

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

NOTES ON THE SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON FOR JULY 5.

The Voice From the East.

Lesson I.—Israel asking for a King. I. Sam. viii. 1-10.

Beersheba (verse 2) means either "the Well of the Oath" or "the Well of the Seven." The name came from the treaty made respecting it between Abraham and the Philistines; the two parties confirming it with a mutual oath, accompanied by a gift of seven sheep from Abraham to Abimelech, as the formal sign which guaranteed to the patriarch thenceforward the possession of the wells which he had dug. Herodotus says that much in the same way the Arabs marked seven stones with their blood, and kept them for witnesses respecting contracts made, having first laid them between the parties contracting. Around these wells the Father of the Faithful sojourned for many years, and here Isaac also lingered, the Philistines confirming the possession of the wells to him by a new treaty, sealed as usual with an oath. There are seven wells there now, and to the north, on the hills that bound the valley, are scattered ruins nearly three miles in circumference. Beersheba was on the southern border of Palestine, as Dan was on the north; hence the proverb, "From Dan to Beersheba." Eusebius and Jerome say that in Roman times Beersheba was "a very large village," with a garrison. It was the seat of a Christian bishopric.

"Turned aside after lucre, and took bribes, and perverted judgment." (Verse 3.) Turning "aside after lucre" means money wrongfully obtained. Lucre and bribes are common Oriental failings, and both in India and China bribery is an almost universal custom.

"Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah." (Verse 4.) Before the exodus Israel possessed an organization of elders to whom Moses was directed to deliver his message. (Ex. iii. 16.) Before Sinai Moses chose seventy elders or heads of families to form a national council. They were civil rulers, chosen from elderly men. Their authority extended to all matters which concerned the public welfare, and they always appeared as the representatives of the people. In Christ's time these elders were part of the Sanhedrin.

The site of Ramah is one of the disputed topics of biblical geography. Hasting's "Bible Dictionary" tells of four Ramahs: 1. A village on the great route between Akka and Damascus, lying upon the southern lower cultivated slope of the mountain whose ridge forms a boundary between Upper and Lower Galilee. 2. One of the cities on the boundary of the tribe of Asher, near Tyre. It stands upon an isolated hill in the midst of a basin with green fields, surrounded by high-

er hills. It is a small stone village with a few figs and olives, and there are many sarcophagi about the hillside, some of unusual size. Robinson considered the remains generally a striking monument of antiquity. 3. A village called Er-Ram, situated on the top of a white, high hill about five miles due north of Jerusalem, is claimed to have been the birthplace and home of Samuel. It is also the traditional site of Rachel's tomb. 4. Neby Samwil, four and a half miles northwest of Jerusalem, on a commanding and conspicuous eminence (two thousand nine hundred and thirty-five feet) above Gibeon, on which is still shown the traditional tomb of Samuel, is claimed to be the ancient Ramah.

"Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations." (Verse 5.) They desired a king, that they might be like other Oriental nations, who could not conceive of a country without a king. Doubtless the neighbors of the Hebrews had often taunted them, calling them a headless nation, because they had no king. In the early times, king was also closely connected with city life, in contrast alike to unsettled wanderings and to permanent possession of large tracts of country. Thus we find in the time of Abraham several kings in a small space round the Dead Sea, and many throughout Palestine at the time of the conquest, each ruling a town with its adjacent lands and presumably such villages as were dependent on it. Hommel gives us this translation of the inscription, written by Ebed-Tob of Urusalim about B. C. 1400: "It was not my father who installed me in this place nor my mother, but the arm of the mighty king has allowed me to enter into my ancestral house."

"And Samuel told all the words of the Lord unto the people that asked of him a king." (Verse 10.) In the address that follows, Samuel paints a faithful and vivid portrait of Oriental monarchies as they existed then and now. The king in the East was a despot, and held the lives and fortunes of his subjects at his disposal. There is no royal usage named by Samuel that may not be illustrated from Oriental history or from the customs of the East at the present time.

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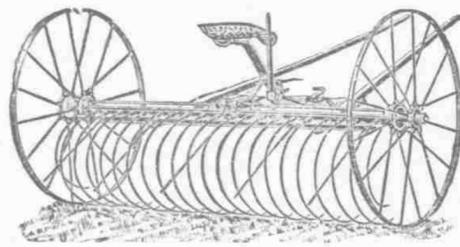
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