

The Moabite Stone

Flinders Petrie

[p.125]

A short statement relating to this stone will not be out of place here, more especially as none of those who took part in the discussion on Mr. Savile's paper replied to the question put by the Chairman in his introductory remarks (page 107).

On the 19th of August, 1868, the Rev. F. A. Klein, attached to the Jerusalem Mission Society, was travelling through the country of Moab; and on arriving at Dibân (Dibon), heard of an inscribed stone never yet seen by a European; on examination, he found it to be "in a perfect state of preservation, and it was only from great age and exposure to the rain and sun that certain parts, especially the upper and lower lines, had somewhat suffered." The size of the stone was about 44 inches by 28 by 14. Mr. Klein took no drawing of the stone, but mentioned the matter to the Prussian Consul at Jerusalem, and various fruitless negotiations—in which Captain Warren very judiciously abstained from taking a part—were entered into with the Arabs with a view to getting possession of the stone, and sending it to Berlin. In 1869, however, the Prussian Consul obtained a firman for its removal, but in the meanwhile the protracted negotiations had aroused the jealousy and cupidity of the Arabs, and in November, when M. Ganneau sent a messenger with squeeze-paper to obtain an impression of the inscription, "whilst the paper was still wet, a quarrel arose amongst the Arabs, and the messenger, tearing off the wet impression, had only time to spring upon his horse and escape by flight, bringing with him the squeeze, imperfect, and

[p.126]

in rags, and receiving a spear-wound in the leg. After this the Arabs lighted a fire under the stone, and throwing water upon it, broke it into fragments." Since then, squeezes have been taken of the two large and certain smaller fragments; and as the matter now stands, out of the 1,000 letters inscribed on the stone, 669 have been preserved. At present, July, 1872, the fragments are stored in a room at the consulate at Jerusalem, and are the property of M. Ganneau, who has refused an offer of £300 for them made by the British Museum: it may be interesting to add that he has recently reported having deciphered the name of David on one of the fragments. M. Deutsch, speaking of the stone, says:—"It is an enormous gain to paleography and Semitic science, and it is unquestionably the very oldest Semitic lapidary record of importance as yet discovered, and apart from certain geographical and other data given in it which are already incontestable, it illustrates, to a hitherto unheard of degree, the history of our own writing—I mean that which we all use at this hour. Nearly the whole of the Greek alphabet is found here; not merely similar to the Phœnician' shape, but as identical with it as can well be. Not merely such letters as the Α Ρ Μ Σ Μ Ε Q (Koppa), &c., but even the Ξ—one of the letters supposed to have been added during the Trojan war by Palamedes, because not extant in the original 'Cadmean' alphabet—is of constant occurrence here (as *Samech*). Further, will the knotty digamma question receive a new contribution by the shape of the *vav* in this monument, which is distinctly the Greek Y—another letter of supposed recent origin.... And another thing will become clear, viz., that the more primitive the characters, the simpler they become; not, as often supposed, the more complicated, as more in accordance with some pictorial prototype."

I forbear giving any of the various translations of portions of the inscription, because until the whole of the fragments are recovered (but few are now wanting), all attempts at translation must be premature, and can only lead to controversy and dispute; before quoting from M. Deutsch's valuable remarks made at Oxford, I may add that, speaking generally, the inscription "not merely confirms or illustrates the narrative of the Second Book of Kings, but it adds to our knowledge."

M. Deutsch alluded to the number of decipherments and translations, hypotheses and suggestions, to which this stone had already given rise, and dwelt upon the fact that, apart from the precise date of this King Mesha, which indeed was still a moot point, very little was doubtful of that which really existed on or of the stone. The chief difficulty and the variance of opinion arose from the questionable letters, the gaps, and lacunae, though even these could scarcely affect the general gist of the monument. Its language was easy and translucent even to a beginner, though, will-o'-the-wisp like, words suddenly appeared which, either from false transcription or some other cause, not merely interrupted, but seemed to subvert the whole meaning and structure. He had from the very outset, and for very good reasons, ventured to beg the world at large, as well as the learned, not to be hasty. The great fact of this intensely important find was clear at first sight; also

[p.127]

that the monument was that of a Moabite king—Mesha—who, after a brief record of himself and his father, tells of certain deeds of war from which he issued victorious; further, that the names of Israel, Omni, Chemosh, and a number of well-known Moabite cities occurred up and down; and that indeed the greater part of the last half of the stone was a record of the kings' [re-]buildings of and improvements in these cities; while the very defective end seemed once more to speak of war. If he had lifted up his warning voice then, he, notwithstanding all that had come between—emendations, chips, squeezes, dissertations, pamphlets, &c.—would still beg a little patience before a final and definite conclusion could be arrived at on all points, if ever that could be the case, inasmuch as there were some more materials extant, which had not as yet been taken into consideration. There was, *e.g.* (besides M. Ganneau's not yet published corrections) a certain chip acquired by Captain Warren some time before his "squeezes," which did not figure in any of the known texts, and which seemed to belong to the right-hand corner—a matter on which a decision could only be arrived at when the other pieces had been brought home. Besides this, he would draw the attention of his hearers to certain fragmentary lines of Mr. Klein, which also appear in none of the materials extant, and which, if accurately copied, would be of some considerable import. Thus one line seemed to exhibit the word "*Ratzim*," (runners, military executioners, "footmen" in O.T.) in a connection which seemed to point to some sanguinary work after a battle, while another distinctly read "Tamar to [Je]richo." There was no need to think of Tadmor. Tamar was the place mentioned by Ezekiel as the south-western limit of Palestine, and the juxtaposition of the two cities in question would be rather significant. But, M. Deutsch said, it was to be hoped that these lines had survived the original, and were among the recently-acquired new fragments, so that full opportunity might be given for further examination. He had mentioned these facts to show that everything was not settled yet, and so long as there was any hope of the recovery of one single scrap of material, so long must the final investigations remain in abeyance.

The most important places in the Bible where reference is made to the people and country of Moab are Numbers xxi. 26; xxii. and xxiii.; Deut. ii. 9; Judges iii. 17; xi. 15, *et seq.*; 1 Sam.

Flinders Petrie, "The Moabite Stone," *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 6 (1872): 125-128.

xiv. 47; 2 Sam. viii. 2; 2 Kings i. 1; iii. 4-27; xiii. 20; xxiv. 2; 2 Chron. xx.; Isa. xv.; xvi.; Jer. Xlviii.; Dan. xi. 41; Amos ii. 1, 2.

NOTE.—For much of the preceding, I am indebted to an interesting work, "The Recovery of Jerusalem," published under the superintendence of the deservedly popular "Palestine Exploration Fund." Those who may desire to know more in regard to the country of Moab, are referred to the Rev. J. L. Porter's "Giant Cities of Bashan;" Mr. Grove's article on "Moab" in the "Dictionary of the Bible;" and to M. Deutsch's letters in Nos. V. and VI. of the "Quarterly Statement of the Palestine Exploration Fund."

It will interest many to know that the expedition to the country of Moab—to which I alluded during a former discussion, see vol. v., p. 408,—has just returned.

This article is now Public Domain and can be freely distributed and copied.

Prepared for the Web in November 2008 by Robert I Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
