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THE FRIEND OF ISRAEL.

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(p. 209) SHECHEM AND THE SAMARITANS.

SHECHEM, like most eastern towns, is surrounded by a strong wall, which, however, according to modern military tactics, would be no serious obstacle to an invading foe; but where all are alike ignorant of warfare, such fortifications serve their purpose. This is one of the oldest and most renowned cities in Judea, and had gained, long before the Christian dispensation, a reputation that shall keep it alive in the memory when battles and conquests are forgotten. The houses are tolerably well built of stone, with domes upon the roofs, and are sometimes thrown, as arches, across the streets, which are narrow, ill-paved, and filthy. More than once I observed dead animals carelessly dragged into by- corners, where they lie until devoured by the dogs, or wasted by corruption. With such fatal hot-beds of mortality at almost every door, the wonder is not that fevers and the plague prevail among the people, but that they should ever be without these dreadful scourges. Some orange-trees, having found a favourable opportunity by a broken-down wall, threw several branches over the dirty foot-path, and had dropped fine fruit for which no man cared. A stream of clear and delicious water, conveyed to the town partly by artificial means, from Gerizim, rushes down through the main street. We passed the remains of a church of good Byzantine architecture, and much dilapidated. On reaching our intended abode, the door, after repeated and loud knockings, was opened by a string from the flat above, like many of our common doors in large towns. The natives are seldom very prompt in their movements, and the principal part of the house being generally at some distance from the main entrance, it is no wonder that Peter stood knocking at the gate of Mary's house in Jerusalem. The door by which we now entered was very low. Having cautiously stooped to prevent the stone lintel from giving my head a warmer salutation than would have been agreeable, I passed through a half underground apartment, and ascended, at the back of the house, by an outside rickety stair, to an upper room. This room, though not entirely destitute of comfort, was but an eastern one.

(p. 210) Shechem, one of the most ancient cities in Palestine, belonging to the tribe of Ephraim, was a city of refuge, and was possessed by the Levites.<sup>1</sup> The names of Abimelech, Rehoboam, Jeroboam, Hyrcanus, and Vespasian, are connected with it for rebuilding, enlarging, and beautifying it, or for rebellion and cruelty. It is long and narrow, consisting of one principal street, and contains a population variously estimated at from 4000 to 10,000,—the latter number is evidently an exaggeration. It is

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<sup>1</sup> Josh. xx. 7.

comparatively prosperous, though, like all towns under the rod of a Pacha, it suffers the accumulated ills of oppressive misrule.

The inhabitants are composed of Mahommedans, Samaritans, Christians, and Jews. The only Samaritans in the world are found in this place, to which they fled 331 years B.C., when driven by Alexander the Great from Samaria, as a punishment for burning Andromachus, their governor. In November, 1850, they amounted to only 63 males in all, 35 of whom were taxable men above 14 years of age. They are the feeble remains of those with whom Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, in 677 B.C., re-peopled Samaria, from the surrounding nations, to supply the room of the Israelites, whom, forty-four years before, Shalmanezzer had carried captive to Babylon. There were, strictly speaking, the following captivities: the first by Tiglath-pileser, in 740; the second, by Shalmanezzer, in 721; the third, by Esarhaddon, in 677; the fourth, by Nebuchadnezzar, in 606, when Daniel and his companions were dragged from the land of their fathers; the next in 597, when Ezekiel, and other men of distinction, were carried into exile; and in 586 B.C., when the final deportation took place. It was thus that the Assyrians carried away captive the people of Samaria, replacing the population of the conquered country by colonies of their own. But the Samaritans trace their own lineage to Ephraim, second son of Joseph; and it is possible that, from intermarriages, some of the blood of that tribe may flow in their veins. This difference, however, respecting their genealogy, is the chief ground of that relentless animosity which has for ages existed between them and the Jews, and which 2260 years have not mitigated. Few communities have committed more crimes, and have so little in their annals to commend; yet *few* have endured more reverses, or suffered so much in defence of their religion and ancestral customs.

Immediately after dismounting, I repaired to their small and very plain synagogue, which is partly built from their ancient temple on Gerizim. It was our Saturday, which is their Sabbath, and they were assembled for divine service. When the Chaldean shepherd and the Egyptian sage,— the earliest astronomers,—were bowing the knee to the host of heaven, a small people in Palestine, a country celebrated for the loveliness of its nights, the splendour of the sun, the beauty of the moon, and the brightness of the stars, which sparkled in their unclouded sky, were rearing humble altars, and raising devout souls to 'the living and true God.' It was therefore not a little touching to see these children of poverty at their devotions, pouring forth their hallelujahs, and raising their hearts to the mercy-seat of heaven. Their mode of worship resembles that of the Jewish synagogues.

To instruct the Samaritans in the Jewish faith, Esarhaddon, 676 B.C., sent a priest from Babylon. In 458 B.C., Ezra purified the temple,<sup>2</sup> previously rebuilt by Joshua and Zerubbabel,<sup>3</sup> who, amidst many obstruct- (p. 211) tions, were incited to perseverance by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah,<sup>4</sup> and expelled from Jerusalem those who, contrary to the divine law, had married strange women, and who would not dissolve that unlawful union,<sup>5</sup> Jehoiada was then high-priest in Jerusalem; and Manasseh, his eldest son and successor in office, had married a daughter of Sanballat, governor of Samaria. Manasseh would not break- off that unhallowed alliance; he was driven from Jerusalem; he repaired to Sanballat at Shechem; and, to revenge his expulsion from the holy city, his father-in-law built for him the large temple which stood so long on Mount Gerizim, in opposition to the temple in Jerusalem, and to which the Samaritan woman, at Jacob's Well, directed

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<sup>2</sup> Ezra viii.

<sup>3</sup> In 415 B.C., Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Zion.

<sup>4</sup> Ezra v. 1,2.

<sup>5</sup> Ezra x.

the attention of our Saviour. By these means the Samaritans obtained a knowledge of the Pentateuch, the Levitical ceremonies and worship. They receive only the five books of Moses as divinely inspired; and these books, though an incomplete and imperfect revelation of the plan of salvation, contain, nevertheless, an embodiment of the great truths of our creation, recovery, responsibility, and final retribution.

Males alone were congregated in the synagogue to pray, give thanks, and read the law. If females were present, they must have been concealed; and no place for that purpose was visible. I was requested to put off my shoes before entering, a request which was readily obeyed. This peculiarity forms a marked distinction between the Samaritan and Jewish synagogues. It was an interesting, and indeed an affecting sight, to look upon the small expiring remnant of a people who once counted their warriors by tens of thousands, met peacefully together to invoke a benediction from the God of Abraham. Unless these oppressed and benighted men be soon animated by higher aspirations than yet have swelled their bosoms, and unless the Spirit of the Lord call them as from the dead, and breathe into them spiritual life and activity, the Samaritan nation, not by external violence, but simply by inherent decay, will speedily survive only in the page of history.

Among their valuable manuscripts is found a copy, carefully preserved, of the five books of Moses, perhaps the oldest manuscript extant. They affirm it to have been written sixteen years after the death of Moses, upon parchment made from the skin of the first sheep offered in sacrifice by Joshua on Gerizim. The additional information is also given occasionally, that it was written by Abishua, son of Phinehas, "Whatever credit may be attached to these statements, no man can count his paternal descent from Aaron with greater certainty than the priest who officiates in this synagogue. Manasseh, mentioned above, would have succeeded, after his father's decease, to the high-priest's office in Jerusalem, had he remained in that city; and from Manasseh, down to the present day, the Samaritans have registered their priests with the utmost care. It is worth travelling some distance to look on the face of a male descendant of Aaron, the first high-priest of God's people, and who can trace his genealogy with so much certainty.

I visited the school which is under the charge of Bishop Gobat. The room was clean, neat, and well furnished. There are commonly above 50 children on the roll of attendance, and the classes are conducted upon a plan which might be adopted with advantage in other quarters. There are the five books of Moses for the Samaritan, the Old Testament Scriptures for the Jewish, and the whole Bible for the Christian children. (p. 212) These classes are taught under the same roof, by the same masters, and no child is expected to read any book without the express permission of the parents. Might not such a system work well at home? It might, were sectarian prejudices, denominational peculiarities, and a grasping at authority by various parties, forgotten in a laudable and much-needed, endeavour to educate our ignorant and degraded multitudes. The bishop wisely labours to gain the young. The good-will and consent of parents and guardians must be at least partially obtained even before the youth shall be permitted to read; but the old give faint hope of improvement. It is the opening bud, and not the sear leaf of autumn, that gives pleasing promise of reward.

The bishop has prudently chosen the sacred volume as an important school-book. It may not accomplish all the good desired, nor may the children fully comprehend its contents, for even external nature is replete with mysteries to the wisest philosopher; but over the darkest soul, repeatedly coming into contact with divine truth, the Bible sheds its sweet and benign influence. The Scriptures have this peculiarity, that while they confer the greatest political, temporal, and spiritual benefits, and are the greatest, and indeed the

only civiliser of the human race, they alone expand, purify, and elevate man's immortal part, by crowning his faith and labours with a blessed salvation and a glorious eternity. Christian parents should remember that every virtue springs from a Christian doctrine, as the branch from the trunk, and that the root of all Bible doctrines and precepts *is the love of God*; that parents, if they would secure the respect of their children, must first teach them to reverence their Maker; that philanthropy, which alone teaches men to love and labour for each other, is a virtue of purely Christian origin; and that the doctrines of the cross so exalt man above the cares and sorrows and fears of time, that they raise him to the heights of sublime enjoyment and holy serenity. The command, therefore, rests unrepealed, and in all its force, upon every parent,—' Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life; but teach them thy sons, and thy sons' sons.'<sup>6</sup>

The Samaritan high-priest is a young man whose aged father has lately retired from office. Not content with kindly paying me all attention in the synagogue, and explaining several inscriptions on some principal stones brought from their ancient temple, he and two of his flock paid me a friendly visit in the evening, though he knew that my 'face was towards Jerusalem.' His visit was welcome, and I was happy at this opportunity of obtaining some desired information. . . .

The priest asked one question which puzzled and put me to shame. \*Why,' said he, 'do you English do so much for the Jews and do nothing for the Samaritans?' 'Because the Samaritans are not so well known,' was the only, but I fear unsatisfactory, answer I could give. To tell the leader of a perishing people that they are overlooked because of their insignificance was felt not to be complimentary, and the priest sighed. In course of conversation I happened to remark that I was favoured with letters of introduction to the Lord Bishop of Jerusalem. He instantly said, 'He is a good man, he is a great friend to me; will you give him my salutations? will you carry a letter to him from me V I expressed my (p. 213) willingness to serve him to the utmost of my power. The Samaritan high-priest went to his home, wrote a friendly letter to the bishop, and sent it by the hands of a Gentile minister of the gospel of Christ. So far are men and times changed from the days when the inhabitants of Samaria would not allow our Saviour to enter one of their gates! May these changes be a prelude to the time when animosities and parties shall cease, and all nations be one in Jesus.—From *'Azuba, or, The Forsaken Land*.

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

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The original book: ***Azuba, or the Forsaken Land: a Description of a Recent Visit to Palestine***. By the **Rev. William Ritchie**. Published 1856 by Johnstone and Hunter in Edinburgh . Written in English. (p. 170-176 ?)

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<sup>6</sup> Deut. iv. 9.