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**Travels in the Holy Land:  
Syria, Asia Minor, and Turkey  
as they were and are**

By **Dr. Freese**

Philadelphia:

Crombargar & Co.

1882

Fourth Illustrated Edition

(p. 196)....

In a little while we reach Nablous and pitch our tents on its western border, amidst the tents of fourteen other Americans and four Englishmen—all, like ourselves, travelers and sight-seers in Palestine.

This town of Nablous (anciently Neapoli) is of very ancient date, its history being traceable for some four thousand years. It was here, or near here, that Abraham first pitched his tent in the land of Canaan; it was the inhabitants of this city who suffered such terrible punishment at the hands of Simeon and Levi (sons of Jacob) for dishonoring their sister Dinah; and it was here that Rehoboam' was declared king over all Israel.

(p. 197) Stephens, who traveled over this same route, says: "Turning the point of the mountain, we came to a rich valley lying between the mountains of Gerizim and Ebal. Crossing this valley, on the sides of the mountain of Ebal is a long range of grottoes and tombs, and a little before coming to them, in a large white building like a sheikh's tomb, is the sepulchre of Joseph. I dismounted and entered the building, and it is not an uninteresting fact that I found there a white-bearded Israelite, kneeling at the tomb of the patriarch, and teaching a rosy-cheeked boy (his descendant of the fourth generation) the beautiful story of Joseph and his brethren.

"It was late in the evening when I was moving up the valley of Nablous. The mountains of Gerizim and Ebal, the mountains of blessings and curses, were towering like lofty walls on either side of me. A beautiful stream, in two or three places filling large reservoirs, was running through the valley, and a shepherd sat on its bank playing a reed pipe, with his flock feeding quietly around him. The shades of evening were gathering fast as I approached the town of Nablous, the Shechem or Sychem of the Old Testament, and the Sychar of the New. More than a dozen lepers were sitting outside the gate, their faces shining, pimpled and bloated, covered with sores and pustules, their nostrils open and filled with ulcers, and their red eyes fixed and staring; with swollen feet they dragged their disgusting bodies toward me, and with hoarse voices extended their deformed and hideous hands for charity."

The town of Nablous is at present a miserably dirty place of about six thousand inhabitants, consisting mostly of Mohammedans. Its streets are execrable, as we have reason to know from nearly breaking our neck while passing over them on horseback when searching for the Samaritan synagogue; and its inhabitants are exceedingly hos- (p. 198) tile to Christians, as we have further reason to know from seeing a boy throw a stone at Lily while quietly riding along on horseback, and for the catching of which boy we offered another boy a dollar, that we might give him such a flogging as would teach him for all time to come to respect the rights of travelers.

The valley in which this town is located is one of great beauty and fertility, and being so near another large valley, it must in times past have been a place of considerable trade and importance.

Early next morning we commence the ascent of Mount Gerizim, which is by no means an easy task. The path from Nablous is so steep and stony that no other than a Syrian horse could ever go up it. In the day of its great glory, when a magnificent temple crowned its summit and thousands went up to worship on this mountain, there must certainly have been a better road or path.

Dr. Robinson ascended Mount Gerizim under the guidance of one of the younger Samaritans, an honest, simple-minded man. When about two-thirds of the way up, they heard, he says, a woman calling after them, who proved to be the mother of the Samaritan guide. He was her only son, and had come away, it seems, without her knowledge; and she was now in the utmost terror at finding that he had gone off as a guide to Franks, to show them the holy mountain. She had immediately followed the party, and was now crying after them with all the strength of her lungs, forbidding him to proceed lest some evil should befall him. The young man went back to meet her, and tried to pacify her, but in vain; she insisted upon his returning home. This he was not inclined to do, though, he said, he could not disobey his mother, and so transgress the law of Moses. This touching trait gave the travelers a favorable idea of the (p. 199) morality of the Samaritans. After reasoning with her a long time without effect, he finally persuaded her to go with them. So she followed the strangers up the mountain; at first full of wrath, and keeping at a distance from them; yet, at last, she became quite reconciled and communicative.

Twenty minutes of ascent in the direction south-west from the city leads the traveler to the top of Gerizim, a tract of high table land, stretching off far to the west and south-west, and covered with rich herbage and wild flowers. Twenty minutes more toward the south-east, along a regular path upon the table land, brings him to the holy place of the Samaritans, which is still some distance from that shown as Joshua's altar. The ground here is rather depressed to a centre, so that a larger assemblage than the Samaritans can now muster might conveniently witness the sacred rites as from an amphitheatre. A few stones formed into an altar, and a paved trench to carry off the victim's blood, are all the tokens of the place and its purposes. A little farther on the extreme and most elevated summit which overlooks the valley are some very extensive remains of a Roman fortress, with large tanks and much masonry of massive and regular construction.

Just under the walls of the castle, on the west side, are a few flat stones, of which it is difficult to say whether they were laid there by nature or by man. Under these were laid, as they allege, the twelve stones brought from Jordan by the Israelites; and there they will remain till the Muhdy (the Messiah) shall appear.

Beyond the castle, toward the south, is the alleged altar of Joshua, the holiest spot, where the Samaritan guide reverently takes off his shoes. It is the kibleh of that people. On whatever side of it they may be, they (p. 200) always turn their faces toward it in prayer; but when upon the spot itself, it is lawful for them to pray in any direction. Round it are slight traces of former walls, possibly those of the ancient temple. The spot itself is a sort of table, level with the surrounding ground, and at first sight appearing to be nothing more than the natural face of the rock from which the surface soil has been removed, and divided into compartments by natural accidents of fracture and fissure. Such Lord Francis Egerton at first considered it, but on closer inspection he was induced to adopt the opinion that it was artificial. "It slopes," his lordship says, "at an angle fully sufficient for the sacrificial purpose of allowing blood to drain off" toward the cavernous mouth of a deep well. Of these wells

there are several near, and in two, at least, of them I thought I perceived that the stones of the orifice had been arranged artificially, and if so, with consummate skill, and to be, in fact, specimens of that kind of architecture best known by the term of cyclopean—stones, namely, unhewn, but fitted to one another with a felicity which, on a small scale, is often exhibited by the dyke-builders of Scotland. Now, Joshua was directed to build his altar of whole stones, untouched by iron tool; and, on looking at the altar itself, and comparing it with the wells in the neighborhood, I was much inclined to the opinion that all were of the same construction, and of one which would answer this description."

Near the same place the Samaritans show an altar as that on which Abraham was commanded to offer up Isaac: and further south, and, indeed, all round upon this eminence, are extensive foundations, apparently of dwellings, as if the ruins of a former city.

On the summit we find a small encampment of Samaritans, who are here to celebrate their annual passover, (p. 201) and a little farther on we find the ruins of their once magnificent temple.

Around the ruins of the temple proper are\* very thick walls, with a tower at each corner, which were probably erected and used for defensive purposes, and outside of these walls are the foundation-stones of many other buildings.

Recent excavations by Capt. Wilson, of England, show the temple to have been of great beauty, both as to architecture and the use of materials. The bases and caps of beautiful columns have been found, and the stones, even of the foundation walls, are carefully cut. The view from the summit is grandly beautiful.

No people, perhaps, ever committed so many crimes, or endured so many reverses and persecutions in defence of their religion and its ancient usages, as the Samaritans; and, though there be little to commend in their annals, who can contemplate unmoved the lingering death of an ancient people, now dwindled to a mere handful, but still clinging with a love stronger than death to the memory and laws of their fathers? Only about twenty families now remain of this once numerous people. "I was presented," says Mr. Farren, then British Consul-General in Syria, "in acknowledgment of some little service I rendered them, with a copy of a letter addressed to them about two hundred years ago from a body of Samaritans in India (of whom they have no other trace), beseeching to know the fate of their brethren in Samaria; and when at Sychem and passing at sunset near their tombs, which lay upon a sterile bank within a wild recess at the foot of Gerizim, two Samaritan women, who were seated there and seemed mournfully to be numbering the graves into which the remnant of their ancient race was fast declining, broke their silence as I approached, and, in accents of deep feeling, implored me, if I knew where any of their people were now scattered, to tell them that their few remaining brethren, who still dwelt in the land of their forefathers, besought them to return and close the exhausted record of their fate with kindred sympathies and rites."

Much curiosity has existed among the learned, both in this country and in Europe, with regard to this singular people, and several most eminent men of their day, including Scaliger and De Sacy, have had correspondence with them, but without any satisfactory result. The descendants of the Israelites who remained and were not carried into captivity, on the rebuilding of the second temple were denied the privilege of sharing the labor and expense of its reconstruction at Jerusalem; and in mortification and revenge they built a temple on Mount Gerizim with the permission of Alexander the Great; and ever since a deadly hatred has existed between their descendants, the Samaritans, and the Jews. Gibbon, speaking of them in the time of Justinian, says, "The Samaritans of Palestine were a motley race, an ambiguous sect, rejected as Jews by the Pagans, by the Jews as schismatics, and by the

Christians as idolaters. The abomination of the cross had been already planted on their holy Mount of Gerizim, but the persecution of Justinian offered only the alternative of baptism or rebellion. They chose the latter; under the standard of a desperate leader they rose in arms and retaliated their wrongs on the lives, the property, and the temples of a defenceless people. The Samaritans were finally subdued by the regular forces of the East; twenty thousand were slain, twenty thousand were sold by the Arabs to the infidels of Persia and India, and the remains of that unhappy nation atoned for the crime of treason by the sin of hypocrisy." (p. 203) They pretended to embrace Christianity in the year 551, as the only means of recovering a few trifling privileges. Soon after that period they disappear from the historian's view; crushed down without the power of resistance under the heavy yoke of the Moslems, their number has ever since continued to decrease.

The Syrian's tell many marvelous tales about the isolated and mysterious Samaritans: they assert that the number of heads of families among them is invariably forty, and can neither augment nor diminish, being irrevocably fixed by the demons, who are the protectors of the race. Setting aside all such fables, the following is an abstract of what appears best authenticated respecting this people.

They intermarry only with each other, never stray beyond their mountain, and hold no familiar intercourse with their neighbors of a different creed. Cut off from the whole world, ages pass over their heads, leaving them unchanged in all but numbers.

Their synagogue is a small, plain arched room, with a curtained recess on the left hand as you enter, wherein they keep their manuscripts, of which they profess to have about a hundred: one of these, a copy of the Pentateuch, they allege to be three thousand four hundred and sixty years old, having been transcribed by Abishua, the son of Phineas, and great-grandson of Aaron. They demand payment beforehand for showing this, and then produce an old roll, which, however, is not the right one. If the traveler is skilled enough in such matters to detect the fraud, the priest and his hopeful flock only laugh and bring out the other. "This," says Dr. Robinson, "was certainly very much worn, and somewhat tattered with much kissing, and here and there patched with shreds of parchment; but the handwriting appeared to me very (p. 204) similar to the former, and the vellum seemed, in like manner, not ancient." They regard the genuine manuscript, whatever that may be, as a palladium with which are bound up the lives and destinies of Samaritans; but they are possessed, it is said, with a sad foreboding that the precious deposit will one day be wrested from them, and then will the days of the last of their race be numbered. According to their account, their two families of priests are still of the stock of Aaron. Until recently these families had kept their blood pure from all alien mixture; but in consequence of their continual diminution, the males among them, now five in number, have been obliged to take wives from other houses. The place where they sacrifice [on ordinary occasions] is an altar of dry stone, erected behind their village, on an artificial mound, which serves them as a representative of the famous Mount Gerizim. They keep the passover in the manner of the ancient Hebrews.

In child-birth the Samaritan woman remains shut up in her house for forty days, and no one is allowed to see her but the midwife or the nurse. Were any one else, even her husband, to see her during that time, the whole house would be rendered unclean, and it would be necessary to burn every article in it that was incapable of being purified by fire or by running water. Her chamber is closely shut, and talismans are hung on the door to drive away the demon *Leilat*, a formidable being, ever on the watch to steal into the lying-in chamber, and cast a malignant spell upon the mother and her child. Above the talismans the name of *Leilat* is inscribed in large red letters, with an imprecation against the fiend; for of all magic charms his own name is thought most potent to repel him, On the fortieth day the woman quits her

prison, Leilat no longer having any power to molest her; but it (p. 205) is not till twelve days after this that she performs her solemn ablutions, and a festival is held in the house to celebrate her readmission into the family circle.

Like the Jews, the Samaritans carefully avoid all contact with a dead body or with a tomb, lest they should be rendered unclean: they wash their whole bodies and change their raiment before presenting themselves at the altar for prayer or sacrifice.

As a reason why the Samaritans never quit Nablous, the following incident is related:

Some members of their community were accused before the atrocious Djezzar, pasha of Acre, of having blasphemed the Mohammedan faith, by declaring that they alone, as possessing the true ancient religion of God; were entitled to Paradise. Djezzar instantly summoned the chief men of the Samaritans, who entered his presence with dismay. Leaning on his hatchet and surrounded with his cut-throats and executioners, he stared for a long while with the aspect of a tiger on the Samaritans, whose terrors he beheld with delight. "Filthy miscreants!" he cried at last, in a voice of thunder, " what is the exact number of your people?" "A hundred and sixty," they replied, half dead with fear. "A hundred and sixty! and Paradise is for you alone! Well, then, sons of dogs, leave the earth to those against whom Paradise is barred, and go straight to heaven." Thereupon the pasha made a fatal gesture with his right hand, and the wretched men were hurried out for execution. But presently Djezzar appeared to change his mind. "Send those dogs back to their dens," he said; "and if a single one of them ever ventures to show himself beyond them, let him be killed like an unclean beast." He then, by way of commuting their punishment, increased the taxes paid by the Samaritans six-fold, and saddled them with the cost of constructing (p. 206) and maintaining a fountain at Kefr Nuohr, two leagues from Saffad, that, as he said, they might do some good in this world to those who were to be deprived of Paradise in the next. The Samaritans returned home, rejoiced at having got off so well from this interview with the ferocious pasha, who, fortunately for them, happened on this day to be in unusually good-humor. "Ever since that day," say the oldest Samaritans, "none of us have gone into the plain, and we die without ever quitting the walls of our quarters."

Djezzar Pasha has been many years dead, but the lesson still works, and the Samaritans keep close to home, dreading to expose themselves to the outrages of the rude Nablousian mountaineers.

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

This reference is not located in *A Bibliography of the Samaritans, Third Edition, Revised, Expanded, and Annotated*, by Alan David Crown and Reinhard Pummer, ATLA Bibliography, No. 51, **The Scarecrow Press, Inc.** Lanham, Maryland, Toronto, Oxford. 2005

**Dr. Freese** is Dr. Jacob R. Freese, (1826-1885) formerly a *doctor* of medicine in Bloomington, Illinois, was appointed captain and assistant adjutant general of Volunteers on August 24, 1861. .. who served on the draft board in Trenton, New Jersey during the civil war in the US. He was a friend of President Abraham Lincoln. He was at Nablus in April, somewhere before the *American Civil War* (1861–1865) or between 1867 and 1875 (Freese mentions recommending a Dogaman to his friends the Appletons (p. 526). The date is narrowed with a date of April 1875 in the book, *Syrian Sunshine* By Thomas Gold Appleton, Boston, Robert Brothers, 1877, p. 1. But since Feese was also there in April, I is also possible the year of Freese's visit was 1877.