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Two months in Syria in 1875; or, Reminiscences of Tent Life

By **Charles Hugh Berners**

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(p. 175)...

We went, for a few minutes, into the Samaritan synagogue, where some sort of ceremony was going on, but it was not interesting. Service was being conducted by the high priest, followed by the congregation ;. and judging from the deafening noise with which they shouted the responses, one could not say much for the reverence of the assembly. We were shown, at the close of the service, the Roll of the Pentateuch, said to be 3,000 years old; but I have no faith in the truth of the assertion. Experience has made me rather sceptical on Oriental objects of "*antiquity*."

The ladies rejoined us after their visit to (p. 176) the harems, and we went to pay a friendly visit to one of the soap manufacturers, with whom the El-Kareys were acquainted. Unfortunately the works were closed at the time we were there, so that we could not see the process. We were, however, shown all over the store-rooms, which contained more than a thousand pounds worth of soap. Having seen all that was of interest in the town, we returned to camp, where we found an invitation awaiting us from the Pasha, to be present that afternoon at the opening of some new barracks. The R----- s accepted it, and were received very cordially by the Pasha, who afterwards deputed one of the officers to show them over the building.

April 19th. Our camp was situated at the western extremity of the town, on a large mound, caused, I believe, by the refuse from the soap works, which have existed in Nablous from a very early date. The pathway running near our tents led down to a copious mill stream; and in the morning, I strolled up the banks of this rivulet, and found myself in some fruit gardens, with which the lower (p. 177) part of Mount Ebal is thickly covered. I was in hopes of gaining a path which would lead me up the face of the mountain, as I was anxious to obtain a view of Nablous from the opposite side of the valley. I have before remarked that the Mahomedans of this place are not partial to Europeans, and so I found on this occasion. Following a narrow path between two gardens, I came upon a group, consisting of an old man sitting down, and two women closely veiled, who were engaged in trimming some bushes at his side. I bowed, and was about to pass them, when the old fellow made a threatening gesture with his stick, and, rising from the ground, advanced as if going to strike me. Of course I could offer no

explanation of my being there: I pointed to the path, and then up to the summit of the mountain, but failed to make him understand; and therefore, having no desire to test the strength of his cudgel, I retraced my steps. It has since occurred to me, that the women were the man's wives, and his anger may have been aroused at my having seen them. The Mussulmans (p. 178) are generally very strict in this respect, and consider that a great injury has been done them, if one even accidentally sees their female relatives.

On my return to camp, I found that a fresh attempt had been made by the soldiers to seize one of our mules. The men, however, had been on the alert this time, and, as the chief muleteer of the soldiers was riding away, they had caught him by the leg, and had flung him heavily to the ground. Mr. El-Karey happened to be visiting the Pasha, when the man presented himself with a complaint against us for assaulting him. The Pasha entirely disbelieved his story, saying that he well knew that the English would not allow their servants to assault a person without good reason. He handed the complainant over to the prison authorities, with an order to have him well thrashed. Thus it will be seen that the Turkish military at Nablous did not get much change out of us, thanks to the equitable conduct of the Pasha.

After an early luncheon we started for Mount Gerizim, in order to be present at the (p. 179) Samaritan Passover. The ascent was very precipitous all the way, and we were several times obliged to stop and breathe our horses. Our friend Mr. El-Karey accompanied us, and to him I am indebted for much information as to the matters to be hereafter described. The road lay, at first, through the Mahomedan cemetery, with its quaintly painted graves, and subsequently wound through beautiful gardens filled with every description of fruit trees in full foliage.

Higher up, after passing beyond the range of vegetation, we had an uninterrupted view of Mount Ebal, across the valley. On the left of this again, to the west and north-west, were several smaller heights; and beyond these, at thirty miles distance, lay the Mediterranean, glittering in the afternoon sun. An hour's ride from Nablous brought us to the encampment of the Samaritans. They had pitched their tents on a level plateau, a few hundred yards from the actual summit of the mountain. This community, which at various times held a conspicuous place in Old Testament history, is now confined exclusively to Nablous, and (p. 180) is rapidly becoming extinct; its number, including children, not being more than 130.

As the sacrifice was not to take place until some hours later, we continued our ride up to the summit, where we visited the ruins of the Church of St. Mary of the Crusades. This originally stood on the site of the old Samaritan temple; and from this spot we obtained a glorious view of the Plain of Shechem. There was just enough cloud in the sky to bring out in grand relief the lights and shades on this fertile area. To the east, beyond the Jordan, rose the dark blue hills of Gilead; and in the far north we could discern, though not very distinctly, the snowy outline of Mount Hermon.

We next paid a visit to the tent of Jacob Esh Shellaby, the recognised leader of the Samaritans, who had called upon us on the previous day at Nablous. We found him intelligent and well-informed; and he spoke tolerably good English, having spent several weeks in this country. On this occasion, owing to some recent dispute, he had separated from the rest of his brethren; and (p. 181) intended, he informed us, to keep a special passover for himself and his family.

About an hour before sunset we returned to the Samaritans' encampment. Here we found that, thanks to Mr. El-Karey, the High Priest had placed at our disposal a small tent, in which we might dine and rest in the interval between the killing and the eating of the sacrifice. As we were "*strangers*," the tent allotted to us was pitched "*outside the camp*."

A few yards to the south-east of the encampment, and within sight of the summit of the mountain, an oven had been built in the ground and lined with large stones. It was from seven to eight feet in depth, and was formed in the shape of a cask, the sides converging towards the top and bottom. The aperture at the top was about five feet in diameter. At a distance of ten or twelve yards from the oven a trench had been cut in the ground, running from north to south, about eighteen inches wide, a foot deep, and eight feet in length. Over the northern end of the trench some planks of wood were (p. 182) placed in order, forming a kind of platform: these were subsequently covered with bundles of long grass. In the opposite end of the trench a large fire was lighted, over which were suspended two iron cauldrons, each containing about ten gallons of water. Near this fire was placed a small wooden table, on which the Pentateuch was put, carefully shrouded in silk handkerchiefs of many different colours. In front of the table were spread two prayer-carpets, for the use of the worshippers during the early part of the ceremony.

About twenty minutes before sunset the whole congregation (except the women) advanced to the carpets, where they took up their position in two rows, one behind the other, and all facing Mount Gerizim. Every one was dressed in white robes, the High Priest being distinguished from the rest only by a black stole. The latter stood by himself, near the table, having his face turned towards the mountain, and his back to the congregation. The ceremony commenced with the chanting of certain portions of the (p. 183) Pentateuch, which most of the congregation apparently knew by heart, although they all had books. They stood up and knelt down alternately, and occasionally prostrated themselves at full length with their faces to the ground. Meanwhile a man dressed in red, and appointed for the purpose, was engaged in tending the fires in the trench and in the oven.

By the time the chanting was concluded, six young men with their legs bare, but wearing shoes on their feet, had brought up the six lambs appointed for sacrifice, to the wooden platform already mentioned as being covered with grass. The object of the grass was to prevent the animals being injured during their struggles, and thus incurring a blemish.¹

The congregation now left the prayer-carpets and formed themselves in a circle round the trench. At the exact moment of sunset, on a signal being given by the High Priest, the first lamb was thrown down on its (p. 184) back, and its throat cut, the whole assembly uniting in a loud chorus, "We offer this sacrifice to the great God, Jehovah!" This chorus was repeated as each lamb was killed; and the bodies were passed on, still struggling, from hand to hand, from right to left, and laid in a row near where the High Priest was standing. When the first lamb was killed, its blood was caught in a tin basin, and carried away to the tents, where the women and children were daubed with it on the face, either with the finger or with a small bunch of hyssop. All the worshippers were afterwards sprinkled in the same manner. The women and children generally take part in the

¹ Exodus xii. 5.

ceremony, as well as the men; but on the present occasion, owing to the whole community being in mourning for the late High Priest, who had died about six months previously, only the men appeared in public.

The High Priest now proceeded to examine each of the victims, in order to ascertain if life were quite extinct; after which four men took each carcase and rapidly stripped it of (p. 185) its wool. This operation was speedily accomplished, hot water from the cauldrons being poured over the fleece to scald it. All the wool was plucked off by hand, and subsequently burnt.

While this was being done, other members of the congregation were handing round the unleavened bread,² which was rolled up in small pieces, each roll containing sorrel or some other bitter herb. They courteously offered us the bread, but would not allow us to partake of the herb it contained, giving as a reason, "Your fathers never ate the bread of bitterness." When everybody had been served with bread, all the congregation kissed each other on both shoulders, and also the hand of the oldest member of the community.

The disembowelling of the animals was done in the usual manner.—The lambs were suspended head downwards, on a wooden pole resting on the shoulders of two men, while a third man made an incision down the front of the body and removed all the entrails at once. (p. 186) These were carried to a short distance from the camp, where they underwent some process of manual ablution, which I was unable to observe minutely owing to the darkness. They were then brought back again, and burnt in the fire underneath the cauldrons. The heart, as well as some parts of the offal, was burnt in the oven itself, where the whole lamb was to be afterwards roasted. The right shoulder was removed from each of the lambs before they were spitted. According to the Levitical law,³ these shoulders were the property of the High Priest; but in the case of the Passover, as no portion was allowed to remain until the morning, and it would not be possible for the High Priest to consume them before eating of the feast itself, all the six shoulders were burnt in the oven.

The spits on which the lambs were roasted consisted of straight pieces of oak, which were passed lengthways through the bodies from the tail to the breast, care being taken (p. 187) to avoid breaking any bones.⁴ A small crosspiece of the same material, fastened to the lower part of the spit, prevented the carcase from falling off. The lambs were then taken to the oven, and deposited, head downwards, in order that the fat contained in the tail, might trickle over the meat during the roasting. The mouth of the oven was closed by means of a hurdle or crate thrown across it, the long ends of the six spits being allowed to protrude through the bars, for the purpose of afterwards extracting the lambs. Lumps of moistened clay and damp grass were firmly trodden down on the top of the crate, so as to exclude all air and keep in the heat.

The full moon was now at its height, and the swarthy features of the Samaritans contrasted strangely with their white garments, many of which were stained with the blood of the victims. There still remained nearly four hours before midnight, when the Passover was to be eaten, so we retired to the tent that had been provided for us.

(p. 188) Two hours afterwards an alarm was suddenly raised that the sacrifice had proved a failure. We hurried from our resting-place, and a momentary glance in the

² Exodus xii. 8.

³ Lev. vii. 32—37.

⁴ Exodus xii. 46.

direction of the oven showed that there was some foundation for the report. Instead of the thin steamy vapour, that had been issuing from the moist clay when we had previously quitted the spot, thick volumes of black smoke were now ascending. It appeared that the oven had been constructed in the foundations of an old building, and by some over-sight a small crevice had not been observed: through this a current of air was fanning the smouldering embers inside into a fierce flame, which threatened to consume the lambs entirely. This danger was obviated by dint of great exertions on the part of the Samaritans; and all the carcasses were recovered, though not before several persons had been severely burnt on the face and hands.

Flag-baskets were now brought to the spot, and in these the lambs were carried round, while the congregation, led by the High Priest, recited some prayers. One or (p. 189) two of the lambs were then conveyed to the women in the tents. The men partook of the feast standing, some few of them having *staves in their hand*, and all *wearing shoes*; but none, so far as I could see, *having their loins girded*⁵ They all ate in *great haste*, each person tearing off with his hands as much as he wanted. I was afterwards told that none of the congregation had eaten any kind of food during the preceding four-and-twenty hours, with the exception of the unleavened bread at sun-set when the Passover was killed.

The ceremony being over, lamps were lighted, and diligent search made for any bones or other refuse that might have fallen on the ground. All that was found was consumed in the fire under the cauldrons, as were also the flag-baskets in which the meat had been carried from the oven, and any cloths or handkerchiefs that had come in contact with any part of the sacrifice. The object of this was that the command might (p. 190) be fulfilled, "Ye shall let nothing remain of it until the morning, and that which remaineth until the morning ye shall burn with fire."⁶

Before we started to return to our camp at Nablous, the High Priest paid us a visit for a few minutes, and thanked us for being present at the ceremony. It was of course obvious that he had come to receive a bakshish, which was readily given in return for the courtesy with which we had been treated.

April 20th. As we had been up late on the previous night, we were glad to have only a short ride of three hours to Sebastieh, the village now occupying the site of the city of Samaria. Descending from our camping ground, we gained a path running due westward of Nablous, which led us for some miles along the banks of the copious mill-stream which I have mentioned as issuing from Mount Ebal. This stream is reinforced from time to time by little rivulets, springing out (p. 191) of the rock, in some places with great force. We passed numerous aqueducts, by which the water is led off into the adjoining orchards of figs and pomegranates. At length we turned away to the right, leaving the stream which had now increased to a small river, and, mounting over the western spur of Mount Ebal, came in sight of the village of Deir Sheraf, standing on an eminence, and presenting the appearance of having been at one time strongly fortified. Passing this on our left, we ascended a ridge from which we obtained our first sight of Sebastieh. Murray's description of it is to the following effect: "In the centre of a basin, encircled by hills and about- five miles in diameter, rises a flattish oval-shaped hill to the height of 300 feet. On the summit is a long plateau, which breaks down at the sides, a hundred feet

⁵ Exodus xii. 11.

⁶ Exodus xii. 10.

or more, to an irregular terrace or belt of level land. Below this the roots of the hill spread off gradually into the surrounding valleys."

The only remains of the old city now visible are some enormous columns, about eighty or a hundred in number, which mark out what was perhaps the main thoroughfare. These formed a colonnade on the west of the city, about fifty feet wide, and it is supposed, nearly a thousand feet long. Others are found on the north-east side of the hill, inclosing a level portion of ground; but these are not so numerous as those on the western side. The columns are all monoliths, about two feet in diameter and eighteen feet in height: none of them have any capitals. At the eastern end of the present village is the Church of St. John, where John the Baptist is said to have been buried. Looking at the importance of the site of Samaria, as a fortification, it struck me forcibly that Omri must have made a very good bargain when he bought the Hill of Shemer for two talents of silver. From a terrace overhanging the camp I obtained a lovely panorama of the surrounding country, and have seldom seen anything to equal the effect, especially as the sun was at the moment on the point of setting.

April 21st. We left Samaria early, and were just on the descent of the hill where (p. 193)....

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