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Village Life in Palestine

A Description of the Religion, Home Life, Manners, Customs, Characteristics and
Superstitions of the Peasants of the Holy Land
With Reference to the Bible

By the

REV. G. Robinson Lees, B.A., F.R.G.S.
Longmans, Green, and Co.
39 Paternoster Row, London
New York and Bombay
1905

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THE SAMARITAN PASSOVER.

The Samaritans, the oldest and smallest sect in the world, numbering less than two hundred, still worship on their holy mountain overlooking Jacob's well. The woman of Samaria said, "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain " (St. John iv. 20).

The Passover ceremony is the most interesting of all

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THE SAMARITAN PASSOVER.

(p. 207) their ordinances and conducted on the plan set forth in Exodus xii.

Their tents are pitched as near as possible in two lines; the oblong tent of the tabernacle, being the most important, is fixed close to the place of sacrifice, which is next to that of the high priest Jacob. On the evening of the ninth day of their sojourn in the holy place, and the fifteenth of the month Nisan, the men having already prepared the lambs for sacrifice by care and constant washing (Exod. xii. 4), the final preparations are complete. The men and boys are dressed in white cotton shirts and trousers, and the women who remain in the tents put on their best clothes.

Fire is placed in a trench opposite the tabernacle, over which two caldrons are fixed containing water, which is gradually heated during the reading of the law. Near the end of the trench, away from the tabernacle, there is a circular pit, bordered by loose stones, about six feet deep and three feet wide, in which a fire is kindled for burning the sacrifice.

Two hours before sunset the male portion of this congregation assemble in the tabernacle, with the exception of the "Shochetim," the young men whose duty is to kill the lambs and watch the boiling water, and two others who attend to the fire in the pit. The "law" is then read with their faces turned towards the ruins of the temple on the top of the mountain. Many visitors from the town of Nablous and the surrounding country cluster round the white-robed men to witness the proceedings, some of whom have come with the intention of creating a disturbance. Officers and soldiers from the Turkish garrison are there to preserve order, a necessary precaution which has to be purchased by a substantial payment from the (p. 208) slender purse of the Samaritan community, unless they are prepared to abandon the feast.

At sunset the reading of the "law" is finished, and as the lambs are brought to the "Shochetim" the remainder of the Samaritans gather round the victims. At a given signal each lamb is seized, thrown on its back, and the knife drawn once across its throat. The blood spurts from the wound, the Paschal lamb rolls over, and after a brief struggle expires. A shout of joy rises from the Samaritans, and counter cries of derision from the Moslem spectators, who have been trying to push their way into the enclosure protected by the broad backs of the faithful band of worshippers.

The foreheads of the boys who form the inner circle are smeared with blood; and the men embrace and kiss each other, rejoicing, with hearty congratulations, that the lambs of their redemption have been slain. After they have been carefully examined by the high priest, to see if properly killed and without blemish, and pronounced dead, boiling water is taken from the caldrons and poured over them; the young men then set to work and pull off the wool. When this is done the entrails are removed and burnt near the end of the trench, and the carcasses prepared on spits—poles about two yards long—for the pit of fire. After they have been put into the flame a cover of wet earth is placed over the mouth of the pit to keep in the heat, and the roasting continues till midnight.

The men then adjourn to the tents, and the boys amuse themselves in various ways considered suitable for a festive occasion.

All meet together in their respective families to eat the unleavened bread and bitter herbs, which are offered to visitors as well, if friendly and well disposed.

(p. 209) From the high priest to the humblest Samaritan all are pleased to talk about their festival, and answer questions with evident pride and gratification at the interest taken in their ancient custom.

Few strangers linger on the mountain to view the final scene, when all stand round the smoking masses of meat as they are brought from the pit, and with loins girded and staves in their hands they hastily swallow every morsel of the lambs roasted with fire (Exod. xii. 10, 11). On no account will they give a portion of this precious food to any but their own people. It is said that on one occasion a Moslem stole a piece but was instantly seized and his throat tightly held until it was squeezed out.

The number of lambs slain varies according to the number and means of the people. Poor families join together for one, while those who can afford it provide a lamb for the family. At the time of my visit seven were killed and eaten.

As there was a large number of onlookers who could with difficulty be kept from interrupting the sacrificial service it was deemed prudent to omit the sprinkling of the doorposts with blood. In spite of every precaution the tabernacle was torn down; and the disorder would have increased and imperilled the feast itself if the men had left the slain animals before they were deposited in the fire. Yet an excuse was available for this act of omission. The high priest told me that for two reasons it was unnecessary; first, because there was no longer any need to particularly mark the dwellings of his people on account of an impending disaster; and secondly, that the blood of the last year's sacrifice was still visible on the tent poles.

Comments on this section from the Editor of theSamaritanUpdate.com

This reference is not 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