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Heathen and Holy Lands: or, Sunny Days on the Salween, Nile, and Jordan

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(p. 355)

I rode into the town of Nablous about sunset, and found lodgings at the house of a respectable resident, who informed me that, shortly before, four American travellers had been attacked while visiting the well of the Patriarch; that their arms and clothes had been taken from them, and one run through the side or back with a spear, while their dragoman had been still more severely used; even practical Jonathan, while busily engaged in measuring the depth of the well, had been caught napping.

Early the following morning, I took a lad as a guide, and climbed Mount Gerizim, the Mount of Blessing; on the opposite side of the town stands Ebal, the Mount of Cursing. Here an hour or two were spent amongst the ruins of the Temple, where the Samaritans still annually sacrifice the Paschal Lamb—the only place now where the ancient rite is (p. 356) observed. From this point a magnificent view is obtained of the well-built town, situated amidst groves of luxuriant vegetation, with a clear stream of water running through it, which always makes a little paradise in the East, where water is the only natural want. Farther down, the whole valley was one waving field of corn, while in the far distance the blue Mediterranean was visible, and in the opposite direction I caught the first glimpse of Jebel Sheik, the highest peak of Mount Lebanon. It was now capped with snow, which softly blended with the light fleecy clouds of morning.

On descending from Mount Gerizim, we visited the synagogue of the Samaritans, and found the people assembled in the usual course. They afforded me a seat, and were very civil. The high priest, a fine old man, with a high receding turban like a Parsee's, was particularly obliging, and after a little pressing, showed us a very ancient manuscript copy of the Five Books of Moses, fixed in a circular metal case, and stated to be upwards of 3,400 years old, having been written by *Abishna*, the son of Phineas, the great-grandson of Aaron. It is generally admitted, even by the Jews, that the Samaritans have the most ancient copy extant, though they seldom, if ever, show it.

(p. 357) The Samaritans, as a people, I may here remark, are fast dying out; at present they number only some forty families at Nablous, and are unknown in any other part of the world, although they have an idea that there are some of their sect in India, sold by the Arabs centuries ago into captivity. The greater portion of the inhabitants of this town are descended from the Greek colony, and probably the name *Nablous* is derived from the Greek *Neapolis*. They are said to be the most turbulent and fierce race in Syria, always ready for a fight. It is related of them that, when on one occasion some children of

the Kess tribe, belonging to the neighbouring village of Beit-el-ma, gathered wild anemones that grew in rich profusion on the hill side, and scattered the crimson flowers to the winds, the people of Nablous declared it an insult to their well-known symbol the Anemone; and having gathered a band together, ravaged the country, and sacked the villages of the Kess. The cruel raid on such slight pretext made many a maiden weep and many a widow mourn.

It was from the Samaritans, probably, that Mahomet took his forms of prayer, or they alone may have handed down the old forms of the Jews. This strikes the Eastern wanderer most forcibly while visiting the Samaritan synagogue. In prayer they turn to Mount (p. 358) Gerizim, on which is the alleged altar of Joshua, as to their *Kiblah*; they hold their hands, bow down the forehead to the earth, touch the tips of their ears, and stroke their beards exactly as the Mahomedans do. It is painfully interesting to watch this most ancient race gradually disappearing, but still through many centuries of reverses and persecutions, even to the present hour, clinging with all the strength and tenacity of a dying grasp to the laws and worship of their fathers.

In the evening my companions arrived, and as I had succeeded in hiring fresh mules, we rode out of the town early the following morning.....

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