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**The Biblical World,**

Volume 34

Editor in chief Earnest De Witt Gurton

New Series. Vol. 34

July – December, 1909

Chicago

The University of Chicago Press

1909

(p. 8) THE SAMARITAN PASSOVER

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Our cavalcade drew slowly up the ancient road toward Nablus. The line that had struck the trail bravely under the morning sun at Bethel was beginning to straggle, and our palanquin was wagging sadly between its foot-sore mules. As the sloping sun filled with gold the vale between Ebal and Gerizim many a rider lusted for the fleshpots that Hamed was about now setting over his pan of charcoals in the kitchen tent; and many a steed was halting between two opinions—whether to lie down where he was or to push on to the grain bags waiting ahead under the olive trees. But a few quick spirits felt a new call as the mountain walls closed on them, a *reveille* that routed the weariness of the long day in the saddle and awoke imagination and desire. It was the call of old Gerizim: "Come up, come up, see the sun set over Carmel and the Mediterranean." Half a dozen of us leaped to the ground, threw the bridle reins to the muleteers, and knew in our veins that we could mount up with wings as eagles.

Our path was the most direct. It led across the orchestra of the vast amphitheater where Joshua assembled the tribes to rehearse the law. Echoes of the blessing and the cursing came to us as we climbed the rocky caves—the blessing of springs of water and olive groves that crown the fat valley; the cursing of stones and sterility on the gray sides of Ebal. But as we climbed and as the horizon line crept up the mountain side, the blessings multiplied—the blessings of a green ocean of hills that swelled beyond the Yale of Muknah, that fell into a purple gulf eastward where Jordan flows, that rose again in the violet ridges of Gilead, and faded into a lavender sky that poised itself in silence over the desert of Arabia. And out of that desert and over the long ridges came trooping back before our imagination the shadowy procession of patriarchs and merchantmen, tribes and empires pouring in from the great deep of the East with their human passions, their thirst for possession, their lust for power, their hunger (p. 9) for God. Gerizim at sunset is a place to make young men see visions and old men dream dreams.

The dreams were broken by the consciousness that we were not alone on the mountain. We had climbed for solitude, but had reached society. In the saddleback of Gerizim we

were suddenly confronted by an acre of white tents and a crowd of people who were buzzing over the stony ridges like bees in swarming-time. Seeing us, a group



THE SAMARITAN ENCAMPMENT ON MT. GERIZIM

of men came running down and poured out a voluble but evidently polite stream of Arabic from which the learned one of our company divined that we were lucky travelers indeed, that these men were Samaritans, that the tents sheltered the whole one hundred and seventy souls that comprise the sect, that the occasion was the Passover, and that we were invited to the celebration of the ancient rite.

It was the high priest's son who was the ambassador to the strangers. With a hospitality that appeared to be truly eastern, but we found afterward looked for reward even in this life, he led us to the tent of his father and bade us welcome. As we entered, the patriarch (p. 10) himself rose from the blanket where he had been sleeping in anticipation of the great ceremony, greeted us with quiet dignity, laying his hand on his forehead and his breast, and invited us to sit on the couches and to break bread with him. The man was impressive. He was not long past his prime, still erect and tall, with a spare figure and a narrow face that looked even narrower framed in a beard that swept his bosom. The face was a lusterless olive, the beard iron gray.



A SHEPHERD ON THE SUMMIT OF EHAL

The long nose gave solemnity to his countenance and the eyes looked sad as if he were conscious of having seen a great race slowly sinking into the earth and a great tradition slowly vanishing into the sky. As he stood there in his tent, dressed in the long robes of his office and speaking his quiet welcome in an unknown tongue, he seemed the very

incarnation of the spirit and the tradition of the holy Hebrew past whose guardian and relic he claimed to be.

His son and heir presumptive to the high priesthood now brought refreshments. Dates he offered and a sour-milk cheese that had been roasted. Apologies for the lack of coffee made us remember that (p. 11) on this sacred eve fire was prohibited, and the unleavened bread carried us back thirty-two hundred years to the night when in haste they went out from the land of Egypt. The loaf was unique. It was a disk about sixteen inches in diameter and a sixteenth of an inch thick, brought to us folded into a quadrant. For liquid hospitality they offered "arak," a pungent aromatic drink distilled from grapes or other fruit.

During lunch the high priest showed us the one Samaritan treasure, a copy of the Pentateuch, which tradition says the great-grandson of Aaron wrote. They had brought it from their synagogue in Nablus to be in certain sort a shrine for them during the ten days' sojourn on the mountain. Most carefully was it guarded. First they uncovered the wooden box in which it was transported and took out a roll of green silk, heavily embroidered with arabesques of gold. Within the silk was a cylindrical case of brass with three spindles running through and terminating in knobs. The case was completely, though crudely, decorated. On it in *repousse* were likenesses of the sacred implements of the temple, the altar, sacrificial knives, the long forks and spits, the lavers, the pitchers, the trumpets, the candlestick, the shew bread. In between the pictures were rude designs and mottoes in Hebrew. Opening this case, they showed us next a covering of blue velvet embroidered in silver. Within this was the soul of the shrine, the eternal treasure which moth and rust should not corrupt if human care could avail anything, the sacred Torah of Moses. The parchment was indubitably old, the ink of the exposed portion was faded, and the antiquarian in every one of us bowed down before this literary relic of an ancient schism, itself the offspring of a still more ancient cult. If the pen of Aaron's great-grandson did not trace these characters, at least the writer was contemporaneous with Jesus.

We asked to see the sacrificial knife, hoping that this, too, might be ancient. But it was an ordinary piece of Sheffield steel recently bought in Jaffa.

Outside the sun was burning low. The sacred hour was approaching. The patriarch adjusted the folds of his yellow turban, caught up tenderly his little copy of the law, and left the tent. We followed him to the place of sacrifice. It was a level area perhaps thirty yards square, from which the surface stones had been cleared. A low wall (p. 12) nearly surrounded it. The crowds had already gathered, not only the male worshipers and helpers of the Samaritans, but the Muslim rabble from Nablus, drawn hither by the unique event—the fools who came to scoff and who did not remain to pray. Undisturbed by the tumult, which was fast proving too much for the lone policeman sent up from the city, the high priest took his stand in the eastern corner of the area, while some thirty of his elders, robed in spotless white,



FROM EBAL LOOKING TOWARD GERIZIM

except for the red fezes in their turbans, arranged themselves crescent-wise in front of him, with their faces toward the east, toward the crest of Gerizim where lay in plain view the ruins of their temple. Mounting a block of stone, perhaps a bit from the old sanctuary, the priest began to read the Hebrew of the ritual in the Book of Exodus, while the elders from time to time bent their bodies toward the east, uttering guttural responses, and the rabble that fringed the wall began its noisy demonstration of interest.

Meanwhile in the opposite angle of the inclosure the younger men were making their preparation for the sacrifice. They had dug a (p. 13) short trench and lined it with stones. Now they brought two great iron kettles and placed them on the stonework. Some threw brush and firewood beneath, some strewed the ground about the caldrons with herbs, the bitter herbs prescribed in Exodus. Others now led in the lambs, seven of them without spot, except for a good deal of removable mother earth, and placed them in precise order about the kettles. From the oblivious worshipers came fitfully the gruff monotony of the chanting, and the swaying mob on the walls kept fitful silence.

Suddenly at the liturgically correct moment, men sprang from the crowd of elders, seized each lamb, threw him quickly upon his side and held him motionless with his feet toward the pit and his throat extended. The crowd grew tense and quiet. Even the policeman forgot his austerity and craned his neck for a view. The thin monotone of the high priest grew sharply defined against the silence. Then the gigantic circle of the sun, that had been throwing purple shadows eastward from every summit, touched the distant Mediterranean and tinged its edge with sard. As if the contact had started the current of action, a swarthy, white-robed man sprang within the circle of lambs and with quick sawing motion cut the throats of the unresisting victims. The voice of the crowd flared up in a hoarse roar of excitement. As the blood of the last lamb gushed forth, the slayer dropped his knife, raised his hands above his head, and clapped. At the joyful signal every man clapped likewise, and with handshaking and unfeigned though solemn joy greeted the new year which at this moment had begun.

The Muslim scoffers shouted and swayed forward from the wall. The spectators and worshipers became a mob, the one part pushing and fighting its way to the center of things where it might see the blood and the lifeless sacrifice, the other part defending its sacrificial lambs from the desecration of the uncircumcized. Slowly the policeman's whip, which seemed to fall more in mirth than anger, somewhat reduced the centripetal tendency, and the joking, jabbering, gesticulating crowd streamed off the summit by many paths to the dusky vales below.

Though the spectacular part of the ceremony was over, the Passover in reality had only begun. Crackling flames now shot up around the caldron and the ritual of prayer became the ritual of work. When (p. 14) the water boiled the lambs were immersed and flayed. Then the inward parts were burned according to the law, and the lambs, spitted on iron stakes head downward, were roasted in another pit especially prepared. After the odor of burning had ascended as a sweet savor to Heaven and the fires were quenched, the lambs were distributed to the elders of the various households and at the silent hour of midnight under the stars were eaten in haste in memory of the great deliverance.



THE INCLOSURE ABOUT JACOB'S WELL

This part of the ceremony we did not see, though as strangers within their gates we were invited to remain and partake. Instead, in the gathering darkness we groped our way down the mountain by unfamiliar paths, thinking many things, while the full moon rose up from Moab and crowned imperial Ebal with light. But most of all we thought of One who sat once on the well just at the foot of this high place of sacrifice in full sight of it, and who, in the joy of his sonship, taught men to worship the Father "neither at Jerusalem nor in this mountain."

#### **Comments on this section from the Editor of theSamaritanUpdate.com**

This reference is # 261 located 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