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All in a Life Time
Chapters From An Autobiography
By **Henry Morgenthau**

Photos

Page 59 (Samaritan Women and Children)

Page 60 (The Samaritan Camp on Mt. Gerizim)

Page 61 (Mr. Morgenthau's visit to the Samaritans)

Page 62 (The Sacrificial Flock)

Page 63 (Samaritans Preparing the Sacrificial Feast)

Page 64 (The High Priest of the Samaritans at the Eastertide Sacrifice)

(p. 69)

After the customary visits to the shrines of the Christians and the Jews and the Moslem, (whose interest and significance were doubled by the eloquence and learning of Doctor Hoskins and Mr. Schmavonian), we proceeded northward toward Nabulus, and Damascus. On our way thither we made a side trip westward to witness the Samaritan Easter sacrifice on Mount Gerizim. These Samaritans are one of the most interesting surviving remnants of antiquity in the world. They have scrupulously refrained from marrying outside their tribe, and have retained unchanged the customs which their lineal ancestors observed in the remotest Biblical times, antedating the Christian Era by many centuries. The total population in March, 1919, was only one hundred and forty one. During Easter week they dwell in about twenty camps, living the life of their ancestors, and worshipping God in accordance with customs nearly four thousand years old. Each year at Eastertide, they ascend Mount Gerizim which they claim is the original Mount Moriah, to perform the ancient sacrifices after the manner, and as they claim, on the spot where Abraham performed them at the time when he offered to sacrifice Isaac. When we reached their encampment on Mount Gerizim, we called on the High Priest, Jacob-ben-Aaron who, after we had paid our respects, asked us if we wished to go over the grounds, and have the various things explained to us. He was too old to accompany us in person, and consequently requested two senior priests to act in his stead. They showed us the ruins of the Temple which Abraham had erected, the spot where he had suddenly

discovered the ram who saved Isaac from the sacrifice, and the altar where the ancient sacrifices took place.

Just before sundown, the Samaritans gathered and began the services which were to last all through the night. They began with prayer and song, which were kept up for more than an hour until the sun had set. They then killed seven beautiful white lambs, and put them into a great hole in the ground, in which fires had been burning for a week. This was in accordance with the law which prescribes that no flames shall touch the meat of sacrifice. So, the fires were removed before the carcasses were placed in the pits and covered with earth, after which the intense heat of the ground (p. 70) accomplished the necessary roasting. The Samaritans then resumed their prayers and singing, which by alternating, they kept up unbroken until a quarter to twelve, midnight. In the meantime we occupied our two tents which had been erected by the American colony at Jerusalem for our use—one of the tents for repose, and the other a dining room where we took our evening meal. Some of the ladies wrapped themselves in rugs and went to sleep on steamer chairs, and the girls sat about chatting, while Doctors Bliss and Hoskins and I visited the different tents of the Samaritans, and had long talks with the High Priest and other priests. The High Priest explained to us that the material condition of the tribes was very bad. The Arabs disliked them and barely tolerated them. He, himself, was supposed to live on a tithe of the income of the tribe, but he said that this amount would not suffice to keep him for more than one month of the twelve, so that although he was more than seventy-four years of age, he used most of his time in copying the Pentateuch in Samaritan, and selling it whenever he could. Upon this hint, I bought a copy.

One of the tents was reserved for the unclean women. They are not permitted to partake of the holy meat, but in return they are allowed certain liberties. They had an Arab servant who was dancing for them while they were beating time with their hands.

In another tent we visited there was a sick man who was being looked after by a doctor. It was a very queer sight. The moon was shining brightly and you could see the men and women sitting around and visiting one another, all anxiously awaiting the division of the lambs. The High Priest excused himself for not having provided one lamb for us, but he had not anticipated that we would remain there until midnight. Of course, he said, as we were not Samaritans, he could not offer us any of the sacrificial meat.

About midnight, the lambs were brought out and there were seven groups, and to each group was given a lamb, and they divided it with their hands and ate it with their fingers—no knife, fork, or any other implement being used. A great many of the men took large chunks of the meat to their tents, where the women and children were waiting. They ate it ravenously, as the law prescribes.

It was indeed a strange and interesting experience, here, on a fine moon-light night, on a lonely mountain in distant Palestine, to see a little tribe of people carrying out, without affectation, the customs which their ancestors had observed unbroken for thousands of years, still dressed in the same garb, speaking the same language, and conducting themselves in the same manner as the shepherd folk of the time of Abraham.

A member of our party, Mr. Richard Whiting, took a number of remarkable flash-light photographs of the ceremonies, a complete series of reproductions of which was published in the National Geographic Magazine some years ago. Shortly after midnight our party started homeward. Most of them were afraid to trust themselves in the dark on the horses and donkeys, and so they walked. I stuck to my horse, and it was a curious

sight to see our little caravan wending its way toward the hotel in the darkness of the middle of the night—I with my Samaritan manuscript, and my daughter with one of the knives used for the sacrifice, which had been presented to her by one of the Samaritans.

The headquarters from which we had made our excursion to Mount Gerizim was the city of Nabulus. From this same headquarters, we made another excursion to Sebastiyeh, the old Samaritan capital of the ten tribes of Judea. Here was the spot where the Assyrians besieged the Jews for three years, and then, in turn, were driven out by Alexander the Great. The ruins had Jewish foundations and superstructures erected by the Romans under Herod.

These two plunges into remote antiquity suggested to my imagination the reply which I made to the Governor of Nabulus when he called one day in great excitement to say that he had just been notified that Talaat had telegraphed from Constantinople to ask whether we were satisfied with our progress and receptions. The Governor was very anxious to know what he could do for me, and asked whether I preferred a dinner, or some other form of entertainment. I replied that I had had so many Turkish dinners, and so many formal receptions, and asked if he would not arrange an Arabian night. The allusion evidently meant nothing to him, for I had to explain that I wanted to witness exactly how the Arabs spent their evenings, and suggested to him that this could be done if he would collect a group of important men of the town at some place where they were accustomed to gather, and permit me and a few of my friends (p. 71) to sit in with them as silent observers. The Governor caught the spirit of my request, and arranged for the entertainment. At eight-thirty the following evening, he and a number of his officials called for us (Lord Bryce, Doctors Bliss and Hoskins, Messrs. Peet, Schmavonian, and myself), and led us through the winding darkness of the streets of a real Arabian town.

The Chief of Police and three of his assistants headed our procession. Each was carrying a table lamp instead of the ordinary lantern. Then I followed, with the Governor of Nabulus on one side, and Viscount Bryce on the other, and behind us, the rest of our party, Mahmoud Tewfik Hamid, the recently elected Deputy of the District, and other prominent Arabs.

As we walked through the dark, narrow, little streets bending in every direction, we saw here and there a shoemaker at his work, and a few fruit shops still tempting the few passers-by with their wares. The air we breathed was laden with a pleasing Oriental aroma. At last, we unexpectedly found ourselves in a large square courtyard, in the centre of which was a fountain playing. From this courtyard we were ushered into an illuminated room, about thirty feet square and twenty feet high. Marble divans ran around the sides of this room, covered with beautiful rugs. In the centre were numerous lamps of various kinds, and the walls, too, were hung with rugs. On the divans sat, cross-legged, twenty-four of the most prominent Arabs of the city, smoking, drinking coffee, sipping lemonade, and carrying on an animated conversation. Through the guide, a nephew of the Governor, I requested them to continue their discussions, and to disregard our presence. The guide, in the meantime, informed us as to the pedigree and identity of the Arabs present.

Doctor Bliss interpreted for me. The Arabs were discussing the expected completion of a railroad line to Nabulus, and the effect it would have upon the exports of soap, which was the principal product of the city. They were pleased to know that they could make up larger packages than could be carried by the camels, which were the only means of

transport at the moment, and they were figuring out the economy of this innovation. After concluding their discussion, they turned to us and acted as our hosts. They spoke with great pride of their lineage. They looked indeed, with their intelligent faces and dignified bearing, like men bred of good stock. One of them told me that he had positive evidence at home that his family had lived in Nabulus for more than five hundred years, and another one traced his lineage back to the prophet Mohammed.

The scene reminded one of what you would picture to yourself as the scene of one of the "Thousand and One Arabian Nights." Two sons and two nephews of Ismail Agha Nimr, the owner of the house, were continually flitting about, serving cigarettes, syrup, tea, and coffee. Nothing could have been more gracious or hospitable than their manner toward us.

Our homeward walk was made under the full moon, and was as picturesque as had been the one earlier in the evening. Unconsciously, I could not keep from expecting some genii to jump out at me from one of the little doors of the native houses.

From Tiberias, our route led us to Damascus, where we spent several days exploring this most ancient of cities, and the beautiful surrounding country, and visiting the ruins at Balbek. Thence, we went to Beirut where the Syrian Protestant College is located—one of the finest American institutions in the Near East. Here we visited a very interesting Jewish settlement also. We then journeyed to Mersine, Adena, Tarsus, and Rhodes, returning to Constantinople on May 1st.

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

Direct link: [The World's work: Volume 43](#)

The above is in his book *All in a Life-Time* By **Henry Morgenthau**
In Collaboration with **French Strother**
Illustrations From Photographs
Garden City/New York, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1922 (First Edition)
(pg. 227- 233) link: [All in a life-time](#)

The photos in the World's Work are not in the book *All in a Life-Time*, and the book was published after *The World's Work*. Photos were as mentioned were by Richard Whiting, of which was published in the National Geographic Magazine

Henry Morgenthau (1856 –1946) was a lawyer, businessman and United States ambassador, most famous as the American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Morgenthau,_Sr.

His visit was 1908.