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An Older "Holy City."

One of the large "ifs" of history is emphasized in the present status of Samaria's capital city. If Shechem (modern Nablus) had been chosen for the Jewish capital instead of Jerusalem, as Samaritans still contend it ought to have been, would the Jews be scattered to the four winds of heaven today? Scholars have already pointed out that the choice of Shechem for the capital could not have failed to exercise a determining influence upon the history of the Jews. Their points, reviewed by Mr. Bruce Barton in The Heme Herald (Chicago), show that Jerusalem was not a natural place for the capital; "it was a heathen town, removed from the center of the nation, and without sacred associations." It was, in fact, a "boom town," favored by David and Solomon, who slighted the other tribes and taxed them more heavily to exalt Judah. "If the nation's life had centered about Gerizim, centrally located and easily defensible as it is, and surrounded by the most beautiful valleys of Palestine, what would have been the effect?" asks the writer.

Most people would hesitate about an answer, he admits, but the high priest at Shechem, Jacob, the son of Aaron, does not hesitate. He, representing the little remaining band of Samaritans, contends, "as stoutly as ever, that the true revelation has been made to them, and that only on Mt. Gerizim can worship be made acceptable to God." The modern Nablus is a city of 24,000 people, says Mr. Barton, "most of whom are Mohammedans, and a most quarrelsome and dangerous citizenship." But the city shelters "a tiny, despised sect" of which we read:

"As was true in the Jewish towns of old, so in this little settlement of Samaritans, the whole community life centers about the synagog. It is a low, unpretentious-looking building, with little in its exterior to set it apart from its neighbors or designate it as the house of God. Across the court from it is the house of Jacob; and in one or other of the buildings he is generally to be found. (p. 721) He is a man of medium height, with bronzed features and a long, flowing beard which has been protected by the Scriptural injunction from the destroying touch of the razor. In spite of his surroundings and the unattractive character of his every-day dress, there is an air of dignity about him. He is the divinely-appointed leader of a chosen race, and he holds himself to be not least among the rulers of the earth. The synagog is a white, barren room with a flag-floor, and meagerly furnished. It seems no different from the interior of other houses, and one's eyes seek in vain at first for the distinguishing feature which should compel reverence or worship. But the trained gaze of the Samaritan travels at once across the room and fixes unhesitatingly on a closet about four and a half feet square, standing in an alcove on the side of the room facing Gerizim. Inside that closet is the sacred Torah, the five books which God revealed to Moses. And the scroll on which they are written is said by scholars to be the oldest book in the world.

"The claims of the Samaritans for it, however, are far greater than the scholars can allow; for, according to their tradition, it was written by 'our Lord Phinehas, the son of our lord Eleazer, the son of our lord Aaron (on whom be peace).' It is written on skins, unruled, and the ink is purple, rather than black. The manuscript is mounted on two, rollers, and enclosed in a silver case, so that it could be rolled back and

forth until the desired place is reached. This is never done, now, for it is too old and fragile, and year after year it remains open on the same spot, the passage where worship on Gerizim is commanded by God. The Christian will not find this passage in the Bible, but it appears clearly in the Samaritan Torah, and it is over these few lines that the contest of the ages has been waged between the Jew and the Samaritan. Each claims; that the other has corrupted the text, the one by the insertion of this passage, the other by its elimination. It follows immediately after the Ten Commandments, and according to the Samaritans is a part of them.

"And it shall come to pass when Jehovah thy God shall bring thee to thee land of Canaanite whither thou goest to posses it, that thou shalt set thee up great stones and plaster them with plaster. And it shall be, when ye pass over Jordan that ye shall set up these stones which I commanded you this day in Mt Gerizim. And thou shalt build an altar there to Jehovah thy God, an altar of stones. Thou shalt not lift up upon them iron. With perfect stones shalt thou build the altar of Jehovah thy God. And thou shalt sacrifice peace offerings and shalt eat there and shalt rejoice before Jehovah thy God. This mountain *is* on the other side of the Jordan, behind the way of the going down of the (p. 722) sun, in the land Arabah, over against Gilgal, beside the oak of Moreh, beside Schechem."

To the Samaritan, Gerizim is the holiest and highest mountain in the world, in spite of the fact that the despised Ebal, opposite, reaches nearly two hundred feet higher. Here, moreover, so it is solemnly affirmed, God gathered the dust from which Adam was made, the Samaritan knowing the exact spot. Here also are twelve stones which Joshua brought with him from over the Jordan. Near by, if the tourist have faith enough, "he may look at the very spot where Abraham came to sacrifice Jacob," and, descending, "he may trip lightly down over the stones by which Adam descended after his expulsion from Paradise." Further:

"In a pathetic little procession that grows each year more thin, the last of the Samaritans wind their way up the side of Mt. Gerizim each spring to celebrate their Passover. Nowhere else is the ancient ceremony performed in all its original detail. The whole Law is read through. The little company spend the entire day in fasting and prayer, and at evening eat the Passover standing, the loins of the men girded and staves In their hands. The lack of marriageable young women among them dooms the Samaritan company to extinction. It is interesting to picture the final Passover which must come before many years."— The Literary Digest

Comments on this section from the Editor of theSamaritanUpdate.com

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