

Asphalt from the Dead Sea

Contributed by George Frederick Wright

The Dead Sea

Vale of Siddim:

This is in all probability the plain extending from the southern end of the Dead Sea to the "Ascent of Akrabbim" which crosses the valley from side to side, and forms the southern margin of the Ghor. At present the area of the vale is about 50 square miles; but if our theory concerning the lower level of the Dead Sea in the time of Abraham is correct, it may then have included a considerable portion of the lagoon South of el-Lisan and so have been a third larger than now. In Genesis 14:10 the vale is said to have been full of slime (that is, of bitumen or asphalt) pits. In modern times masses of asphalt are occasionally found floating in the southern part of the Dead Sea. After the earthquake of 1834 a large quantity was cast upon the shore near the Southwest corner of the lake, 3 tons of which were brought to market by the Arab natives. After the earthquake of January, 1837, a mass of asphalt was driven aground on the West side not far from Jebel Usdum. The neighboring Arabs swam off to it, cut it up with axes and carried it to market by the camel load, and sold it to the value of several thousand dollars. At earlier times such occurrences seem to have been still more frequent. Josephus affirms that "the sea in many places sends up black masses of asphalt having the form and size of headless oxen"; while Diodorus Siculus relates that the bitumen (asphalt) was thrown up in masses covering sometimes two or three acres and having the appearance of islands (Josephus, BJ, IV, viii, 4; Diod. Sic. ii.48; Pliny, NH, vii.13; Tac. Hist. verse 6; Dioscor., De re Med., i.99).

Since asphalt is a product of petroleum from which the volatile elements have been evaporated, the ultimate source of these masses is doubtless to be found in the extensive beds of bituminous limestone which appear in numerous places on both sides of the Dead Sea. An outcrop of it can be observed at Neby Mousa, on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, which Dawson describes as resembling dry chalk saturated with coal tar. When long weathered this becomes white and chalky at the surface, so that a mass of it, quite white externally, reveals an intense blackness when broken. It is this that the people of Bethlehem call "Dead Sea stone," and which they carve into various ornamental articles and expose for sale. Some specimens of it are sufficiently bituminous to burn with flame like cannel-coal. These beds are still more abundant around the South end of the lake and doubtless underlie the whole region, and for all time must have been exuding bituminous and gaseous matter, but much more abundantly in former times than now.

In these accumulations of bitumen at the South end of the Ghor we probably have the incentive which led the Babylonians under Amraphel and Chedorlaomer to make such long expeditions for the sake of conquering the region and holding it under their power. Bitumen was much in demand in Babylonia.

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