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### **The Samaritan Passover.**

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AFTER being deprived of the privilege at different times and for considerable periods, the Samaritans have for fifty years been permitted the uninterrupted celebration of their passover at the rightful centre, on Mt. Gerizim. Among the very first visitors to witness the festival after its restoration was the German Orientalist, Petermann, who was present April 22, 1853. The careful report which he gave of his observations is perhaps the most valuable one that we possess.<sup>1</sup> Subsequent reports from other observers are quite numerous, and differ in excellence according to the care with which that which was actually seen is distinguished from what was learned second-hand or taken for granted. While in its main outlines the celebration has continued the same, it is clear that there has been, and still is, much freedom in matters of detail. It is in illustration of this fact and in directing attention to the peculiarities of a Sunday passover that the following report has whatever of value it may possess. There are really three methods of procedure, according as the passover falls on Saturday, Sunday, or a following week-day. At the time of Petermann's visit and that of several others since, the festival chanced to fall on Saturday, and so preparations were made in advance, and the lambs were all ready to be eaten by the setting of Friday's sun, which marked the advent of the Sabbath. When the feast falls on any other day than Sunday, preparations can begin in the afternoon or even earlier, but naturally this cannot take place on Saturday, and so a Sunday passover has its own particular method of procedure. It happened this year that the feast fell on Sunday, April 12, and, as the Jewish day is reckoned from sunset to sunset, was celebrated on the night of Saturday.

We arrived at the Samaritan encampment about four o'clock Saturday afternoon and found all very quiet. People could be seen moving about and sitting in the tents, but there was no rush toward us on the part of the young men and boys, as there had been when we came up the day before, nor did any of them follow us or show more interest than to watch our movements from a distance. The place of the encampment was on the shoulder of the mountain below the summit and to the west of it, apparently the exact spot described by Petermann. The masses of stones which surround it testify to the labor that was necessary to clear this space, about half an acre in extent. The tents, of various shapes, were ranged in irregular lines about three sides of a court or square. The open

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<sup>1</sup> *Reisen im Orient*, i. pp. 260-292, Leipzig, 1860; Herzog's *Real-Encyclopädie*, ed. 1, xiii. pp. 378sqq.

side was the entrance to the encampment on the east. Among the tents were two or three light, portable structures of wood and metal, resembling the camps sometimes used by those engaged in the work of excavation. At the time of Petermann's visit he speaks of finding six tents. Seven, years later there were ten;<sup>2</sup> and early in the '90's it is estimated there were twenty-five or thirty;<sup>3</sup> while in 1898 there were twenty-nine.<sup>4</sup> This year we could count fully forty, one for each of the forty families. In the earlier days, fear of their Moslem masters, and especially fear of a raid from the neighboring Bedawin, led the Samaritans to curtail their sojourn on Mt. Gerizim as much as possible. The passover and the following feast of unleavened bread was not a religious holiday to the same extent that it is now. The change has resulted from the development of a more tolerant spirit and a larger degree of security. The tents, as we saw them, were well equipped with household furniture, and the encampment had an air of permanence. The high priest, Yacub, invited us to his tent soon after our arrival. We found it of the same kind as the usual fourteen-rope tent of a Cook outfit. Its fittings were clean and comfortable, but in no way elaborate. The usual coffee presented to guests was replaced by lemonade, as there could be no fires on the Sabbath. Yacub was very willing to answer our questions, and also to receive the *bakhshish* for showing the sacred roll of the Pentateuch.

The place where the passover is celebrated is in a little enclosure at the southeast corner of the encampment. As one enters he comes first to a short trench, running north and south, in which the fire is kindled for boiling the water in two caldrons which rest on the walls that form the sides of the trench. Beyond these, towards the north, the trench expands into a circular end, where larger wood is laid for (p. 189) the fire to consume the entrails and whatever may remain from the feast. The fuel was all in readiness when we went to inspect the place after our call on the high priest. The long fragment of a large column, evidently from the ruins on the top of the mountain, lies near the farther side of the enclosure. Joined on to the northeast corner is a little mound, and in the centre of this a pit some eight or nine feet deep and about three feet in diameter, walled up like a well. This is the oven where the lambs are roasted. Apparently, since it is not possible to dig to any depth in such a rocky surface, they heaped up earth and stones in this small mound to increase the depth of the pit. The same one is used from year to year. Meantime it is kept in proper condition and preserved from defilement by being filled with small stones. A large pile of thorns, together with twigs and branches, was in readiness for the fire here.

As the hour drew on toward sunset, there was a stir of life throughout the encampment. The high priest came for a last inspection. He was throughout the master of ceremonies and gave personal attention to details, lending a hand on various occasions. Visitors now began to arrive in considerable numbers, and along with them mounted soldiers and police. The walls of the little enclosure where the service was to be held became crowded, and police and soldiers were busy keeping back the curious boys. In previous years young Mohammedans have sometimes caused considerable trouble and come near defiling the passover. About half an hour before sunset the high priest took his place at one end of the broken column, with his face toward the sacred rock on the mountain top, the site of the ancient Samaritan temple. Behind him, at some little interval, was a company of men ranged in three rows, two long ones and a short one between. They took

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<sup>2</sup> John Mills, *Three Months' Residence at Nablus*, pp. 248 *sqq.*

<sup>3</sup> Macewen, *Good Words*, 1894, pp. 50 *sqq.*

<sup>4</sup> Thomson, *PEF, QS.* 1902, p. 84.

their places without any apparent principle of arrangement, as one after another joined this group. Petermann speaks of twelve men representing the nation appearing in this part of the service. These I did not see, unless they were collected in the first row. This, however, included fourteen, counting one small lad. Most of the company were clothed in white. The high priest had on a green robe at first, and later changed this for a white one. At first all knelt or prostrated themselves in silent prayer. Then they joined the high priest in the repetition of a prayer in the nasal chant or intonation employed by worshippers of all faiths in the East. This was attended with stroking of the face or beard in certain passages, and occasional prostrations. After this all rose, and the high priest continued the service with responses from the people. Then he (p. 190) mounted the broken column and looked out toward the Mediterranean, where the setting sun was almost hidden by a dense haze. He was repeating with marked emphasis what was presumably the account in Ex. 12, while closely observing the watch which he held in his right hand. Some twelve or fourteen young men, in white trousers and blouses, had been busied during this preliminary service with last arrangements. The centre of their activity was the trench where the caldrons of water were in place. They had driven in the lambs which had been feeding on the mountain near at hand, and now stood holding them between their knees around the circular end of the trench. At the moment of sunset the high priest stepped down from the column and turned with the rest of the company toward the young men. Thereupon the latter began the excited repetition of some prayer or blessing, and, throwing the lambs on their sides with their throats toward the trench, held them in this position while they were killed by two of the men who were appointed to this duty. The throats were cut, not with one or two but with repeated strokes. One of the knives used for this purpose had been shown to us by the high priest. It came from a German shop at Jerusalem. The blood ran down into the trench, or was absorbed by grass and weeds placed for the purpose. We watched to see whether any blood would be taken for "striking" the tents or marking the children. It was a time of greatest excitement, and the surging crowd made it difficult to watch proceedings closely; but so far as we could observe, no blood was taken. At the time of Petermann's visit the high priest told him that this command of Ex. 127 was enjoined only for the first instance, and that they no longer observed it. On the other hand, he says that he saw boys marking themselves with the sacrificial blood by making a stripe which extended from the forehead to the end of the nose. Fathers and mothers were seen marking their children, and even their babes, in like manner. Subsequent observers report seeing blood caught in basins to be used for such a purpose and for sprinkling the tents.<sup>5</sup> The high priest told us later, in response to a question, that this rite had not been carried out for some five or six years because of the Mohammedans — at least not openly. He added that usually some blood was taken by two or three, and had been taken that evening. Later on, in walking through the camp, I could not anywhere detect the presence of blood about the tent doorways, and I saw no children who were marked; (p. 191) but there might have been such among those who remained in the tents.

When the lambs had been slain the congregation exchanged joyful greetings after the usual Oriental manner, falling with a kiss first on the right and then on the left shoulder, or, in the case of the high priest and of some others, presumably his relatives or the more venerable of the community, by taking the hand, kissing it, and pressing it to the

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<sup>5</sup> So, for example, Trumbull, *Studies in Oriental Social Life*, p. 379.

forehead. This is undoubtedly an ancient custom and points to the central importance of the slaying of the lambs in the paschal celebration.

The number of lambs taken this year was seven. At the time of Petermann's visit there were five, and the number seems to have ranged from five to seven, according to the number of the participants. In addition one or two are held in reserve, in case any should not be properly slain or should be found to be physically imperfect. For one or the other of these reasons an extra lamb is often needed, but was not this year. The high priest inspected them as soon as they were slain and found that all had been properly killed; and in the dressing nothing was found amiss, as was the case when Petermann was present, when in one lamb the lungs had grown together.

The signal for slaying the lambs had been also the signal for lighting the fires under the caldrons and in the pit. A fire-tender was busy in each place feeding the flames. When the preliminary services were over many of the older men withdrew to the tents, and there was a lull in the ceremonies while waiting for the boiling water. This was needed to pour over the lambs to make it possible to pluck the wool. The visitors began to scatter, and it was not long before the two of us who had come together were left alone with the Samaritans.

It was about an hour after the killing of the lambs before the first one was ready to be dressed. Apparently the same men who had done the slaying served in the dressing and in making ready for the spit, although I saw the high priest preparing at least one. During the process of dressing, a lamb hung head downward suspended from a pole resting on the shoulders of two young men. All the young men thus engaged continued shouting in chorus, "The Lord God is one God." The entrails were thrown upon the fire that had been kindled in the circular end of the trench after removing the caldrons. The stomach and gall-bladder were taken aside and emptied of their contents before being cast on the fire. Once, in (p. 192) impatience because these were not promptly taken from him, the dresser threw them on the ground. The liver was not burned with the refuse, as formerly seems frequently to have been the case, but was put into one of the caldrons and later cleansed and inserted in the carcass to be roasted. The right fore leg and shoulder, which is the portion of the high priest, was cut off and put on the fire to be burned, since he eats with the others, and nothing can remain until the morning. When a lamb was dressed a very little water was poured into it, to rinse it, and this was allowed to run down on the ground. The spits were sharpened poles some eight or ten feet long made from the holm- or holly-oak (*sindiyan*). These were thrust out through the lamb and through the hind legs. A square collar of wood, about a foot and a half from the larger end, served to keep the carcass from sliding down too near to the ground. Thus the spit of the present day has little resemblance to the shape of the cross alluded to by Justin Martyr (*Dial. c. Trypho. c. 40*).

When the lambs were ready for roasting they were piled on a hurdle woven from large branches which was lying on the ground. It was not until two or three had been deposited that some new baskets were brought and placed on the surface of the wood beneath them. These baskets were of the kind used by workmen for carrying dirt and for many other purposes. They are pliable and can be so doubled as to serve for mats. After the lambs were dressed they were salted and the livers inserted. The fire in the pit had meanwhile been kept briskly burning, and quite a circle of men was gathered here, watching the process and enjoying the grateful warmth. Another company centred about the burning

refuse in the fire trench. Two fire-tenders, using what appeared to be the poles from which the lambs had hung, were kept busy in so disposing the material that it should be completely consumed. During the progress of the dressing, everything had been picked up with due care except the wool, which was allowed to be kicked about most of the night before it was finally gathered into the fire. Two or three older men were reading by the light of a lantern farther on in one corner of the enclosure. Another younger man read by the light of the fire, and others soon got out their books and joined him.

About a quarter to eleven the high priest appeared and put a few last sticks into the pit. Then the lambs were brought, and the men stood about in a circle, holding the spits upright with one end resting on the ground. The high priest led in a short prayer, after which all the lambs were thrust into the pit at about the same time. The (p. 193) hurdle had been brought and was now placed over the mouth of the pit. The spits, being allowed to protrude through its open squares, were thus kept in position. Grass, wild mustard, etc., at hand for the purpose, was piled on this, and then all was plastered over with mud. This smearing was kept up as long as a puff of steam or smoke could anywhere be seen. The oven mound was then deserted, save for one man who lay down there by a lantern as a guardian and droned away, for two hours and more, at some poems or prayers in the book which he held. After a little time some of the group around the coals in the fire-trench also took part. There were others reading at the end of the enclosure. Many retired to their tents. In two or three of these the voices of those who were reading could be heard. In others we could see people lying on their beds and rugs, sleeping or engaged in conversation. Some young women now ventured forth and crouched with the group about the coals. Outside here also a few men curled up in their mantles and slept. During this period of waiting for the roasting of the lambs there came, after a little time, a long prayer by the high priest, in which many of the congregation took part. In this service the relative positions of priest and people were as they had been at the opening of the celebration. Another season of inactivity followed.

Soon after one o'clock a slight bustle arose in the tents. People, at least a few, could be seen by the tent doors engaged in washing hands, face, mouth, and feet. They began to assemble about the fire with their white robes girt about them and carrying a staff or some rude substitute for the same. The new baskets, before used on the hurdle, were ripped down one of the sides and thus made into larger mats for holding the roasted lambs. Some of the men had brought plates and platters as they came. It was two and one-half hours from the time the lambs had been put in when the young men began to dig away the mud from the mouth of the oven, a rather shorter time than usual, it was said. It took some minutes to make it possible to lift up and turn over the hurdle. The lambs, now reduced to black, unappetizing-looking masses, were removed without accident, and each was folded in its basket-mat, borne down into the enclosure, and laid on the ground. They were not placed in any noticeable order, but grouped irregularly. No sheet or other covering, save the basket, was spread on the ground. Usually the spit was pulled out, but in one or two cases it was allowed to remain. The high priest divided the bitter herbs, throwing a few handfuls on each lamb. Unleavened bread was also distributed beside each lamb. (p. 194) The bitter herbs are such as are gathered on the mountain and are known to the Samaritans only under the name bitter (*murr*). They have rather long, bright green leaves and bear some resemblance to dandelion greens.

Before eating, all the people stood together about the mats, repeating a prayer or blessing. In leading this the chief fire-tender (who was possibly the second priest) was more conspicuous than the high priest. Then all fell to, tearing the meat from the carcasses with their fingers and eating as they tore. Handfuls were pulled off and passed about. Plates and platters were filled and borne to the tents. Some ate crouching by the lambs or about the fire, while others were standing. There were some of the smaller children with the group in the enclosure. Little regard seemed to be paid to the grouping. I noticed some who moved from lamb to lamb in search of new bits. The high priest and his family were apparently in one company, and had a lamb to themselves. All ate "in haste," certainly, and in a few minutes, about twenty, possibly, nothing but bones remained. It was not yet two o'clock when the hurdle, spits, poles, baskets, etc., and all that remained from the feast was piled together in the circular end of the fire trench where the entrails had been burned, and a brisk fire was started by a branch lighted at the mouth of the pit, which continued to send forth bursts of flame now and then from the accumulation of fat that remained from the roasting. Plates of refuse from the tents and considerable quantities of unleavened bread were thrown on the new fire. The burning was a long, slow process, for after two hours each stirring of the embers brought to light new material and caused the flames to leap up afresh. After the washing which followed the meal, the high priest took his place once more, kneeling at the end of the broken column with his face toward the mountain top, and began a service of prayer. Behind him, as previously, was ranged the congregation in a like attitude. The numbers gradually increased until there were nearly as many in this company as when the service began the previous evening. Only three or four remained about the fire. Lights could still be seen in the tents, but all was quiet there. The scene continued unchanged as dawn came on. The weird chorus of seeming lamentation was the last sound we heard as we left the fire and passed down the mountain about four o'clock Sunday morning.

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

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