Egypt, Palestine, and Phoenicia:
A Visit to Sacred Lands
By **Felix Bovet**

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(p. 323) ….

While the beds are being spread on the floor and John goes to market to buy provisions, I avail myself of the last hour of daylight to visit the synagogue of the Samaritans, and to ascend Gerizim.

I need not remind you of the origin of the Samaritans and of their religion. We see in the Second Book of Kings[1] that, after the deportation of the ten tribes, the king of Assyria re-peopled Samaria with colonists taken from various provinces of his empire; and that this new population made itself a religion in its own way by adding the worship of Jehovah, whom they took to be the God of their new country, to that of its ancient gods. After their return from captivity in Babylon, the Samaritans tried to make friends with the Jews, and to make common cause with them in rebuilding the Temple; but their offers were rejected by the puritanism of the latter. Having failed in attaching themselves to the Jewish nationality, they gave themselves out as the (p. 324) heirs of the ten tribes;[2] and the same mutual hostility was seen springing up between them and the Jews which had formerly existed between Ephraim and Judah. A Jewish priest, named Manasseh, son of the high priest Jehoiada, and son-in-law of Sanballat, having been excommunicated by Nehemiah[3] passed over to the Samaritans, and brought with him the rights of the race of Aaron and the traditions of the priesthood. Sanballat caused a rival temple to be erected on Mount Gerizim. The Samaritans gave up, it would seem, all that they still retained of the idolatry of their ancestors, and laid claim, like the Jews, to the exclusive title of "*the true worshippers*"[4] of Jehovah. It was from that moment that the mutual hostility of the Samaritans and the Jews became implacable. Without here mentioning the testimonies to this fact which are to be found in the Talmud, it is enough to recollect those we find in the Gospel. Observe, for instance, in the fourth chapter of St. John, this little word, " He

[1] 2 Kings xvii. 24—41
[2] The woman of Samaria calls Jacob *"our father"* (St. John iv. 12); but the Jews call the Samaritans *strangers* (St. Luke xvii. 18).
[3] Nehemiah xiii. 25.
[4] St. John iv. 23

must needs (ἔδει, *oportebat)* pass through Samaria." [5] We know that when it was not absolutely needful so to do, the Jews went a long way round to avoid passing through that country. Remember, too, how the woman of Samaria was astonished at hearing a Jew address her.[6] Further, we find from the same Gospel that to call any one a Samaritan was, among the Jews, the most deadly insult: "*Thou art a Samaritan, and hast a devil,"* said the Jews to Jesus.[7]

As to the doctrinal differences which separated the (p. 325) two races and distinguished their religions, the principal, and perhaps the only one, was, that the Samaritans received as sacred books only those of Moses, and rejected all the rest of the Jewish canon.

They have in their possession, even now, an ancient copy of the Pentateuch, of which they trace the origin as far back as the early days of the history of Israel. This Pentateuch is in Hebrew; but instead of being written in Chaldaic, like the manuscripts of the Jews, it is in Samaritan characters, which are probably of greater antiquity, and have been retained by the Samaritans for writing Hebrew as well as their own language.

There are still existing in Nablous a hundred or so of Samaritans, the sole remaining representatives of their race, the sole adherents of their religion. This nation, reduced to a few families—this religion, professed by only a few persons, but still through all time retaining its identity, is one of the most interesting historic phenomena in existence. I asked to be shewn their synagogue. It is a small room, with nothing remarkable in it. But I was not allowed to enter it till I had taken off my shoes, and left them outside the door. The priest was sent for. He is a man of about forty years old, of a very noble and dignified countenance. He solemnly displayed to me the roll of parchment on which the Pentateuch is written, but strictly forbade my touching it. I had once gone through a course of lessons in the Samaritan language, at the University of Berlin, and Doctor Petermann (if he is still living, as I hope) would even assure you, were it needful, that I was one of his best pupils;—it is true that he had only three. I confess that since that time I have forgotten much of what I learnt of the language, having never had occasion to make use of it. I remembered the (p. 326) alphabet, however, and that was all I now wanted, as the text was Hebrew. I set to work to decipher a few lines under my breath.

"*Hayodea atta leschon hakkodesh?"* (Dost thou understand the sacred language?) the priest asked me, in Hebrew.

On my answering in the affirmative, he entered into conversation, and we had a few minutes' talk. You see the Samaritans as well as the Jews call Hebrew the sacred language. This member of the race spoke very good Hebrew; his pronunciation was that of the *Sephardim* Jews, and in entire conformity with that in use in the Christian schools. He told me that the number of Samaritans amounts at the present moment to a hundred and fifty; but others of the inhabitants of Nablous have assured me that that is a great exaggeration. As to the manuscript they shewed me, it is evidently modern. But nevertheless the priest warranted it to be the original. Some travellers affirm that they have two, and that they do not shew the most precious.

A point often discussed *inter doctos* is that of the origin of the Samaritans. Are we to consider this people as composed essentially of foreign colonists, and did the remains of the tribe of Ephraim, who had not been carried captive into Assyria, enter only as a small

[5] St. John iv. 4
[6] St. John iv. 9
[7] St. John viii. 34

and almost inappreciable element into the formation of this new nation? Or are we to suppose, on the contrary, that the heart and substance of this race is Israelitish, and that the Assyrian colonists are only a secondary element? This latter hypothesis has in its favour the language of the Samaritans, which is but a dialect of Hebrew adulterated by the intrusion of a considerable number of foreign words. Nevertheless the narrative of the books of Kings favours the former hypothesis. (p. 327) I must also say that, looking at the Samaritan high priest, I was struck with his face, which did not in any way recall the Jewish or Arab type. His aquiline nose, his handsome face, with full, rosy cheeks, were of the pure Indo-Germanic type.

I take a guide to shew me the way to Gerizim. He is a Mussulman, but he uses also, and murders in the using, a few Hebrew words, among which he introduces continually, *Yes sir.*[8] These two monosyllables are the only European words he knows. This man is a thorough Arab, not inferior in rudeness to any of his fellow-citizens in Nablous. Far from piquing himself on the obsequiousness usual with men who have an eye to a baksheesh, he treats my horse and its rider with a shameless brutality which draws from me, many times over—I confess it with regret—exclamations which ought never to have been heard on the Mount of Blessing. On issuing from the town, we climb straight up to Gerizim, through the sweet-smelling orchards. Nablous has been compared to Heidelberg; it is as seen from this side that it resembles it,—as much, at least, as an Oriental can resemble a northern town. The crest of the mountain forms a plateau sloping from east to west, in which are some fields of wheat, alternating with stone-sprinkled pastures. We ascend this plateau, up to its highest summit. It has an elevation of eight hundred feet above the valley of Shechem, and of two thousand four hundred above the sea. It is generally considered the highest summit of the mountains of Ephraim, but M. Van de Velde nevertheless assures us that the top of Ebal is some feet higher. This fact explains why it was on Ebal, and not Gerizim, that the Israelites erected an altar to the (p. 328) Eternal [9]Ebal was the highest mountain-top in the country.

On this height, which looks down upon Jacob's well, there is a wide space, enclosed in fragments of wall and great heaps of stones, many of which are sculptured in relief. These remains formed part, no doubt, of many buildings in succession; it is probable that among the number are included fragments of the temple built by Sanballat and destroyed by John Hyrcanus. And here also is the Samaritan sanctuary; towards this spot they turn in their prayers. The only building still standing is a small cubical edifice, crowned with a cupola. It contains a single chamber, four yards square, which serves as a synagogue for the Samaritans. They still celebrate on Mount Gerizim the solemnities commanded in the Law of Moses, the Passover, the Feast of Pentecost, the Feast of Tabernacles, the Day of Atonement. A notable fact!—while the Jews have been for a long time deprived of their Temple and their sacrifices, the Paschal lamb is still sacrificed by Manasseh's heretical sectaries, and their worship still celebrated by a junior branch of the family of Aaron, a quasi-legitimate priesthood.

Third Day's Journey.

FROM NABLOUS TO DJENN1N.

This morning, on waking, I saw light clouds floating over the top of Ebal. It was a real Swiss morning. I found my host, in his white cotton robe with lilac spots, smoking his

[8] *Sic,* in English—in the original.—*Tr.*

[9] Deut. xxvii. 4. In this passage, the Samaritan Pentateuch, as is well known, gives Gerizim instead of Ebal.

narguileh on the terrace. I settled accounts with him,—not a very easy thing to do. In (p. 329) this country the inn-keepers have too much delicacy to hand you in their bill. You give them what you please, and you may be quite sure that they will never be satisfied, and that they will ask for more.

Leaving the town, we stop at the encampment of the English. We are to travel with them to-day, as it is particularly on the road from Nablous to Nazareth that there is danger, and that it is important not to be alone. I hear from them that, yesterday evening, as they were ascending Gerizim, half-an-hour in advance of me, they were attacked; and, notwithstanding their numbers and their arms, they were compelled to capitulate, and pay a ransom to the Arabs. It was no doubt owing to them that I met no one on my expedition to Gerizim; the robbers must have been content with this success, and, in a hurry to dine after a long Ramadan day, must have returned immediately to the town without waiting for the chance of perpetrating more robberies.

While our English are busy with their preparations, and my horse, wandering along the orchards, takes leave of the fine pastures of Nablous, some lepers come up, and hold out to me their swollen hands,—a sad spectacle amidst the glories of nature!

At a little distance from Nablous, we are shewn, by the roadside the tomb of Joshua. There we meet a caravan of fifty camels, and are obliged to stop to make room for them to pass, on account of the narrowness of the road.

Arrived in the neighbourhood of Samaria, we part from our baggage and our moukres; they take the straight road to Djennin, while we visit the ruins of the town. Samaria stands on a long-topped hill standing by itself in a plain. This plain is surrounded (p. 330) with higher mountains, not round-topped, like those of Judaea, but, so to speak, throwing themselves backwards, and rising by terraces. ……

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Felix Bovet or **Eugène Victor Félix Bovet** (1824- 1903) Author, French Swiss Protestant
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