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The East: Sketches of Travel in Egypt and the Holy Land  
By J. A. Spencer

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1850.

(p. 418) .....

We made it a point this morning, to see the city and to visit the Samaritan Synagogue, in hope of having an opportunity to inspect the Samaritan Pentateuch, which, as you know, is of great importance in the estimation of Biblical scholars. Accordingly, after breakfast we went into Nablus, which, though it looks well outside, has not many attractions internally. The houses are generally of stone, the bazaars are well supplied, the population large, and apparently industrious, but the streets and lanes are like those in all oriental towns which I have seen, narrow, crooked, and filthy. We got along pretty well, as respects the clamor and abuse, which this time was unaccompanied by a repetition of yesterday's (p. 419) outrages; and, save being called bad names by some children, who ran after us, we escaped unharmed or unmolested.

In a little while, we reached the entrance to the old priest's house, who lives close by the synagogue; and we found him and a few other persons, sitting cross-legged, and smoking, in the court or vestibule before the door of their house of worship. After some little conversation with reference to our object, and after settling the important matter of keeping on our boots while within the synagogue, we were admitted into a moderate-sized room, covered with straw mats on the floor, and offering nothing worthy of mention in regard to its arrangement or its contents. The venerable rabbi, who was present, showed us at first a number of old books and manuscripts which he had, keeping back the only one that we really cared to see, as if to enhance its value and consequence in our eyes. As we were a little impatient, having no time to lose, we prevailed upon the old gentleman to bring out the great treasure for our inspection. It proved to be a large roll, kept in a brass case, and adorned with various costly coverings of crimson silk, and letters embroidered in gold. We examined the manuscript with all the care we could, and noticed, besides its evident air of antiquity, that it is written in columns of about five by fourteen inches, and three of these to what may be termed a page. We were permitted to touch the valuable manuscript, to look as closely as we chose at the various peculiarities which it possesses, the color of the ink, the size, shape, and character of the alphabet, the arrangement of the words and sentences, &c, and, in short, to enter upon any examination which our time or our wishes allowed. The old rabbi was very obliging in every way, and in answer to our inquiries as to the probable age of the manuscript before us, did not

scruple to declare that it belonged to .the period of Moses! This was rather more than we could credit, though we entertained no sort of doubt that the Samaritan Pentateuch is of an age which entitles it to very great consid- (p. 420) eration in Biblical questions. I was very sorry that our time was so limited, and so little opportunity was afforded us for making some research into the interesting questions connected with this manuscript; but we had no alternative, and were compelled to bid our old friend adieu, much gratified on the whole, and yet regretting the lack of those things which we had not in our power.<sup>1</sup> Tischendorff visited Nablus five years ago, and gives an interesting account of what he saw and experienced. As his name is distinguished in matters relating to ancient manuscripts, I may be allowed to quote a sentence or two from his " Travels in the East," with regard to this relic of other days:—" I was chiefly occupied with the alleged exceedingly ancient manuscript, which is said to contain a statement to the effect that it was written thirteen years after the death of Moses, by Abischua, the son of Phineas, who was grandson of Aaron. The rabbi brought us a tin case, within which lay the manuscript, like a large synagogue roll of parchment, enveloped in a costly covering of crimson silk, with embroidered golden letters. It bears undeniable traces of antiquity. I examined the parchment, the color of the ink, the system of the lines, the punctuation, the divisions (none of which have initials), and the characters, as well as they could be examined without a knowledge of the Samaritan. All combine to convey the idea of a manuscript of the sixth century. Even under this supposition, it necessarily holds a very distinguished rank among all the ancient parchment codices of both the East and West. With respect to the alleged statement, it may not, if in fact it exist, be considered otherwise than as a transcript, carelessly copied from former documents, and incorporated in it as a note founded on a remote tradition. Perhaps this Abischua took some share in writing the original Pentateuch."<sup>2</sup>

(p. 421) While I am writing, the dragoman is bustling about, and making preparations for our departure. Standing not far off are some of that wretched class of persons, lepers, holding out their boxes for alms, and begging most piteously for aid. Poor creatures! how deeply do your sufferings move the sympathies of Christian hearts, and how earnestly do they make one long for the Divine power and compassion of Him who heard the cry of the leper, and said, "I will; be thou clean!" Despite the ill-treatment we have met with in this ancient city, we cannot but acknowledge its beauty of situation, and its consequence as the chief town in Samaria. It is said to contain about seven thousand inhabitants, among whom are a hundred and fifty Samaritans, and if we may judge from appearances, possesses considerable wealth and resources. Its present name is derived from the title which it received in honor of Vespasian, viz. *Flavia Neapolis*, whence the Arabic Nabalus, or Nablus. Anciently, it was called Shechem, Sychem, or Sychar, and calls up the recollection of events which transpired ages ago. Abraham dwelt here. Jacob pitched his tent before this city, and bought a parcel of a field, which afterwards he gave to his son Joseph. Here Joseph's brethren came, to feed their father's flock; and not far hence, they consummated their wickedness, by selling their brother into slavery. Here Jotham uttered that beautiful parable to the men of Shechem, respecting the trees which went

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<sup>1</sup> I must beg to refer you to Dr. Robinson for an interesting account of the correspondence with the Samaritans by accidental scholars, and of the literature of this small community. See the "*Biblical Researches*," vol. iii p. 129-134.

<sup>2</sup> "*Travels in the East*," p. 219

forth to choose a king. And here our blessed Lord came, at the urgent prayer of the people, and abode two days in their midst, proclaiming unto them the life-giving words of His Gospel. But I need not enlarge upon these topics; and my time is very short. In a little while, we shall be all ready, and in the saddle again. May God bless you, and permit me to reach the haven of rest, whence I will write you again!

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

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