

**The Land and the Book**  
Or  
**Biblical Illustrations Drawn From The Manners And Customs,  
The Scenes and Scenery of The Holy Land**

**By W.M. Thomson, D.D.,**  
Thirty years missionary in Syria and Palestine.  
London  
T. Nelson and Sons, Paternoster Row  
Edinburgh; and New York  
1896

(Beginning half down page 470)

From Samaria to Nablus is two hours' easy riding, first south, over the shoulder of the mountain, and then eastward, up the lovely vale of Nablus. Nothing in Palestine surpasses it in fertility and natural beauty, and this is mainly due to the fine mill-stream which flows through it. The whole country is thickly studded with villages, the plains clothed with grass or grain, and the rounded hills with orchards of olive, fig, pomegranate, and other trees. Coming from Samaria, the ascent to the city from the valley is quite steep, and it climbs up the side of Gerizim to a very considerable elevation; indeed the perpendicular cliffs of the mountains overhang the upper part of the city. Travelers generally seek out the Samaritan quarter, which is near the south-western corner, and sufficiently elevated to afford a good view of the whole town. Nablus is a queer old place. The streets are narrow, and vaulted over; and in the winter time it is difficult to pass along many of them on account of brooks which rush over the pavement with deafening roar. In this respect I know no city with which to compare it except Brusa; and, like that city, it has mulberry, orange, pomegranate, and other trees, mingled in with the houses, whose odoriferous flowers load the air with delicious perfume during the months of April and May. Here the bilbul delights to sit and sing, and thousands of other birds unite to smell the chorus. The inhabitants maintain that theirs is the most *musical* vale in Palestine, and my experience does not enable me to contradict them.

Imagine that the lofty range of mountains running north and south was cleft open to its base by some tremendous convulsion of nature, at right angles to its own line of extension, and the broad fissure thus made is the vale of Nablus, as it appears to one coming up the plain of Mukhna from Jerusalem. (page 471) Mount Ebal is on the north, Gerizim on the south, and the city between. Near the eastern end, the vale is not more than sixty rods wide; and just there, I suppose, the tribes assembled to hear the "blessings and cursings" read by the Levites. We have them *in extensor* in the 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> chapters of Deuteronomy; and in Joshua<sup>1</sup> we are informed that it was actually done, and how. "Simeon, and Levi, and Judah, and Issachar, and Joseph, and Benjamin, stood on Gerizim; and Reuben, Gad, Ashur, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali, on Ebal;" while "all Israel, and their elders, and officers, and their judges, stood on this side of the ark, and on that side before the priests which bare the ark of the covenant of the Lord:" the whole nation of Israel, with the women and little ones, were there. And Joshua read all the words of the law- the blessings and the cursings: "there was not a word of all that Moses commanded which Joshua read not before all the congregation of Israel." It was, beyond question or comparison, the most august assembly the sun has ever shone upon; and I never stand in the narrow plain, with Ebal and Gerizim rising on either hand to the sky, without involuntarily recalling and reproducing the scene. I have shouted to hear the echo, and then fancied how it must have been when the loud-voiced Levites proclaimed from the naked cliffs of Ebal, "Cursed be the man that maketh any graven image, an abomination unto Jehovah." And then the tremendous AMEN! Even so let him be accused. No, there never was an assembly to compare with this.

It was part of the command of the Lord, and of Moses to Joshua, that, having placed the blessings and the cursings" on Gerizim and on Ebal, he should write the whole law upon pillars of stone which he should rear up at this place. Do you suppose that the whole five books of Moses were thus engraven upon stone?

---

<sup>1</sup> Joshua viii

I suppose not; perhaps none of it was *engraved* on stone. A careful examination of Deuteronomy xxvii. 4, 8, and Joshua viii. 30-32, will lead to the opinion that the law was *written upon or in the plaster* with which these pillars were *coated*. This could easily be done; and such writing was common in ancient times. I have seen numerous specimens of it certainly more than *two thousand years old*, and still as distinct as when they were first inscribed on the plaster. There seems to have been an unnecessary amount of learning bestowed upon this matter, and difficulties imagined where none exist. Michaelis, in his "Commentary on the Laws of Moses,"<sup>2</sup> enters into a laboured examination of the passage. He gives and refutes various explanations, among others that of Kennicott, who supposes that the letters were cut out in black marble, the letters being raised, and the hollow intervals between them filled with white lime plaster. His own opinion, however, is, that Moses commanded Joshua to do as Sostratus, the architect of the Pharos, did, who (page 472) cut his own name on the solid marble, then plastered it over, and grooved the name of the king of Egypt on the cement. Moses, in like manner, ordered the law to be cut in the solid stone, and then to be plastered over with hard cement, so that when this plaster fell off, in after ages, the engraven law would be discovered entire and perfectly legible! Now the main objection to these speculations is, that there is not the slightest foundation for them in the text. The direction there is perfectly plain, and needs none of these recondite devices to render it intelligible and reasonable. That the Egyptians were accustomed to engrave on stone in various ways is well known, and Moses must have been familiar with it; but he was also familiar with the mode which he commands to be followed, and he knew it to be sufficiently durable for all practical purposes. He therefore did not order such a Herculean labour as to grave the whole law in marble, but simply to write it *on or in* properly prepared cement, it will continue hard and unbroken for thousands of years- which is certainly long enough. The cement on Solomon's Pools remains in admirable preservation, though exposed to all the vicissitudes of the climate, and with no protection. The cement in the tombs about Sidon is still perfect, and the writing on them entire, though acted upon by the moist damp air always found in caverns, for perhaps two thousand years. When Joshua did, therefore, when he erected those great stones at Mount Ebal, was merely to write *in* the still soft cement with a stile, or, more likely, *on* the polished surface, when dry, with red paint, as in ancient tombs. If properly sheltered, and not broken away by violence, they would have remained to this day. But everything that could be destroyed, has been long since, and again and again overthrown, in the countless convulsions of this most rebellious neighbourhood; and the hope expressed by Michaelis, that these (imaginary) marble slabs, with the law engraven upon them, were still in existence, buried beneath the rubbish of Nablus, and might one day be discovered, crumbles into dust along with the plaster upon which the commandments of the Lord were really written. Nor need we mourn over the loss. The printing-press preserves this same law to us far more securely than could any monument, though built of bronze or solid adamant.

If Nablus occupies the place of Shechem (and I suppose it does), it is one of the oldest cities in the world; nor is there anything improbable in this, for its natural advantages, great beauty, and abundant supply of water, mark out the site for a city. This latter fact, however, seems to prove that Shechem was not the Sychar mentioned in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of John. It is incredible that the "woman of Samaria" should have gone two miles away from these delicious foundations to draw water out of an immensely deep well. If we admit the identity of the present well of Jacob with that mentioned by John, there can be but little doubt that Sychar was a small Samaritan town not far from that spot; and there is a village north of it now called Aschar. This is so like John's Sychar, that I feel inclined to adopt it. Of course, the "woman of (page 473) Samaria" belonged to the country or people of Samaria, not to the city of that name, which is some eight miles to the northwest of it.

I see no good reason to question the identity of this well with that of the patriarch; nor do I intend to disturb the bones of Joseph concerning which he expressed so much solicitude when about to die in Egypt<sup>3</sup>. The Moslems point out his tomb at the base of Ebal in this vicinity; and this agrees well enough with Joshua xxiv.32, where it is said that "the bones of Joseph, which the children of Israel brought up out of Egypt, buried they in Shechem, in a parcel of ground which Jacob bought of the sons of Hamor." Of course this "parcel of ground" must have been adjacent to the well; and tradition has located the sepulcher near enough to meet all the requirements of the history. Let his bones, therefore, rest in peace.

---

<sup>2</sup> Michaelis, vol. I. Book iii.

<sup>3</sup> Gen. L:25

There is, after all, a mystery about this well, which is not easily cleared up. Although we know that the patriarchs were given to well-digging, yet it is strange that Jacob should be at the expense of such a work when there is a fine fountain a little west of it, and the whole vale of Nablus abounds in them beyond almost any other part of Palestine. The well, however, is a very *positive fact*, and it must have been dug by somebody, notwithstanding this abundance of fountains, and why not by Jacob? He was as likely to need it as any one, and as competent to execute the work. As to the reason for it, we may suppose that the fountains within the valley of Shechem were so appropriated as not to be available for Jacob's large family and larger flocks. Even now the inhabitants would not allow the flocks and herds of such an opulent tent-dwelling tribe to frequent their pretty vale; and as there are no fountains in that part of the eastern plain, and the streams from those within the valley run *westward*, Jacob probably found it necessary to dig this deep well for his own use. It is now deserted, and the surrounding terrace of rude masonry broken down, so that there is nothing distinctive or striking about it.

The ancient city of Shechem, I suppose, stood where Nablus does now, and it is easy to comprehend how Jotham could stand above it, and deliver his cutting allegory in the hearing of the people, and then "run away" before they could take him.<sup>4</sup> Several lofty precipices of Gerizim literally overhang the city, any one of which would answer his purpose. Now would it be difficult to be heard, as everybody knows who has listened to the *public crier* of villages on Lebanon. In the stillness of evening, after the people have returned home from their distant fields, he ascends the mountain side above the place, or to the roof of some prominent house, and there "lifts up his voice and cries," as Jotham did; and he gives forth his proclamation with such distinctness that all can hear and understand it. Indeed the people in these mountainous countries are able, from long practice, so to pitch their voices as to be heard distinctly at distances almost incredible. They talk with persons across enormous wadies, and give the most minute directions, which are perfectly (page 474) understood; and in doing this they seem to speak very little louder than their usual tone of conversation. Jotham, therefore, might easily be heard by the greater part of the inhabitants of Shechem. The costume of his allegory is simple and natural, and the allusions are to the very trees which most abound at Nablus, -the olive, the fig, the vine, and the bramble.

The Samaritans (and their patrons) claim for the site of their temple above Nablus two very important Biblical events: that *here*, and not at Jerusalem, Melchizedek met Abraham; and that *on Gerizim*, and *not Moriah*, the patriarch offered his son Isaac;- and if I understand Mr. Stanley aright, he concurs in the justness of these pretensions.

He does, and even devotes a long note of several pages to substantiate the claims; but this is not the most successful effort of that pleasant traveler and very clever writer. Mr. Stanley is a gentleman who yields cheerfully to the paramount authority of the Bible on all points where its indications are clear and decisive; and it seems to me that the positive assertion that Melchizedek was king of *Salem* makes it certain that Abraham did not meet him in *Gerizim*. *Shechem* was never called Salem, nor was there ever any place on Gerizim that bore that name. There was a *Shalim* east of it, toward Jordan, and Jerome, after Theodotus, *supposed* that Melchizedek reigned there; but even this does not favor the cause of the Samaritans. The philological argument drawn from *Ar-Gerizim* has no appreciable weight in the case. And as to the probable route which Abraham would follow in returning from Dan to Hebron, I must dissent entirely from the opinion of Mr. Stanley. Abraham would naturally return on the *western* side of the lakes Huleh and Tiberias. I have been round the eastern side of both, and affirm that he could not have selected that road, encumbered as he was with a large company of rescued prisoners and their baggage. Nor could he have followed the valley of the Jordan. No one who has ever traversed that impracticable *ghor* will believe that this great company took that path; and, after wandering over these regions in all directions, I am quite sure that the way by which Abraham led back the people of Sodom was along the ordinary road from Galilee to Jerusalem. This, it is true, would bring him near Nablus; and if there were the remotest evidence that Melchizedek reigned there, the meeting might have taken place on Gerizim, as the Samaritans affirm; but there is *no* such evidence, and this route would bring Abraham to Jerusalem, where the king of Sodom would most naturally meet him. Mr. Stanley supposes that the king of Sodom when round the *eastern* shore of the Dead Sea; but that is quite impracticable, unless one makes a long detour through the interior. On the while, I have not a doubt but that Abraham meet Melchizedek at Jerusalem, and having restored the goods and the captives to the king of Sodom, he returned by way of Bethlehem to his home on the plain of Mamre. I cannot avoid the impression that the author of the "Hebrews" believed that *the Salem* of

---

<sup>4</sup> Judges ix. 7-21.

which the “priest of the most high God” was king was Jeru-*salem*; and in the 76<sup>th</sup> Psalm the Holy City is expressly called *Salem*. Add to this Josephus positively asserts that (page 475) Jerusalem was founded by Melchizedek, and we have a chain of evidence which cannot be broken by the weight of a hundred Samaritan traditions detailed with so much confidence by “our friend Jacob Shelaby” of Nablus, sheikh of all the holy Samaritans, etc.

I cannot comprehend the motive for this partiality on behalf of Gerizim, nor by what authority Mr. Stanley asserts that the original sanctuary of the most high God was on that mountain, and not Jerusalem. This is contrary to all the Biblical indications, so far as I can understand them. Salvation was of the *Jews*, not of the Samaritans; the spiritual worship of the Father was in Jerusalem, not on Gerizim; and from the days of Sanballat, and before, so far as we know, devout worshippers of Jehovah regarded the temple on Gerizim with abhorrence. Now, if this had been the original shrine, why was not this most important fact urged by Sanballat and his friends in their angry disputes with Nehemiah and Zerubbabel? And if Melchizedek reigned in Shechem, and Abraham offered up Isaac on Gerizim, why do we hear nothing of these things to strengthen their cause?

In regard to the question about the true site of that most wonderful act of Abraham, I believe it was on Mount Moriah, where the altar of burnt sacrifice was erected by Solomon, and near the spot where the greater sacrifice of an infinitely greater Son was finally offered; and it would take a vast amount of contrary evidence to force me to abandon this idea. Mr. Stanley’s geographical argument is more than feeble. It is almost absurd to maintain that Abraham could come on his loaded ass from Beersheba to Nablus in the time specified. On the third day he arrived early enough to leave the servants “afar off,” and walk with Isaac bearing the sacrificial wood to the mountain which God had shown him- there built the altar, arrange the wood, bind his son, and stretch forth his hand to slay him; and there was time, too, to take and offer up the ram in Isaac’s place. That all this could have been done *at Nablus on the third day* of the journey is incredible. It has always appeared to me, since I first traveled over the country myself, that even Jerusalem was too far off from Beersheba for the tenor of the narrative, but Nablus is two days’ ride further north! Nor will the suggestion of Mr. Stanley, that Abraham came up through Philistia and then turned into the mountain, bear examination. The supposition is entirely gratuitous, and at variance with all the lines of patriarchal travel through the country, nor does it render the achievement of the journey in three days any more feasible. If Mr. Stanley had traveled over those interminable plains of Philistia and Sharon, as I have, he would not select this route for Abraham on his sad errand. Let us rejoice in being permitted to rest with entire confidence in the correctness of our received tradition, that the priest of the most high God reigned in Jerusalem, and that Abraham made the typical sacrifice of his son on Moriah, and not on Gerizim.

In regard to the famous temple of the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim, little need be said in addition to the information addresses to the eye by the plan of the *existing foundation*. The main edifice (I.) was nearly a square, being (page 476) two hundred and forty-one feet from east to west, and two hundred and fifty-five feet from north to south. In the centre of the court was an octagon

SCANNED IMAGE HERE  
FOUNDATIONS OF SAMARITAN TEMPLE OF GERIZIM.

(II.), and near it a small but beautifully rounded tank or cistern (XIV.). On the corners were square rooms (III.) and the one on the north-east (IV.) is covered with a white dome, and is used as an oratory. (V.) is a passage up from a lower platform on the north-east. (VI.) entrance to the grand court. (VII.) an open terrace, a few feet lower than the main court. (VIII.) used apparently as a cemetery. (IX.) a room about eighteen feet lower than No. (VII.) (X.) portico or passage to the room (IX.) (XI.) shapeless ruins. (XII.) now unoccupied, perhaps originally a yard or outer court. (XIII.) a room in ruins, object of it doubtful.

The walls are about six feet thick, and form seven to fifteen feet high. There are no ornamental carvings on any of the stones, but they are well cut, and *beveled* after the Jewish or Phoenician manner. On the north there is a lower terrace of the mountain, covered with ruins, as of a village; and west of (page 477) the main edifice as a smooth plat, now used by the Samaritans for their tents, when they go there to celebrate their feasts. For vastness and variety, the prospect from this temple is not surpassed by any in Palestine, unless it be the view from Tabor, and many visitors think this from Gerizim the most interesting.

It was doubtless to his mountain, with its ruined temple, that our Savior pointed when he enunciated that cardinal truth in religion, “Woman, believe me, the hour cometh when ye shall neither in *this mountain*, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. God is a spirit; and they that

worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”<sup>5</sup> Josephus tells us that this temple was destroyed about a hundred and twenty-nine years before the birth of Christ; but the site of it has been the place where the Samaritans have continued to “worship the Father” from that day to this, *not* in spirit nor in truth, it is to be feared, but in form and fanaticism, according to the traditions of their elders.

There are not now two hundred Samaritans, all told, in the world. They themselves mention one hundred and fifty as the correct census. They are a strange people, clinging to their law, and to the sepulchers of their fathers. with invincible tenacity. Their chief priest will show you, with any amount of sham reverence, their ancient copy of the Pentateuch; but though, like all other travelers, I have given my *buksheesh* for the privilege of turning over its time-stained pages, I have no faith in their legends in regard to it, estimate its real value at a very low figure, and leave to others the minute description of this curious relic of antiquity.

### **Note from the copyist:**

Since the time that this article was written, opinions have been basically the same they still are people that believe that the Samaritans are not worshipping the one true God. Yet there are people today that do believe the Samaritans to be who they say they are, many in some in part, while some in whole. The views of the author, Thomson, are indicative of a hardcore Christian missionary; wherein everything he believes is the Gospel and the correct way. No matter his opinions, the article shown here is for knowledge, only concerning any valuable information on the Samaritans. If after reading this article that it does give to an anti-Samaritan opinion, then I suggest reading the book that Thomson has mentioned above, Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, *Sinai and Palestine*.

---

<sup>5</sup> John iv. 21, 24.