

## **The Oldest and Smallest Sect in the World**

**By the Rev. John F. Hurst, D.D.**

There is to be found in the heart of the small city of Nablus, in North Palestine, a little religious community-now numbering about one hundred and fifty souls-which has defied the ravages of war and poverty and oppression nearly three thousand years. Unlike the Vaudois, these Samaritans have had no friendly system of mountain buttresses to defend them through the centuries; and still more unlike the long-lived Savoyard Protestants, they have been right in the pathway along which the devastating armies have marched back and forth, from the time of Sargon to Napoleon. But they have lived on, and their unity has never broken. They have clung to little Nablus and to their sacred Mount Gerizim, as the very cactus roots to the granite sides of the somber Ebal that confronts them across their little enchanted valley.

The line of Samaritan History, however, extends to a far earlier period than thirty centuries since; indeed, it stretches back to the morning of history. When Abraham was called out of Mesopotamia to the land of Canaan he crossed the Jordan and proceeded directly to Sichem, or Shechem, the probable site of the present Nablus, where he pitched his tent and dwelt for a time, receiving during his stay the divine promise of the possession of the whole land by his posterity. From Abraham's time, therefore, the Samaritans history runs parallel with the Jewish, until the breaking up of the Jewish nationality by the Assyrian invasion. Since that catastrophe the line of Samaritan religious life has never been interrupted. The Jews have dispersed all over the world, and are now divided into numerous shades of faith. But the Samaritans still live at the base of the sacred Gerizim, and have never differed amongst each other in tradition, fait, or usages. Dean Stanley has accordingly ample ground for claiming for this little Samaritan community the distinguished honor of being the "oldest and smallest sect in the world."

The feeling with which the present Samaritans regard the Mohammedans is of that intense bitterness which they have always manifested toward the Jews. And why not? Does not the Samaritan date his faith from Abraham, or rather from Adam? And has he not a right to call that infant religion which has been in existence for only the trifle of twelve centuries? Is not the Koran one of your new catchpenny romances, while that mysterious copy of the Pentateuch, made of sacred lamb-skins, which the Samaritans have been reading and kissing through these many ages, is the oldest copy in existence, written down by Aaron's own grandson, and the veritable original of all the Pentateuchs in the world?

As the population of Nablus is just about 12,000, the little Samaritan community is almost absorbed by the surrounding Mohammedan mass. Save to a careful observer, the very existence and presence of the Samaritans as a distinct element of citizenship in Nablus would not be noticed. The Samaritans wear turban, much like that of their true Moslem neighbors, but between the history and theology of the two classes there is not a single point of positive resemblance.

My visit to Nablus was in April, the best of all months for the enjoyment of the rare beauty of the region. Having come from the barren and rocky hills of Judea, I was hardly prepared for so positive a change as this sudden luxuriance of foliage and flowers. At Jacob's Well I turned abruptly to the left, and entered the narrow valley of Nablus. What the valley of the Engadine, is to the Tyrol, that of Nablus to Syria. There is nothing elsewhere that proves it. It is the quiet, half-concealed gem of the whole land. While the plain of Esdraelon is fruitful, there is chiefly the charm of history to make it attractive. But in the valley of Nablus there is a profusion of flowers and fruits that transfers you at once to the tropics.

Beyond the city of Nablus, as you bear northward toward Sebustieh, the ancient city of Samaria, the sound of brooks and fountains-new enough to the tourist from the south-is as present and cheering as to the guest who falls asleep amid the jasmines and fountains of the court of Demetri's Hotel in Damascus. The valley is a perpetual orchard, or rather garden, with a great variety of fruits and flowers. Figs,

mulberries, grapes, pomegranates, oranges, lemons, apricots, almonds, and other fruits vie for mastery in this miniature Eden. Van de Valde, for a calm Dutchman, quite lost his self-control when he entered the valley. For example, he speaks of a peculiar coloring here to all objects—"a lovely bluish haze."

My dragoman conducted me into Nablus by the western gate—an old rickety affair. Through this I rode with something of a dash, lest the sleepy guard should take it into his head to detain me without for an hour or two until the completion of the customary meaningless formalities. On my way to my lodgings I passed an excellent bazaar, which I have since learned is the best in Palestine. I found dark but otherwise comfortable quarters in the middle of the little city, and divided my few days in Nablus between clambering up the sides of Mount Gerizim, examining the marble ruins that crown it, conversing with the Samaritan high-priest, and rambling back to Jacob's Well and Joseph's Tomb.

The presence of the little Samaritan community in Nablus, clinging to their traditions and religion and first home with a tenacity which has no parallel in the annals of the world, suggests a glance at the marvelous history of this now dying sect. When Sargon, the successor of Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, took Samaria and carried all its strong inhabitants to Assyria, B.C. 722, he supplied the place of the exiles by colonists from Babylon and other parts of his empire. These colonists united with the infirm population which had not been regarded worth taking captive, and the two elements formed the basis of a new and mixed population. The religion, up to a certain time, was semi-idolatrous, having been introduced by the new colonists from Babylonia. The country began to be infested with lions and other wild beasts, and the people, regarding this as an evidence of divine wrath for stripping the land of its native deity, sent a request to the King of Assyria to give an order for the return of some Israelitish priests from captivity, that the citizens might be instructed in their former worship of Jehovah, and thus the wrath of the popular deity be appeased for all time to come. The request was granted, and Israelitish priests became the religious teachers of Samaria. Shechem, the Sychar of the New Testament and Nablus of our times, became the capital. We have then, this anomalous combination of facts: a mongrel population, part Assyrian and part Israelitish, living in a country which had belonged to the latter element, and now instructed in the religion of Israel by the priests who had been voluntarily sent back from exile. When, at the end of seventy years' Jewish captivity, Zerubbabel and his Jewish brethren returned to Jerusalem and began to rebuild the temple, the Samaritans proposed to unite with them. But the Jews would not permit them, on the ground that they regarded the Samaritans as semi-pagans. They therefore disclaimed all fellowship with them, and would give them no share in the restoration of their worship throughout the land. The Samaritans now conceived the idea of religious independence; so they proceeded to their sacred Shechem, and erected on the top of Mount Gerizim that great temple whose ruins are to-day the wonder of the antiquarian. From the day of the refusal of the Jews to permit them to share in the rebuilding of the temple, the hostility between the two peoples has been singularly intense.

There is no sadder bit of local history than that of Nablus. In the Roman period this city was rebuilt by Vespasian, on or near the site of the ancient Shechem, and called Flavia Neapolis (new city). The present title is therefore a very perceptible Arabic corruption of the Roman name. A Roman colony was established there by Vespasian. It appears that the population has always been quarrelsome, either with itself or unitedly against its rulers. Toward the end of the reign of the Emperor Zeno, A.D. 490, the people arose against the Christians, and having chosen as a chief a certain Justus, they fell on them during the feast of Pentecost, and put to death many of them and destroyed their churches. The Emperor sent troops against the rebels. Gerizim was given to the Christians, who built a church thereon in honor of the virgin. The ruins of this church we find to-day beside those of the original Samaritan temple. Under Justinian the Samaritans rose again, and destroyed the churches and massacred as many of the Christians as fell into their hands. They murdered Ammonas, Archbishop of Shechem. These excesses were punished by Justinian, who sent out a general against the rebels, and the Samaritans were compelled to build the demolished churches at their own cost. This general rebellious spirit of the Samaritans explains the severity of the degrees of the Emperors in the Roman code against this sect.\*

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\* Barges, *Les Samaritains de Naplous*, pp. 31, 33, 35, 36.

During the later Roman Empire the Samaritans, as a sect, began to lose all historical importance. The Christians had their churches at Nablus, and were protected in their rights, until the Mohammedan conquest of Syria, when both Samaritans and Christians shared in the devastations of that time. The Samaritans, however, were not exterminated, and were not driven from Nablus. During the Crusades they fell under Christian rule, and again reverted to Mohammedan control when the Turks became possessors of Syria. The Samaritans have therefore never been an independent people, but have been successively ruled by the Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Jews, Romans, and Turks. Yet during all these thirty centuries they have never gone beyond the site of their pomegranate and almond blossoms, or the sounds of the brooks, or the protecting side of their sacred Gerizim. But they have paid a fearful penalty in the decrease of their numbers and in their present poverty. Only their religion has kept them bound together. I spent an entire afternoon on the top of Gerizim, and by the aid of an excellent diagram examined the ruins of the church and the ancient temple until an approaching storm hastened my departure. The various parts and uses of the temple are still traceable. The greatest of the Samaritan festivals, the Passover, is still celebrated on the top of Gerizim with the most solemn and elaborate festivities.

The Samaritan synagogue is a small building in the center of Nablus, half obscured by the surrounding dwellings. I passed through arched and littered streets to a little court, in the middle of which was a little plot of grass, relieved by three trees, two of which were lemon. I here found a little Samaritan school, and at the sight of a stranger the children sprang from the floor where they were sitting, kissed my hand, and begged for backsheesh. The teacher was a youth of about fourteen, the son of Amram the high-priest. I was greatly disappointed at failing to find Amram himself, but in the end this circumstance aided me in my chief object, for the young man was willing, for a good fee, to show me the ancient Pentateuch. His father might have been deaf to all entreaties.

The claim of the Samaritans to have a copy of the Pentateuch older than the Jewish is supported by their own unbroken tradition and by the opinion of some learned men of the present time in Christian countries. But the weight of internal evidence is against it, among which may be mentioned grammatical emendations, late glosses in the text, insertions of foreign passages, alterations, Samaritanisms, and changes in support of Samaritan doctrine.

There are three codices kept in the little synagogue in Nablus, two being generally shown to strangers. It is very rarely that the veritable one can be seen. My good fortune in getting a hasty look at it was due to the venturesome and avaricious spirit of Amram's sons, rather than to any management of my own. Having first exhibited the two imitations, the young man, upon the offer of an additional fee, then brought out the original scroll from a chest. After the removal of the red satin cover I saw that the codex was enclosed in a silver cylindrical case, which had two doors opening on two sets of hinges. When these doors were thrown back the whole column was exposed to the vision. It is about two feet and a half long and nearly a foot in diameter, and presents, in exquisite raised work, a good plan of the Tabernacle, with every part given with the utmost minuteness and rarest skill. The roll consists of dingy skins-prepared before the invention of parchment-sewed together with neat stitches, and worn and patched, and here and there entirely illegible. The skins are of equal size, and measure each twenty-five inches long and fifteen wide.

Before leaving Nablus I had the opportunity of spending an evening with Amram at his house. He lived in the greatest simplicity, though in Palestine that is the rule rather than the exception. Mrs. El Karey, the wife of the missionary in Nablus in the employment of the Church Missionary Society of London, was good enough to accompany me and serve as interpreter. The venerable high-priest, who was barefooted, and clad in a great turban and loose flowing robe, received us with calm and dignified cordiality in his room-at once his parlor, dining-room, and bedroom. His very aged mother was lying on the floor, covered with bedclothing and asleep. There were several children, half asleep, lying about the room. Amram's son-in-law was slowly copying a Pentateuch-for the Samaritans have no printing-press. It requires a year to make a copy, which is never sold, and is only used by the community. The aged mother of Amram arose after we had been present a few minutes, the many ornaments on her neck and in her ears making a harsh tinkling sound as she moved. I was invited to a seat on the floor, and to take coffee and cigarettes. The mother, on seeing guests in her presence, took a rude bellows and blew up the coals under the copper kettle. Coffee, the Oriental's unflinching proof of hostility, was handed us in little cups.

The peculiar views of Amram may be said to represent very fairly the theology of his dying community. The world, he claimed, is about seven thousand years old. For fifty-five years men will go on increasing in wickedness, after which there will come a time of great peace and purity. Then there will come on a new period of consummate wickedness, which will last three hundred years. This time will be consummated by the total destruction of the world. After this the general judgment will take place, when the righteous will go to live with God and the wicked with Satan. There are some people who have clean hearts, or at least are accepted as clean, though none are absolutely pure. Just here Amram looked off, as if in the distance, and said, "God is one!" Here he intended a slight thrust at all Christians, because of their emphasis on Christ and His divine character. He spoke with interest of the ruins on Mount Gerizim, and of the increase of his community within the last thirty years. He closed by expressing his firm belief that the time would come when the Samaritans would be the most numerous body in the world.

Amram has since died, and the sedate son-in-law, being the eldest male relative, has succeeded him in the high-priest-hood.

***Please Note:***

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