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Tent Life in the Holy Land

By William C. Prime
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(p. 333).....

Many and difficult have been our various paths in life. One and another has wandered far off, over seas and continents. Two of us have been in Nablous!

On this same spot of ground, where now my tents are pitched, my brother had slept. The most thrilling idea that took possession of me that evening was this: that two of those boys who used, of a Sunday morning, to look up with earnest eyes to their father in the pulpit of the old white meeting-house, had set their far-traveled feet on the soil of the Holy Land, in the foot-prints of the Lord.

Moreright interrupted my reveries, by proposing to go into the town and visit the Samaritans. I was not unwilling. A guide appeared, in the shape of an attache of the mission school in Nablous, and we entered the open gateway through which we had emerged shortly before. Silence reigned. The narrow, dark streets were absolutely deserted. No sign of life was visible; nor was there window or gleaming fire, or any thing to show that it was not a city of ancient days, empty and desolate. As we advanced, the streets grew darker, until at last we were in the very blackness of darkness, and the next step plunged us, all four, in a deep mud hole, where we paused to hold a consultation.

I had, as usual, a piece of candle in my pocket, and plenty of matches. A flash revealed our position. The candle burned a moment, and the wind then dashed it out. But we advanced under a dark stone arch, into a long passage, in which the wind howled furiously, emerging at length by the door of a house at which our guide paused.

A knock and a shout brought out a sad-looking woman (p. 334) SAMARITAN SYNAGOGUE.

and a fast-looking boy. They let us in, and called the rabbi and his assistant to show us what we wished to see, the Samaritan synagogue.

The elder rabbi was a sharp specimen, with an eye to the tangible and useful. No speculating German, nor dreaming American. Not he. He began to whisper and mutter bucksheesh from the first moment of our acquaintance.

He led us up a stairway to the top of a house, across this, and into an open place like a small portico. Here he demanded that we should take off our shoes; and we, of course, complied with his request.

He then led us into a large, low room, dark as Erebus, where we stood in silence, while he scratched two or three matches on the wall and obtained a light. By this we saw that on the side of the room there was a niche, concealed by a curtain covered with curious devices, but no intelligible inscriptions.

The chief object of this visit was to see the ancient copy of the law which this people possess, and which they profess was written by the hands of Abishua, the son of Phineas,

nearly thirty-five hundred years ago. The old man demanded a bucksheesh, as the preliminary. I declined, and promised it as a closing ceremony. After a little demurring, he at length consented, and brought out two immense rolls of parchment, in cases. They were, as usual, on rollers, so arranged that one could roll the page off from one and on the other as the reading proceeded. One of these two was the ancient manuscript in question, and the other a more modern one.

I believe some travelers have been disposed to regard this manuscript as quite as old as the seventh or eighth century of the Christian era. I formed a different opinion. I think it scarcely more than five hundred, if it be four hundred years old. I saw nothing of the peculiar

(p. 335) THE SAMARITANS.

reverence for it which travelers have described. On the contrary, when I handled and examined it, turning over the back and bending the parchment in my hands to test its probable age, the old rabbi or the younger offered no objection, but, on the contrary, seemed anxious about the result of my examination.

They showed us some other manuscripts of the law, of which they had perhaps ten or twelve in the closet behind the curtain, which I opened and examined. They would sell moderns, but I could not get them to name a price for the old one.

The old rabbi asked earnestly after Samaritans in all lands. There seems to be a strong mournful anxiety on the part of this miserable remnant, to hear of others on the broad earth's surface, who believe in the worship of God on Mount Gerizim. They inquired if there were any Samaritans in America, and told us there were some in France and England. But in this they were deceived.

Before bidding them farewell, I asked the younger rabbi to read to me from the old manuscript of the law. He read fluently. I desired to hear but one part of the writing, since in all others it is similar to the Jewish version. In the portion of Exodus, which in our version is the twentieth chapter, I found the Samaritan addition to the Decalogue, "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God in Mount Gerizim."

There are now no remains of the ancient Samaritan temple on the mountain. Later structures probably displaced the older, and all alike have disappeared. Nevertheless the Samaritans still regard the temple site as holy, and worship with their faces toward it. There are less than two hundred of them, as I learned in Nablous, and probably no others in the world. These few retain the ancient customs, and offer their annual sacrifices on Gerizim.

(p. 336) SHUT IN.

Our bucksheesh on leaving was not satisfactory to the rabbi. I was sorry, but confident that it would have been no more so if ten times as great, I bade him goodnight, and we moved down the narrow streets now lit by the moon.

Comments on this section from the Editor of theSamaritanUpdate.com

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