

The Roads from Jerusalem to Damascus

from “The Life and Epistles of St. Paul” by Conybeare and Howson.

No journey was ever taken on which so much interest is concentrated as this of St. Paul from Jerusalem to Damascus. It is so critical a passage in the history of God’s dealings with man, and we feel it to be so closely bound up with all our best knowledge and best happiness in this life, and with all our hopes for the world to come, that the mind is delighted to dwell upon it, and we are eager to learn or imagine all its details. The conversion of Saul was like the call of a second Abraham.

But we know almost more of the Patriarch’s journey through this same district, from the north to the south, than we do of the Apostle’s in the opposite direction. It is easy to conceive of Abraham traveling with his flocks and herds and camels. The primitive features of the East continue still unaltered in the desert, and the Arabian sheik still remains to us a living picture of the patriarch of Genesis. But before the first century of the Christian era, the patriarchal life in Palestine had been modified, not only by the invasions and settlements of Babylonia and Persia, but by large influxes of Greek and Roman civilization. It is difficult to guess what was the appearance of Saul’s company on that memorable occasion. We neither know how he traveled nor who his associates were, nor where he rested on his way nor what road he followed from the Judean to the Syrian capital.

His journey must have brought him somewhere into the vicinity of the Sea of Tiberias. But where he approached the nearest to the shores of this sacred lake, whether he crossed the Jordan where, in its lower courses, it flows southwards to the Dead Sea, or where its upper windings enrich the valley at the base of Mount Hermon, we do not know. And there is one thought which makes us glad that it should be so. It is remarkable that Galilee, where Jesus worked so many of His miracles, is the scene of none of those transactions which are related in the Acts. The blue waters of Tiberias, with their fishing boats and towns on the brink of the shore,

are consecrated in the Gospels. A greater than Paul was here. When we come to the travels of the Apostles, the scenery is no longer limited and Jewish, but catholic and widely extended, like the Gospel which they preached; and the Sea, which will be so often spread before us in the life of St. Paul, is not the little Lake of Gennesareth, but the great Mediterranean, which washed the shores and carried the ships of the historical nations of antiquity.

Two principal roads can be mentioned, one of which probably conducted the travelers from Jerusalem to Damascus. The track of the caravans, in ancient and modern times, from Egypt to the Syrian capital, has always led through Gaza and Ramleh, and then, turning eastwards about the borders of Galilee and Samaria, has descended near Mount Tabor towards the Sea of Tiberias; and so, crossing the Jordan a little to the north of the Lake by Jacob’s Bridge, proceeds through the desert country which stretches to the base of Antilibanus. A similar track from Jerusalem falls into this Egyptian road in the neighborhood of Djenin, at the entrance of Galilee; and Saul and his company may have traveled by this route, performing the journey of one hundred and thirty-six miles, like the modern caravans, in about six days.

But at this period, that great work of Roman road making, which was actively going on in all parts of the empire, must have extended, in some degree, to Syria and Judea; and, if the Roman roads were already constructed here, there is little doubt that they followed the direction indicated by the later itineraries. This direction is from Jerusalem to Neapolis (the ancient Shechem), and thence over the Jordan to the south of the Lake, near Scythopolis, where the soldiers of Pompey crossed the river, and where the Galilean pilgrims used to cross it, at the time of the festivals, to avoid Samaria. From Scythopolis it led to Gadara, a Roman city, the ruins of which are still remaining, and so to Damascus.

Whatever road was followed in Saul’s journey to Damascus, it is almost certain that the earlier por-

tion of it brought him to Neapolis, the Shechem of the Old Testament, and the Nablus of the modern Samaritans. This city was one of the stages in the Itineraries. Dr. Robinson followed a Roman pavement for some considerable distance in the neighborhood of Bethel. This northern road went over the elevated ridges which intervene between the valley of the Jordan and the plain on the Mediterranean coast. As the travelers gained the high ground, the young Pharisee may have looked back, and when he saw the city in the midst of its hills, with the mountains of Moab in the distance, confident in the righteousness of his cause, he may have thought proudly of the 125th Psalm: "The hills stand about Jerusalem, even so standeth the Lord round about His people, from this time forth for evermore." His present enterprise was undertaken for the honor of Zion. He was blindly fulfilling the words of One who said; "Whosoever killeth you will think that he does God service." (John 16:2)

Passing through the hills of Samaria, from which he might occasionally obtain a glimpse of the Mediterranean on the left, he would come to Jacob's Well, at the opening of that beautiful valley which lies between Ebal and Gerizim. This, too, is the scene of a Gospel history. The same woman with whom Jesus spoke might be again at the well as the Inquisitor passed. But as yet he knew nothing of the breaking down of the "middle wall of partition." (Eph. 2:14)

He could, indeed, have said to the Samaritans, "Ye worship ye know not what, we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews." (John 4:22) But he could not have understood the meaning of those other words, "The hour cometh, when ye shall neither in Jerusalem, nor yet in this mountain, worship the Father, the true worshippers shall worship Him in spirit and in truth." (John 4:21,23)

His was not yet the Spirit of Christ. The zeal which burnt in him was that of James and John, before their illumination, when they wished (in this same district) to call down fire from heaven, even as Elias did, on the inhospitable Samaritan village. (Luke 9:51-56) Philip had already been preaching to the poor Samaritans, and John had revisited them, in company with Peter, with feelings wonderfully changed. But Saul knew nothing of the little Church of Samaritan Christians, or, if he heard of them and delayed among them, he delayed only to injure and oppress. The Syrian city was still the great object before him. And now, when he had passed through Samaria and was entering Galilee, the snowy peak of Mount Hermon, the highest point of Antilibanus, almost as far to the north as Damascus, would come into view. This is that tower of "Lebanon which looketh towards Damascus." (Cant. 7:4) It is already the great landmark of his journey, as he passes through Galilee towards the sea of Tiberias, and the valley of the Jordan.