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Syria and the Holy Land: their scenery and their people.
Incidents of Travel, &c. From the Best and the Most Recent Authorities with Illustrations
By **Walter Keating Kelly**
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(p. 3).....It would be erroneous to suppose that Christianity, Judaism, and Mohammedanism monopolise the land between them; the Anzary Mountains still shelter in their fastnesses the rites and the descendants of ancient Paganism; there still subsist in Syria the mysterious initiations of the *Druse*, the infamous rites of the *Ismeylee*, the adoration of the devil by the *Yezeedee*, and the practical pantheism of the *Koord*; whilst, in a part of Sechem, (p. 4) or the modern Naplous, three-and-twenty families, descended from the revolted tribes, preserve their ancient Pentateuch, and still offer upon Gerizim the rites and sacrifices of the Samaritan worship.

It would seem, as though by a perpetual law, Syria were peculiarly marked out as an arena whereon to determine mighty issues, such as involve the destinies of mankind at large. How often has the lot of empires and nations been decided there, from the gray dawn of time down to our own days! Jews, Assyrians, Chaldaeans, Macedonians, Romans, Saracens, Western Christians, Tatars, Turks, and Egyptians, have all left their bones to bleach upon this common battle-ground of the nations. It was the resistance offered to Napoleon, by the petty fortress of Acre, which rolled back on Europe the tide of conquest that otherwise had swept over Asia.

(p. 422) 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, officers, and slaves around him. We exchanged our greetings on horseback; I showed him my firman, and he sent a janissary to conduct me to the house of a Samaritan, a writer to the government, where I was received, fed, and lodged better than in any other place in the Holy Land, always excepting the abodes of those suffering martyrs the Terra Santa monks.

CHAPTER XXX.

NABLOUS.—THE SAMARITANS. SEBASTE. PLAIN OF JEZRKEL. SOIL AND HUSBANDRY OF PALESTINE.

NABLOUS is the Arabic form of the Greek Neapolis, and is one of the few instances in which the names imposed by foreign conquerors have superseded the ancient nomenclature. The inhabitants of this mountain district exhibit many physical and moral traits distinguishing them from the other Syrian tribes. They bear the impress of their Greek ancestry; but Perrier remarks that to the turbulence and other bad qualities inherited from them, the Nablousians superadd the vices of the Arabs. The following anecdote illustrates their fierce party spirit. In 1834, some children of the village of Beit- (p. 423) el-Ma amused themselves with gathering anemonies, and plucking and scattering the bright leaves of the flowers. As the relations of these children -were known to be of

the Yesmeni faction, a mob of Nablousians of the Kess party immediately assembled in arms, vowing vengeance for this so called insult to their adopted colour and emblem. Several villages were sacked, and a hundred and thirty individuals lost their lives in consequence of this frivolous quarrel.

The city of Nablous is long and narrow, stretching close along the N.E. base of Mount Gerizim. In the ruggedness and narrowness of its ways, it resembles Jerusalem and other Syrian towns, but there is a welcome appearance of bustle and life in its streets; the sound of the silk-wheel and loom is heard from many of its houses, mingling with that best of music in an Eastern climate, the rush of many streams, which afford a profuse supply of water to the inhabitants. The houses are high, and in general well-built, all of stone, with domes upon the roof as at Jerusalem. The valley itself, from the foot of Gerizim to that of Ebal, is here not more than some five hundred yards wide, extending from S.E. to N.W. The city lies directly upon a water summit in this valley; the waters on the eastern part flowing off east into the plain, and so to the Jordan: while the fine fountains on the western side send off a pretty brook down the valley N.W. to the Mediterranean.

Mounts Gerizim and Ebal rise in steep, rocky precipices, immediately from the valley on each side, to a height apparently of some eight hundred feet. The sides of both these mountains, as here seen, are equally naked and sterile; although some travellers have chosen to describe Gerizim as fertile, and to confine the sterility to Ebal. The only exception in favour of the former appears to be a small ravine coming down opposite the west end of the town, which, indeed, is full of fountains and trees; in other respects, both mountains, as here seen, are desolate, except that a few olive trees are scattered upon them. The side of the northern mountain, Ebal, along the foot, is full of ancient excavated sepulchres.

The two most interesting accounts given us by recent travellers of Mount Gerizim, are those of Dr. Robinson and Lord Francis Egerton. The latter, coming from Jerusalem, encamped in the valley beyond the further end of the town:—"The spot we selected," says his Lordship, "formed, in my opinion, the most agreeable halting-place in our travels—an olive grove on a slight eminence immediately over a delicious spring. We had the whole afternoon before us for the enjoyment of that sort of repose, which can only (p. 424) be purchased by exercise in a hot sun, and richly we enjoyed it. The spring was enough frequented to make it interesting, from the specimens it afforded of the inhabitants, without being burthensome as a neighbour, which a fountain in these countries often becomes, particularly when much frequented by the younger ladies of a town or village. I never enjoyed pleasanter repose than in this cradle, of which the two sides were Mounts Ebal and Gerizim."

Early next morning his Lordship's party climbed the latter mountain. "It is easily accessible for horses; and one of the views of the town at the beginning of the ascent, forms one of the finest landscapes I have seen in Syria. A ruined tower of the middle ages is on the left of the foreground, which is otherwise made up of a mass of foliage, in which the deep green of the apricot and fig predominates. A single palm breaks this mass in the foreground, and others are seen in the distance, adding to the oriental effect of the picture of the city itself, with its terraced roofs, mosques, and cupolas. Mount Geirzim on one side and Ebal on the other, feathered with olive groves, complete the scene. In some of its features, Nablous struck me as not unlike Bagneres in the Pyrenees."

Dr. Robinson went by the ravine before-mentioned, under the guidance of one of the younger Samaritans, an honest, simple-minded man. Above the ravine, the ascent is steep; yet not so but that one might ride up without difficulty. When about two-thirds of the way up, they heard a woman calling after them, who proved to be the mother of the Samaritan guide. He was her only son, and had come away, it seems, without her knowledge; and she was now in the utmost terror at finding that he had gone off as a guide to Franks, to show them the holy mountain. She had immediately followed the party, and was now crying after them with all the strength of her lungs, forbidding him to proceed lest some evil should befall him. The young man went back to meet her, and tried to pacify her, but in vain; she insisted upon his returning home. This he was not inclined to do, though, he said, he could not disobey his mother, and so transgress the law of Moses. This touching trait gave the travellers a favourable idea of the morality of the Samaritans. After reasoning with her a long time without effect, he finally persuaded her to go with them. So she followed the strangers up the mountain; at first full of wrath, and keeping at a distance from them; yet, at last, she became quite reconciled and communicative.

Twenty minutes of ascent in the direction S. W. from the city leads the traveller to the top of Gerizim, a tract of high table land, stretching off far to the W. and S. W., and covered with rich herbage and wild flowers. Twenty minutes more towards the S. E. along a regular path upon the table land brings him to the holy place of the Samaritans, which is still at some distance from that shown as Joshua's altar. The ground here is rather depressed to a centre, so that a larger assemblage than the Samaritans can now muster, might conveniently witness the sacred rites as from a theatre. A few stones formed into an altar, and a paved trench to carry off the victim's blood, are all the tokens of the place and its purposes. A little further on the extreme and most elevated summit which overlooks the valley are some very extensive remains of a Roman fortress, with large tanks and much masonry of massive and regular construction. (p. 425)

Just under the walls of the castle, on the west side, are a few flat stones, of which it is difficult to say whether they were laid there by nature or by man. Under these are laid, as they allege, the twelve stones brought from Jordan by the Israelites; and there they will remain till the Muhdy (the Messiah) shall appear.

Beyond the castle, towards the south, is the alleged altar of Joshua, the holiest spot, where the Samaritan guide reverently takes off his shoes. It is the kibleh of that people. On whatever side of it they may be, they always turn their faces towards it in prayer; but when upon the spot itself it is lawful for them to pray in any direction. Round it are slight traces of former walls, possibly those of the ancient temple. The spot itself is a sort of table level with the surrounding ground, and at first sight appearing to be nothing more than the natural face of the rock from which the surface soil - has been removed, and divided into compartments by natural accidents of fracture and fissure. Such Lord Francis Egerton at first considered it, but on closer inspection he was induced to adopt the opinion that it was artificial. "It slopes," his lordship says, "at an angle fully sufficient for the sacrificial purpose of allowing blood to drain off towards the cavernous mouth of a deep well. Of these wells there are several near, and in two, at least, of them I thought I perceived that the stones of the orifice had been arranged artificially, and if so, with consummate skill, and to be, in fact, specimens of that kind of architecture best known by the term of cyclopean,—stones, namely, unhewn, but fitted to one another with a felicity,

which on a small scale, is often exhibited by the dyke-builders of Scotland. Now, Joshua was directed to build his altar of whole stones, untouched by iron tool; and, on looking at the altar itself, and comparing it with the wells in the neighbourhood, I was much inclined to the opinion, that all were of the same construction, and of one which would answer this description."

Near the same place the Samaritans show an altar as that on which Abraham was commanded to offer up Isaac; and further south, and, indeed, all round upon this eminence, are extensive foundations, apparently of dwellings, as if the ruins of a former city.

In the S.W. part of Nablous is the quarter occupied by the remnant of the Samaritans, rising somewhat upon the acclivity of Gerizim. The houses are well built and have the appearance of comfort. One of this little community is in affluent circumstances, having formerly been for a long while chief secretary of the Mutsellim of Nablous, and one of the most important and powerful men in the province: the rest are not remarkable either for wealth or poverty. Their physiognomy is not Jewish, nor does it appear to possess any peculiar character, distinct from that of other natives of the country.

No nation perhaps ever committed so many crimes, or endured so many reverses and persecutions in defence of its religion and its ancestral usages, as the Samaritans: and though there be little to commend in their annals, who can contemplate unmoved the lingering death of an ancient people, now dwindled to a mere handful, but still clinging with a love stronger than death, to the memory and laws of their fathers? In the month of April, 1840, one hundred and fifty-three individuals, forming three-and-twenty families, were all that were left of them to hope and struggle on in vain. "I was (p. 426) presented," says Mr. Farren, late British Consul-General in Syria, "in acknowledgment of some little service I rendered them with a copy of a letter addressed to them about two hundred years ago from a body of Samaritans in India (of whom they have no other trace) beseeching to know the fate of their brethren in Samaria; and when at Sychem and passing at sunset near their tombs, which lay upon a sterile bank within a wild recess at the foot of Gerizim, two Samaritan women, who were seated there and seemed mournfully to be numbering the graves into which the remnant of their ancient race was fast declining, broke from their silence as I approached, and in accents of deep feeling, implored me, if I knew where any of their people were now scattered to tell them, that their few remaining brethren, who still dwelt in the land of their forefathers, besought them to return, and close the exhausted record of their fate with kindred sympathies and rites."

Much curiosity has existed among the learned in Europe with regard to this singular people, and several most eminent men of their day, from Scaliger down to De Sacy, 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 with the permission of Alexander the Great; 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, and by the Christians as idolaters. The abomination of the cross had been already 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; 20,000 were slain, 20,000 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." They pretended to embrace Christianity in the year 551, as the only means of recovering a few trifling privileges. Soon after that period they disappear from the historian's view; crushed down without the power of resistance under the heavy yoke of the Muslims, their numbers have ever since continued to decrease.

The Syrians tell many marvellous tales about the isolated and mysterious Samaritans: they assert that the number of heads of families among them is invariably forty, and can neither augment nor diminish, being irrevocably fixed by the demons, who are the protectors of the race. Setting aside all such fables, the following is an abstract of what appears best authenticated respecting this people.

They intermarry only with each other, never stray beyond their mountain, and hold no familiar intercourse with their neighbours of a different creed. Cut off from the whole world, ages pass over their heads, leaving them unchanged in all but numbers. (P. 427)

Their synagogue is a small plain arched room, with a curtained recess on the left hand as you enter, wherein they keep their manuscripts, of which they profess to have about a hundred: one of these, a copy of the Pentateuch, they allege to be 3460 years old, having been transcribed by Abishua, the son of Phineas, and great grandson of Aaron. They demand payment before-hand for showing this, and then produce an old roll, which, however, is not the right one. If the traveller is skilled enough in such matters to detect the fraud, the priest and his hopeful flock only laugh and bring out the other. "This," says Dr. Robinson, " was certainly very much worn, and somewhat tattered with much kissing, and here and there patched with shreds of parchment; but the handwriting appeared to me very similar to the former, and the vellum seemed, in like manner, not ancient." They regard the genuine manuscript, whatever that may be, as a palladium with which are bound up the lives and destinies of the Samaritans; but they are possessed, it is said, with a sad foreboding, that the precious deposit will one day be wrested from them, and then will the days of the last of their race be numbered. According to their account, their two families of priests are still of the stock of Aaron. Until recently these families had kept their blood pure from all alien mixture; but in consequence of their continual diminution, the males among them, now five in number, have been obliged to take wives from other houses. The place where they sacrifice [on ordinary occasions?] is an altar of dry stone, erected behind their village, on an artificial mound, which serves them as a representative of the famous Mount Gerizim. They keep the passover in the manner of the ancient Hebrews.

In childbirth the Samaritan woman remains shut up in her house for forty days, and no one is allowed to see her but the midwife or the nurse. Were any one else, even her husband, to see her during that time, the whole house would be rendered unclean, and it would be necessary to burn every article in it that was incapable of being purified by fire or by running water. Her chamber is closely shut, and talismans are hung on the door to drive away the demon *Leilat*, a formidable being, ever on the watch to steal into the lying-in chamber, and cast a malignant spell upon the mother and her child. Above the talismans the name of *Leilat* is inscribed in large red letters, with an imprecation against

the fiend; for of all magic charms his own name is thought most potent to repel him. On the fortieth day the woman quits her prison, Leilat no longer having any power to molest her; but it is not till twelve days after this that she performs her solemn ablutions, and a festival is held in the house to celebrate her re-admission into the family circle.

Like the Jews, the Samaritans carefully avoid all contact with a dead body or with a tomb, lest they should be rendered unclean: they wash their whole bodies and change their raiment before presenting themselves at the altar for prayer or sacrifice.

The following is their own tradition touching their origin: it is not, perhaps, perfectly in accordance with history:—

"When Salmanazar, king of Assyria, invaded Judea, after having conquered the kingdom of Israel, he carried away the whole population of Samaria into slavery in the land of Maden and Phares; but he left in their places a certain number of Assyrian families to till the ground and transmit (P. 428) the revenues of the country to Assyria. These families chose for their residence the mountain still called Samir to this day; hence they took the name of Samaritans. For a long while they retained their own religion; but soon after the return of the Jews from captivity, they intermarried with the Hebrew families, whose religion they gradually adopted, at the same time preserving some of the rites of their own worship. The Jews, to avoid being confounded with the Samaritans, invented, under Esdras, new Hebrew characters, called *Sires*, and copied out their books in the new writing, rejecting the old one as rendered impure by the Chaldeans. Now the ancient mode of writing, and the primitive Hebrew characters, are at present in the hands of the Samaritans, as well as the original books which were contemned by the Jews after the invention of the new characters."

Some members of this little community were accused before the atrocious Djezzar, pasha of Acre, of having blasphemed the Mohammedan faith, by declaring that they alone, as possessing the true ancient religion of God, were entitled to Paradise. Djezzar instantly summoned the chief men of the Samaritans, who entered his presence with dismay. Leaning on his hatchet and surrounded with his cut-throats and executioners, he stared for a long while with the aspect of a tiger on the Samaritans, whose terrors he beheld with delight. "Filthy miscreants!" he cried at last in a voice of thunder, "what is the exact number of your people?" "A hundred and sixty," they replied, half-dead with fear. "A hundred and sixty! and Paradise is for you alone! Well, then, sons of dogs, leave the earth to those against whom Paradise is barred, and go straight to heaven." Thereupon the pasha made a fatal gesture with his right hand, and the wretched men were hurried out for execution. But presently Djezzar appeared to change his mind. "Send those dogs back to their dens," he said; "and if a single one of them ever ventures to show himself beyond them, let him be killed like an unclean beast." He then by way of commuting their punishment increased the taxes paid by the Samaritans six-fold, and saddled them with the cost of constructing and maintaining a fountain at *Kefr Nuohr*, two leagues from Saffad, that, as he said, they might do some good in this world to those who were to be deprived of paradise in the next. The Samaritans returned home, rejoiced at having got off so well from this interview with the ferocious pasha, who fortunately for them happened on that day to be in unusually good humour. "Ever since that day," say the oldest Samaritans, "none of us have gone down into the plain, and we die without ever quitting the walls of our quarters."

Djezzar Pasha has been many years dead, but the lesson still works, and the Samaritans keep close to home, dreading to expose themselves to the outrages of the rude Nablousian mountaineers.¹

Mr. Stephens spent a long evening in a Samaritan house; he had an interesting conversation with the owner and his brother, and testifies to the kindness, sincerity, and honesty of his entertainers.

The brother was particularly fond of talking about his people. "He was very old, and the most deformed man I ever saw who lived to attain a great (p. 429) age. His legs were long, and all his limbs were those of a tall man, but he was so humpbacked that in sitting he rested on 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 looked for the day of the Messiah's coming as 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 no account were they permitted to touch the sacred scroll; and that, although the Jews and Samaritans had dealings on the market-place, &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."

At about eight in the morning we left Nablous, and for more than an hour we followed the course of the beautiful stream winding and murmuring through the centre of the valley. Nothing could be more charmingly picturesque than the little mills on its banks; low, completely embosomed among trees, with their roofs covered with grass; and sometimes the agreeable sound of a waterfall, was the first intimation we had of their presence.

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 on a singularly bold and insulated mountain crowned with ruins. The most conspicuous of these is the church dedicated to St. John the Baptist, built over the spot where a tradition of long standing has fixed the place of his burial, if not of his martyrdom. The walls are still entire to a considerable height and inclose a large space in which are now a mosque and a small building over the tomb. Yet Josephus relates expressly that John was beheaded in the castle of Machaerus, (p. 430) on the east of the Dead Sea; and it is hardly probable that his disciples who "came and took up the body and buried it," (Matt. xiv. 12), first transported it all the way to Samaria. The eastern end of the church is rounded in the common Greek style, and resting as it does upon a precipitous elevation of nearly one hundred feet, it is a noble and very striking monument. Common tradition, as in so many

¹ Perrier.

other cases, falsely ascribes this magnificent church to Helena; but the style of the architecture necessarily limits its antiquity to the period of the crusades; though it is not improbable that a portion of the eastern end may be of earlier date.

Sebastieh is the Arabic form of Sebaste, another foreign Greek appellation, which, since the days of Herod, has continued to usurp the place of the earlier name, Samaria. The neighbourhood is quite a forest of truncated columns, bearing witness to Herod's magnificence; and it would be difficult to find in all Palestine a situation to equal in strength, fertility and beauty combined, this site of the later capital of the Ten Tribes. In all these particulars it has greatly the advantage over Jerusalem. The whole hill consists of fertile cultivated soil; on the summit is a broad level, apparently artificial, from which a view is obtained, extensive and beautiful almost beyond comparison. All around was a noble valley, watered by murmuring streams, and covered by a rich carpet of grass sprinkled with wild flowers of every hue; and beyond, stretched like an open book before me, a boundary of fruitful mountains, with their deep green ravines, and the fig, vine, olive, and waving wheat, rising in terraces to their very summits. I sat down on a broken column under the shade of a fig tree; and near me a fellah was turning his plough round a column, the mute witness, perhaps, of the revels of Herod, "his lords, and high captains, and chief estates of Galilee." I asked the man what were the ruins we saw; and while his oxen were quietly cropping the grass that grew among the fragments of the marble floor, he told me they were the palace of a king—he believed of the Christians. What a comment on the vanity of worldly greatness! While pilgrims from every quarter of the world turn aside from their path to do homage in the supposed prison of Herod's victim, this Arab, who was driving his plough among the columns of his palace, knew not the proud monarch's name.

Descending from the ruined city we resumed our journey, and came in less than an hour to Burka, a large village on the side of the northern ridge, overlooking the whole basin of Sebastieh. Riding along through a succession of beautiful valleys, nearly all the way close to the banks of a running stream, with numerous villages in sight, we came to Sanur, seated on an insulated (p. 431) hill, commanding an extensive view of the country, and once a strongly fortified place, but now totally demolished. The notorious Jezzar, with five thousand men, once ineffectually besieged the sheikh of this place for two months in his stronghold. But more than thirty years afterwards was again invested by the late Abdallah Pasha of Acre, assisted by the troops of the Emir Beshir. It was taken after a siege of three or four months; the insurgent inhabitants were put to the sword, and their houses burnt and razed to the ground. The plain on the east of Sanur is a beautiful tract, oval or nearly round in form, three or four miles in diameter, and surrounded by low picturesque hills. Having no issue for its waters, this plain becomes a lake in the wet season, whence it has received the name of Merj-el-Ghuruk, or Drowned Meadow.

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