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SACRIFICE OF THE PASSOVER ON MOUNT GERIZIM

BY DOCTOR WOLFGANG VON WEISL

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(Berlin Liberal Daily)

(P. 76)

As twilight began to purple the barren mesa of Gerizim, the Sacred Mountain, on the evening of the seventeenth of April, an observance began there that has no counterpart elsewhere in the world. It purported to be a festival of joy and indeed there was dancing and singing the whole night through; but to me it was like a funeral. I seemed to stand at the grave of a people and a religion.

The last of the Samaritans slaughtered their Passover sacrifice upon the summit of the mountain, which their temple at one time crowned. They ate the flesh, they sang, they thanked the Eternal who led their forefathers out of Egypt. Scarcely forty men and boys joined in the prayer, and altogether not more than one hundred and seventy participated directly in the ceremony.

Spectres seemed to dance around the ruddy fire of sacrifice,

Unique indeed is this tiny Samaritan nation- as unique as its history. After the destruction of the kingdom of Israel, the King of Babylon settled strangers in the conquered land. These intermarried with the Israelites who had remained behind, and remarkably enough adopted the religion of the latter. When, two centuries later, the Jews returned from Babylonian exile and began to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem, these Samaritans came to the Jews and said: 'Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye do; and we do sacrifice unto him.' But the returning exiles, instead of welcoming this unexpected aid, bluntly rejected it, for they considered the Samaritans no longer of pure blood.

Bitterly did the Samaritans avenge this insult. We seem to be reading the history of the modern intrigues against the Balfour Declaration when we recur to the records of that period. The Samaritans hired counselors against the Jews 'to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.' And the Jews reciprocated in full this hatred, which more than once endangered their very national existence.

Thereupon something still more remarkable occurred a psychological riddle. Precisely at this time, when the hatred of the Samaritans for the Jews was bitterest, they accepted the Pentateuch as their Holy Scripture, and proclaimed themselves the Defenders of the Law. They erected a temple on Mount Gerizim which, according to the Samaritan belief, is the place appointed for it by Jehovah, and, rejecting all oral tradition, clung inflexibly to the letter of the Law. Fighting the Jews on one side and the Gentiles on the other, they likewise became jealous defenders of the purity of their race.

Centuries passed. Greeks and Romans came, but neither the Jews nor the Samaritans softened their hearts. They remained steadfast enemies. Vespasian defeated the Jews and sacked Jerusalem; and he defeated the Samaritans and slaughtered eleven thousand of their people on Mount Gerizim. (p. 77) But even common suffering did not unite the brother peoples.

Jews and Samaritans revolted against the foreign yoke. In the year 628 A.D., Emperor Heraclius II conquered the Holy Land. He massacred the Jews because they had revolted against him, and the Samaritans because they would not accept Christianity. But the few survivors of the Jews and of the

Samaritans remained as bitter enemies as ever. Both races had lost their temples, but neither would forget a feud begun at the erection of a temple a thousand years before.

Another ten centuries passed, and other centuries in addition. Many peoples in succession overran the Holy Land: Arabians, Seljuks, Crusaders, Tatars, and Turks in turn ravaged the country. But the little tribe at the foot of Mount Gerizim, though repeatedly decimated by persecution and forced conversions, remained faithful to its Holy Books the Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua and clung precariously to existence.

Until to-day. Now, just when the Jews are returning to their ancient fatherland to erect there a New Jerusalem, the Samaritans are gradually disappearing. They now number only one hundred and seventy souls, and there is little chance that they will multiply. There are not enough mothers to perpetuate the race. The Samaritans are handsome, upstanding, physically vigorous, and their women are often remarkably beautiful, with magnificent eyes. But the race is worn out. It is no longer prolific. Men remain single because they can find no wives. Samaritan girls are lacking; their Law forbids them to marry Arabian women, and the Jewish rabbis forbid Jewesses to marry them. It is to-day as it was twenty-three centuries ago the Samaritan is an Israelite, as he claims, but not a Jew.

At Easter the Samaritans go forth from their little quarter in the fanatically Mohammedan city of Nablus to the plateau of Gerizim, and encamp there just beneath the summit of the mountain, where their temple once stood. Men, women, and children thus go forth, pitch their tents on their ancient place of worship, and during the seven days that the festival continues live under the open heavens, in the heart of their former kingdom. On the thirteenth of Nisan, the first month after the spring solstice, just one day before the date observed by the Jews, they slaughter their Passover sacrifice. They kill seven sheep in the twilight, and roast them with hides and entrails on a fire, and they eat the flesh with bitter herbs and unleavened bread.

The oldest sacrifice in history! In the past strangers have occasionally ascended Mount Gerizim on the night of the sacrifice to witness the ceremony. This year, however, they did not come singly or in pairs, but in great parties, completely changing its character. For the first time in the history of the two kindred but hostile peoples, Jews flocked in throngs to the sacrifice of the Samaritans.

Seven auto-trucks brought three or four hundred workingmen from Jerusalem to Nablus; five hundred when came on foot from Haifa through the mountains of Ephraim, and still others from the colonies, even as far as Jaffa. It was an invasion, and in a way a political demonstration, against the Mohammedans of Nablus, whom the Jews regard as their particular enemies to-day.

The men, wrapped in white mantles, formed a circle around the sacrificial animals. The sun was just sinking below the horizon. The Samaritans prayed aloud, stretching their hands out toward the young sheep in the (p. 78) middle of the stone corral that is the place of sacrifice. One after another the throats of the lambs were cut, and their blood ran over the stones that formed the altar. Green boughs carpeted the ground. These were kindled and carcasses thrown on them and covered with burning brush. The men continued to pray, erect, forming a compact ring around the fire. Children crouched at their feet, tearing the wool from the singeing pelts. A man kept pouring boiling water over the animals, in order that the wool might come off easier. The blaze flamed high, the smoke was wafted over the circle; the moonlight lay brilliant upon the white cliffs and rocks beyond.

It must have been difficult for the praying men to concentrate their thoughts upon their solemn function, for full fifteen hundred spectators crowded around them on every side. Those behind could not see what was going on, and pushed forward against the others. It was necessary for a chain of policemen to keep the centre of the circle clear. Yet I could see that the visitors themselves caught the contagion of worship. The solemnity of the occasion irresistibly overawed them. These last representatives of a faith handed down from centuries before our present era closed their eyes and chanted like the dervishes, or like the Chasidim themselves. They prayed with their whole bodies; their beards and their long locks waved in the air as they clapped their hands in time with the rhythm of the chant. The latter became more rapid and

rose louder - a song of joy and exultation in march time. The words were Arabic, but the melody was not. I could detect Jewish tone-sequences that I had heard in Saloniki, and strange refrains from the Yemen. Ancient affinities with kindred races echoed obscurely through the notes.

The carcasses were hung in succession by the hind feet to a tall wooden post and dressed. The lungs and other organs were carefully inspected; the liver, kidneys, and lungs were laid aside as an offering of honor for the priest. Meanwhile the chanting never ceased. The singers described the flight of Israel from Egypt. Then suddenly all was silent.

A solemn voice rose from one corner of the circle, speaking in Hebrew the first time, perhaps, in eighteen centuries that this tongue has been heard on Mount Gerizim. The schoolmaster of the Samaritans was addressing the assembled guests. He said that this day an alliance was concluded between Judaea and Ephraim. To be sure, Ephraim is but a name. The nation itself is dead, and the thirty or forty men present that night were hardly capable of making an 'alliance.' But on an occasion like this such terms may be allowed. The speaker requested offerings from the Jews to help rebuild the Samaritan synagogue, because the Samaritans themselves are very poor.

This appeal seemed to me to jar on the occasion. A people may be poor, and a people may perish. It may be great in poverty and in death. But an impoverished people begging alms of its hereditary enemy to pay for a fine funeral is an unworthy end of greatness.

It reminded me of Europe after the war.

At length the sacrifice was over. The slaughtered animals were deposited in a separate enclosure until the feast, which occurs just before midnight. There they were carefully guarded, that no foreigner might disturb them. Should a Jew or a Mohammedan touch anything associated with the sacrifice, the latter would become impure.

Then a sight ensued that has had no precedent on this ancient mountain. The Samaritans received the strangers (p. 79) as guests in their tents, selling to the tourists and at reasonable prices coffee, tea, beer, soft drinks, and eggs. What the poor Samaritan artisans and petty traders of Nablus earn on this occasion is of great importance to them, yet they manage to preserve the fiction that the Europeans are really guests. They summoned up the little Hebrew they possessed in order to greet the visitors courteously in what they presume to be their native tongue. But I could observe that most of the Jews, especially those from Germany and Czechoslovakia, knew even less than they did of the language. While the wealthier were making purchases in the tents, or contemplating with wondering interest the strange scene around them, the poorer Jewish laborers took things into their own hands. Several hundred young colonists gathered around an itinerant lecturer, who gave a talk upon the history of the Samaritans. Others started singing, and at length, joining hands, began to dance the *horra*, the new Jewish dance of Palestine.

He who has not seen the horra in Palestine does not know what dancing is. The *chaluz* the colonist puts his whole soul into it, dances until he is ready to sink to the ground with fatigue, revels in an ecstasy of motion. There is no suggestion of the exotic about the horra, as in the fashionable dances of Europe; indeed, it is rather for men than for women an expression in rhythmic movement of masculine power and vigor.

One man places his arm around the shoulders of another, and so on until a circle is formed. A simple melody is sung, either by the dancers or by the spectators, and the circle begins to turn with constantly increasing speed. Other men and women join, throwing their cloaks and knapsacks into the middle of the circle, unclasping a pair of linked arms, and joining the swiftly moving ring. Thus the circle grows until it is too large and its movement is retarded. Then it breaks up into two or more smaller circles, and the dancing is renewed. The music of the horra fascinates the *chaluz*. The moment he hears its monotonous but stirring melody he drops whatever he is doing and hastens to join his singing companions. The words are simple and of no significance; indeed some of the songs have no text, but consist of the repetition of a few meaningless vocals. Yet they have a wild, primitive beauty, and these men dancing upon the moonlit

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mountain plateau, to the rhythm of their hobnailed boots on the stony ground, are a much finer sight to look upon than a crowded European ballroom.

Midnight approached. The carcasses of the sheep had been long since buried amid the glowing stones of the altar, and covered with earth. Now they were taken out, carved on huge platters, and served to the participants in the sacrifice. The older men sat on stools, their cloaks girdled about their loins, their shoes on their feet, as the Bible bids. When the meat was served, they rose and ate hastily and standing, as the Israelites were commanded to do when they fled from Egypt. Huge biscuits of unleavened bread were distributed, and platters of bitter herbs. The meat was piled on the biscuit, covered with herbs, and eaten, naturally in the Oriental fashion, without plates or knives and forks.

Toward midnight the feast drew to an end. The high priest, a descendant of Aaron, a massive, powerful old man of royal mien, well past his eightieth year, lifted his face and recited a benediction. The worshipers joined in a low voice, thanking the Eternal that He had fed and preserved them until today - them, the last of the Samaritans.

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

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