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Incidents of travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea and the Holy Land,

By an American.

With a map and Engravings

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(p. 239)

The ground which I was now treading is supposed to be the " parcel of ground" which Jacob bought of the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for a hundred pieces of silver, and gave to his son Joseph. Turning the point of the mountain, we came to a rich valley, lying between the mountains of Gerizim and Ebal. Crossing this valley, on the sides of the mountains of Ebal is a long range of grottoes and tombs, and a little before coming to them, in a large white building like a sheik's tomb, is the sepulchre of Joseph, as it is written, " the bones also of Joseph, which the children of Israel brought up with them out of Egypt, buried they in Shechem." I dismounted and entered the building, and it is a not uninteresting fact that I found there a white-bearded Israelite, kneeling at the tomb of the patriarch, and teaching a rosy-cheeked boy (his descendant of the fourth generation) the beautiful story of Joseph and his brethren.

It was late in the afternoon when I was moving up the valley of Naplous. The mountains of Gerizim and Ebal, the mountains of blessings and curses, were towering like lofty walls on either side of me; Mount Gerizim fertile, and Mount Ebal barren, as when God commanded Joshua to set up the stones in Mount Ebal, and pronounced on Mount Gerizim blessings upon the children of Israel " if they would hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord, (p. 240) to observe and do all his commandments,"¹ and on Ebal the withering curses of disobedience. A beautiful stream, in two or three places filling large reservoirs, was running through the valley, and a shepherd sat on its bank, playing a reed pipe, with his flock feeding quietly around him. The shades of evening were gathering fast as I approached the town of Naplous, the Shechem or Sychem of the Old Testament, and the Sychar of the New. More than a dozen lepers were sitting outside the gate, their faces shining, pimpled and bloated, covered with sores and pustules, their nostrils open and filled with ulcers, and their red eyes fixed and staring; with swollen feet they dragged their disgusting bodies towards me, and with hoarse voices extended their deformed and hideous hands for charity.

We rode up the principal street, and at the door of the palace I met the governor just mounting his horse, with a large retinue of officers and slaves around him. We exchanged our greetings on horseback. I showed him my firman, and he sent a janizary to conduct me to the house of a Samaritan, a writer to the government, where I was received, fed,

¹ Deuteronomy xxviii., 1.

and lodged better than in any other place in the Holy Land, always excepting the abodes of those suffering martyrs, the Terra Santa monks.

I had just time to visit the Samaritan synagogue. Leaving my shoes at the door, with naked feet I entered a small room, about fifteen feet square, with nothing striking or interesting about it except what the Samaritans say is the oldest manuscript in the world, a copy of the Pentateuch, written by Abishua, the grandson of Aaron, three years after the death of Moses, or about three thousand three hundred years ago. The priest was a man of forty-five, and gave me but a poor idea of the character of the Samaritans, for he refused to show me the sacred scroll unless I would pay (p. 241) AN ANTIQUE MANUSCRIPT. him first. He then brought down an old manuscript, which, very much to his astonishment, I told him was not the genuine record; giving him very plainly to understand that I was not to be bamboozled in the matter. I had been advised of this trick by the English clergyman whom I met in Jerusalem; and the priest, laughing at my detection of the cheat, while some of his hopeful flock who had followed me joined in the laugh, brought down the other preserved in a tin case. It was written in some character I did not understand, said to be the Samaritan, tattered and worn, and bearing the marks of extreme age; and, though I knew nothing about it, I admitted it to be the genuine manuscript; and they all laughed when I told the priest what a rogue he was for trying to deceive me; and this priest they believe to be of the tribe of Levi, of the seed of Aaron. If I had left Naplous then I should probably have repeated the words that our Saviour applied to them in his day," no good thing can come out of Samaria;" but I spent a long evening, and had an interesting conversation with my host and his brother, and in their kindness, sincerity, and honesty, forgot the petty duplicity of the Levite.

Much curiosity has existed in Europe among the learned with regard to this singular people, and several of the most eminent men of their day, in London and Paris, have had correspondence with them, but without any satisfactory result. The descendants of the Israelites who remained and were not carried into captivity, on the rebuilding of the second temple were denied the privilege of sharing the labour and expense of its reconstruction at Jerusalem, and, in mortification and revenge, they built a temple on Mount Gerizim, and ever since a deadly hatred has existed between their descendants the Samaritans and the Jews. Gibbon, speaking of them in the time of Justinian, says," The Samaritans of Palestine were a motley race, an ambiguous sect, rejected as Jews by the pagans, by the Jews as schismatics, (p. 242) and by the Christians as idolaters. The abomination of the cross had already been planted on their holy mount of Gerizim, but the persecution of Justinian offered only the alternative of baptism or rebellion. They chose the latter; under the standard of a desperate leader, they rose in arms and retaliated their wrongs on the lives, the property, and the temples of a defenceless people. The Samaritans were finally subdued by the regular forces of the East; twenty thousand were slain, twenty thousand were sold by the Arabs to the infidels of Persia and India, and the remains of that unhappy nation atoned for the crime of treason by the sin of hypocrisy." About sixty families are all now remaining, and these few relics of a once powerful people still dwell in their ancient capital, at the base of Mount Gerizim, under the shadow of their fallen temple.

The brother of my host was particularly fond of talking about them. He was very old, and the most deformed man I ever saw who lived to attain a great age. His legs were long, and all his limbs were those of a tall man, but he was so hump-backed that in sitting

he rested upon his hump. He asked me many questions about the Samaritans in England (of America he had no knowledge), and seemed determined to believe that there were many in that country, and told me that I might say to them, wherever I found them, that there they believed in one omnipotent and eternal God, the five Books of Moses, and a future Messiah, and the day of the Messiah's coming to be near at hand; that they practised circumcision, went three times a year up to Mount Gerizim, " the everlasting mountain," to worship and offer sacrifice, and once a year pitched their tents and left their virgins alone on the mount for seven days, expecting that one of them would conceive and bring forth a son, who should be the Messiah; that they allowed two wives, and, in case of barrenness, four; that the women were not permitted to enter the synagogue, except once a year during fast, but on (P. 243) no account were they permitted to touch the sacred scroll; and that, although the Jews and Samaritans had dealings in the market-places, &c, they hated each other now as much as their fathers did before them.

I asked him about Jacob's well; he said he knew the place, and that he knew our Saviour, or Jesus Christ, as he familiarly called him, very well; he was Joseph the carpenter's son, of Nazareth; but that the story which the Christians had about the woman at the well was all a fiction; that Christ did not convert her; but that, on the contrary, she laughed at him, and even refused to give him water to drink.

The information I received from these old men is more than I have ever seen in print about this reduced and singular people, and I give it for what it may be worth. I cannot help mentioning a little circumstance, which serves to illustrate the proverb that boys will be boys all the world over. While I was exploring the mysteries of the Samaritan creed, it being the season of Easter, a fine chubby little fellow came to me with a couple of eggs died yellow, and trying them on his teeth, just as we used to do in my boyish days (did we learn it from them or they from us?)—gave me a choice ; and, though it may seem a trifling incident to the reader, it was not an uninteresting circumstance to me, this celebration of my " paas" in the ancient Sychem, cracking eggs with a Samaritan boy. (p. 245).....

Leaving the valley, we turned up to the right, and, crossing among the mountains, in two hours came in sight of the ruins of Sebaste, the ancient Samaria, standing upon a singularly bold and insulated mountain, crowned with ruins. The capital of the ten tribes of Israel, where Ahab built his palace of ivory; where, in the days of Jereboam, her citizens sat in the lap of luxury, saying to their masters " come and let us drink," destroyed by the Assyrians, but rebuilt and restored to more than its original splendour by Herod, now lies in the state foretold by the prophet Amos; " her inhabitants and their posterity are taken away." The ancient Samaritans are all gone, and around the ruins of their palaces and temples are gathered the miserable huts of the Arab Fellahs.....

Comments on this section from the Editor of theSamaritanUpdate.com

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