

"Passover with the Samaritans, 'A Medieval and Picturesque Easter Ceremony'
The Garden Grove Express, Garden Grove, Iowa, USA, March 20th, 1913.

There is a photo of Armenians celebrating Easter attached to the article which is not shown here.

Of the numerous festivities which take place in the Holy Land at Easter time by far the prettiest, and certainly one of the least known is that of the Samaritan Passover. All devout Jews, of course, celebrate the Passover, but even in Jerusalem, the holiest of cities, the Jewish ceremony is only a semblance of the graphic directions given by Moses for its observance. There is indeed the unleavened bread, but there is only a bit of bone to represent the slain lamb; a salad stands for the bitter herbs; a chocolate colored confection is a reminder of the Nile mud and of their servitude and brickmaking. Wine is drunk repeatedly throughout the ceremony and course after course of different dishes are brought to the table and eaten.

With Samaritans, however, it is entirely different. They are the only people that celebrate the Passover in its primitive simplicity. The very midnight scene of the original Passover night, with its slain lambs, its sprinkled blood, its bitter herbs, its being eaten roasted and in haste, standing, with shoes on and staves in hand, is all faithfully reproduced. It is an open, air faithfully reproduced. It is an open air scene in the dead of night and with the full moon shining over head.

Before describing this ancient and picturesque festival, which has now been annually held by this band of devout believers for the past 2,300 years, a word or two about the people themselves will not be out of place. Once strong and numerous they have gradually diminished until now the poor and despised remnant crowded together in their quarters in Nablous, numbers only about 170 souls. As they do not intermarry with other peoples, and the number of their women is proportionately small, they are gradually dying out though holding on tenaciously to their inherited ideas of coming national resuscitation and glory. They are, as in the time of Christ, detested by the Jews and are hardly tolerated by the Mohammedans among whom they dwell. Their high priest, by name Yakob, claims, with a good show of historical confirmation, to be a lineal descendant of Aaron, Israel's first high priest. He has held his office for over 60 years.

In their synagogue in Nablous they have the famous "Samaritan Scroll" of the Pentateuch. They accept only the five books of Moses as scripture. Their scroll is claimed by them to have been written by the grandson of Aaron. Scholars assign it to about the second century of the era. They also possess some valuable historical "annuls." They contain short references to the birth and death of Christ and to the work of the apostles.

The locality in which they live is redolent with scripture associations Nablous is the Shechem of the history of the patriarchs, and was the first capital of the southern Jewish kingdom. This narrow vale in which the town lies is shut in by the historic mountains of Ebal on the north and Gerizim on the south, and here gathered that mighty assemblage of the tribes of Israel, soon after their entrance into the land, when the law was read and its blessings responded to from Gerizim and its curses from Ebal. Near by is the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. There also is Jacob's well, where Christ met the woman of Samaria who was from the little village of Sychar, which is still pointed out. Joseph's tomb is also close at hand.

Those who are privileged to be the guests of the little Samaritan community on the memorable occasion of their Passover, make their way from the little town of Nablous in the late afternoon up the fruit slopes of Gerizim.

Those who are privileged to be the guests of the little Samaritan community on the memorable occasion of their Passover, make their way from the little town of Nablous in the late afternoon up the fruit slopes of Gerizim. Passing above its well-watered base, from which gush forth scores of springs, one is forcibly reminded that this was the mount of blessing on that memorable occasion in the history of the children of Israel just alluded to, while if the eye is cast across the valley on Ebal, the mount of cursing, no springs or fruitfulness are seen, but only barrenness and rocky desolation.

Reaching the top, we find the tents already pitched. Round this camp has already gathered a considerable company of Moslems from Nablous who have, like ourselves, come to witness the ceremony. They form a curious and not very respectful assembly. We also detect a little group of Americans, both ladies and gentlemen, a titled Englishman and his wife, three other English tourists, including the writer, and a few from France and Germany. As if by instinct, the Europeans gradually form

themselves into a little company apart from the other spectators. We are quickly observed, however, and two of the Samaritan officials make their way to us. They invite us into the tent of the high-priest to see the Samaritan treasures, an invitation that is eagerly accepted.

Chief among these, of course, is the famous Scroll referred to. The high priest informs us that it is locked up in his cupboard pointing to a somewhat plain receptacle over which two men stand guard. It appears he is apprehensive of its being stolen by his cousin. This young man has served a term of imprisonment for stealing ancient manuscripts and would not hesitate to steal the precious scroll if he had a chance. The tent doors are carefully closed and made fast. The high priest then unlocks the cupboard and produces the sacred manuscript. It is very old and wrinkled and tattered. The parchment is brown and brittle. The lines are irregular and the ink has faded so nearly as to be illegible, though in places it has been re-inked by newer parchment. The whole is backed with other parchment and enclosed in a silver case, on which are engraved pictures of the ark of the Covenant, the golden candlestick, the altar of sacrifice, the knife for killing the sacrifice, and certain other engravings and emblematic designs. The whole is covered with a green silk cloth and veiled from ordinary sight. Of course no one must touch it, it is not quite orthodox that any one else should see it save on certain great festivals, but this is one of the occasions when it may be seen though guardedly.

In the little interval that remained before the service began the high priest's son showed us over the mountain top, pointing out the famous ruins there. Half an hour before the sun goes down the service begins. Near by the rocks where the Samaritans say that Abraham offered Isaac the company gathers. Their meeting place is a depression walled in. Around the wall gathers the curious crowd, but just within, by invitation stand some officials from the city and the European visitors.

The men and boys of the community are dressed in white and join in a loudly shouted prayer.

The men and boys of the community are dressed in white and join in a loudly shouted prayer. The high priest in black, standing on a fallen pillar (an unintended suggestion of their fallen condition), reads the Mosaic account of the first Passover. Before him are the 6 white sheep, "males of the first year and without blemish" which are to be slaughtered and eaten. Exactly at sunset, as the sun touches the Mediterranean sea line, amid loud shouts, the sheep are killed, care being taken that not a bone should be broken and the blood is poured forth. The carcasses are plunged into scalding water so that the skins can be easily removed. After being dressed they are put into a pit which serves as an oven the bottom being covered with hot coals each carcass being supported on staves. The right forequarter of each sheep is put in separately as the portion of the priests. The pit is then closed with grass mats and earth to exclude the air and left for the roasting process to go on. During all this time, loud prayers and shouts of rejoicing fill the air. After saluting one another they retire to their tents to rest until midnight when the roast lambs are to be eaten according to the ritual. A few keep watch at the oven.

At midnight, a herald proclaims that the hour has come, and all put on their sandals, gird their loins and take their staves in hand. They gather close round the roast lambs which have been drawn from the hot pit and placed on white cloths spread on the ground. They eat standing, with sandals on and staves in hand, with every indication of haste, as though about to start on a journey. They guard the feast from the many Moslems spectators who try to torment them by snatching some of the roast lamb as it is being eaten. The bones are thrown into an open furnace, for nothing of it is to remain until the morning.

The entire scene, being enacted at midnight, in the light of the full moon of this, the first of the Jewish months (April) on the summit of this historic mount, just according to the ritual handed down from the hoary past, is most impressive- the white robed participants, the dignified high priest, the interested tourist guests, the curious alien crowd, of spectators and tormentors, the picturesque tents, the heaps of eloquent ruins, the moon bathed sea to the west, the plain below with its sites telling of sacred scenes from the old testament and from the new- all these conspire to leave an indelible impression on one's mind.

The Passover having now been eaten, after again saluting each other, the people disperse.

Comments on this section from the Editor of theSamaritanUpdate.com

This reference is #146 listed in *A Bibliography of the Samaritans, Third Edition, Revised, Expanded, and Annotated*, by Alan David Crown and Reinhard Pummer, ATLA Bibliography, No. 51, The Scarecrow Press, Inc. Lanham, Maryland, Toronto, Oxford. 2005