

who was then tending his father's sheep somewhere in the neighbourhood, king of Israel, and after his reign it was called the city of David. But Bethlehem owes its everlasting renown to its having been the birth-place of our Saviour.

Overhanging the plain on the eastern brow is the convent, consisting of a large pile of buildings, the principal of which is the church of the nativity. It requires a large amount of faith to receive the tradition which declares this church to be built over the grotto or stable in which our Saviour was born. And it is undoubtedly a pity when there is so much to interest one in the unchangeable features of the country, and in the associations which belong rather to districts or to towns and villages, that a halo has been attached to particular spots upon grounds so slender as to be open to ever renewed discussion. The ignorant devotee may be easily imposed upon by these pious frauds, and they may serve to fan his religious enthusiasm, but they are not honourable to the Christian religion, and they are most mortifying to any one who visits Palestine for instruction towards the better understanding of God's Word, and who seeks to become acquainted with realities rather than with fictions. The tradition marking the spot of our Saviour's birth is however very ancient, and the Church of the Nativity was erected by the Empress Helena, the mother of Constantine. Here, too, Jerome took up his abode, and prepared his translation of the Bible—the Vulgate. His tomb is shown, and above it there is a portrait of the great father resting upon a lion.

The building is grey with age, and is heavy and massive, but it has no architectural beauty, and, like all the holy places in Palestine, is through the jealousy of Christian sects getting sadly out of repair. In the interior some good Corinthian columns adorn its nave, and we may yet trace the outlines of some designs in mosaic on its walls and roof, but the tout ensemble is paltry.

The road from Bethlehem to Hebron passes over a broken country, presenting few marks of cultivation; on our right was Beit-Jaler with its large Church and Convent, and which is believed to be the ancient Zelzah of 1 Sam. ix. 10, and in about an hour we reached El-Burah on the pools of Solomon.

These remarkable ruins, which are believed to be the pools of Solomon, consist of three large reservoirs or tanks, elevated one above another, and some hundred feet long by rather a less breadth. They are situated between two hills, and are fed by a stream that rises in the neighbourhood and empties itself into them by a small canal cut in the rock. Though still in excellent preservation, they are undoubtedly

of great antiquity. We do not indeed find any direct mention of them in the Bible, but Josephus tells us that Solomon had gardens and fountains at Etham near Bethlehem, in which he took great delight and frequently visited, attended by the retinue of his "gold-powdered servants." This Etham is Urtas in the lower valley, still a luxuriant spot. And there is a passage in Ecclesiastes, where, if the allusion is not direct, the language is at least quite applicable, "I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruits. I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees."†

These pools were evidently intended to supply Jerusalem with water by an aqueduct which went round by Bethlehem and the upper pool of Gihon, and was probably connected with the temple and the pool of Bethesda. Bethlehem is still supplied with water by this means, and there are traces of such an aqueduct near Jerusalem. These pools are objects of great interest, whatever be their origin, and are very interesting from their situation, and as specimens of the ingenuity and art of the ancient Jews.

From this place we again entered a hilly and rugged country. The hills are covered with the arbutus and other small shrubs, intermingled with a variety of gay flowers, among which the scarlet anemone, wild tulip, and that commonly known as the star of Bethlehem are in the greatest profusion. Occasionally we passed a plot of cultivated ground, but generally the country is sterile and rocky; the mountain sides however do sometimes show marks of ancient terraces.

In about three hours we passed the ruins Ramet-el-Khulil, which are believed by some to mark the site of the ancient Ramah, the birth-place, residence and burial-place of Samuel, and this is not improbable, and accords better with the Scripture narrative than any of the other 7 places which are claimants for the same honour. Beyond this the valley becomes more fertile, and we shortly entered the valley of Eshecol, one of the richest spots in all Palestine. The path, which is now much broken, follows the course of an old Roman road, and conducts between sloping hills and rounded hillocks covered with orchards of olives and pomegranates, or with vineyards just bursting into leaf, and with abundant crops of corn.

Somewhere here the spies sent by Moses must have come, and gathered the cluster of grapes which they bore back to the camp as a foretaste of the land flowing with milk and honey, which God had promised; † and here too, or in the immediate vicinity, dwelt the dreaded sons of Anak, before whom the courage of the

Israelites gave way, and they withdrew, forgetful of him who had led them through dangers as great, and had wrought many miracles in their behalf; therefore did they lose the blessed land, and entered not into the rest that remained for them.*

These vineyards, besides being invested with an historical interest, also serve strikingly to illustrate several passages of Scripture, as of the Song of Solomon, but especially the parables of our Lord, and that where "there was a certain householder who planted a vineyard, and set a wall about it, and digged a winepress, and built a tower." So the vineyards of Eshecol have their stone walls, and their towers in the corners; and there too is the fig-tree in the vineyard. Besides the repeated images which are drawn from the vine and vineyard, five of our Lord's parables have also relation to them, no doubt having been suggested by what has ever been one of the peculiar features of Palestine.

This district is well watered, and from the foot of every hill a small stream gushes out, giving to the fields and gardens a wonderful luxuriance.

The sun was fast sinking behind the western hills when we encamped at the foot of Beth-Arbaim, over against the town of Hebron. As it was too late to enter the town that evening, we climbed to the top of the hill behind our tents, and wandered for a little upon its bleak and solitary height. It was one of those evenings so soft and balmy when the mind is woe'd to quiet and sweet meditation, and the scene before us was such as carried the fancy back to other days. Here Abraham dwelt, and often were these hill-sides and the little plain below speckled with the flocks of the Chaldean shepherd; here too, as he sat "in the tent-door in the heat of the day," the Lord appeared unto him, and, after having given to him the promise of a son, told him also of the destruction that was about to overtake the cities of the plain, and, when Abraham rose next morning, as he looked in that direction, "lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace."‡ Along that valley of Eshecol too Abraham must have journeyed when he went up from Beersheba to offer his son Isaac on Moriah. At Hebron Sarah died, and Abraham bought from Ephron, the Hittite, a possession for a burial-place, and in the cave of Machpelah was Sarah buried, † and there Abraham himself, § and there Isaac, ¶ and Rebekah, and Leah, and there too Jacob. ¶ Hebron was captured by Joshua from the descendants of Anak, and was ever afterwards closely connected with the history of the Jews, and indeed continued

* xiii and xiv and Heb. iii.

† Gen. xviii and xix.

‡ Gen. xxiii.

§ Gen. xxv. 9.

¶ Gen. xxxv. 27-29.

¶ Gen. xlix. 29-31 and L. 13.

* Josephus, *Jod. Ant.* viii. 3.

† *Eccles.* ii. 5.

‡ *Numb.* xv. 23, 17.