

Reproduced from the Library of the Editor of
www.theSamaritanUpdate.com
Copyright 2011

The Art- Journal
Volume VII
1868
London: VIRTUE & CO.

BOOKS AND BOOK-BINDING IN SYRIA AND PALESTINE.

Part I

(p. 41).....

At Nablus, the ancient Shechem, a slab of stone inscribed with portions of the Decalogue, in Samaritan characters, was built into the minaret of a mosque erected on the site of an ancient Samaritan synagogue, of which the Moslems took possession about five hundred years ago.

The town of Nablus is situated in a beautiful valley between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. The latter is the Holy Mount of the Samaritans, and, according to their version



of the Pentateuch, it was there, and not on Mount Ebal, that the memorial stones were " set up." It is very remarkable that there still lingers in Nablus a little community of Samaritans, numbering not quite two hundred souls, the last remnant of this interesting people; interesting not only historically, but ethnologically. Their version of the "Torah," *i.e.* the Pentateuch, which differs in many points from the Hebrew version, is the only book which they accept as sacred. It is their sole guide and rule of life. The other portions of the Hebrew Scriptures they

regard as forgeries. They still celebrate their sacred festivals " in the mountain where their fathers worshipped."

The Samaritans are a fine race of men; handsome, tall, and strong, and generally shrewd and intelligent, but possessing a rather limited range of ideas. An unmistakable

family likeness pervades the whole community, which is not surprising, as they never intermarry with strangers. It is difficult to define the marks which distinguish them from the Jews, and other Oriental races, but I am sure that I should know a Samaritan anywhere. They generally have oval faces, prominent dark eyes, high foreheads, Assyrian noses, full large lips, and peculiarly large ears. Their houses are all closely clustered together round their synagogue, or "Kinsha," as they commonly call it, though it is sometimes spoken of as "Beit Allah," f. e., House of God. This is a small unadorned vaulted building, of irregular form, having on the south-east side a veiled recess to represent the sanctuary, to which their priests (who are of the tribe of Levi) alone have access.

Here, among their other literary treasures, they preserve with jealous care two very ancient copies of the Pentateuch, one of which is believed by them to have been written in A.M. 2813 by Abishua, the great-grandson of Aaron. As evidence of this, they point

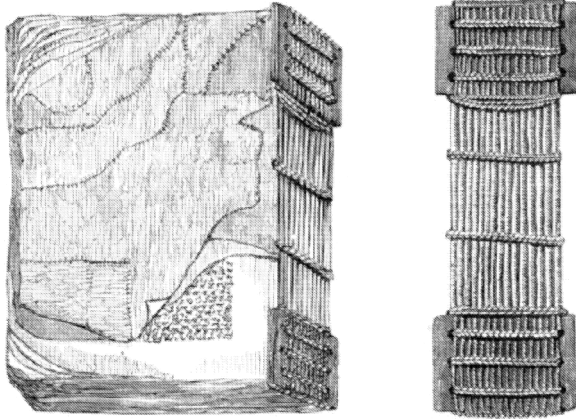


out his name introduced in acrostic form in the text of the book of Deuteronomy. This much-prized volume is exhibited to the congregation once a year by the Chief Priest and his assistant the Ministering Priest. This ceremony takes place on the Day of Atonement, and then all the people, young and old, are permitted to kiss that part of the roll on which the Aaronic blessings are written; the consequence is, that the blessings are by degrees disappearing. Strangers are very rarely permitted to see this copy of the law; but when I was at Nablus, with my brother, in the spring of 1856, Selameh, who was then the Chief Priest, not only allowed us to examine it, but kindly sat down on a mat spread on the stone floor, and held the precious volume while I sketched it and him. He was then a tall, fine-looking old man of about seventy years of age. He wore a loose pale blue cloth robe, lined with crimson silk, and under it a long gown made of yellow and red striped satin, confined by a heavy shawl girdle. His large turban and his flowing beard were quite white. His eyes were dark, and had a peculiarly searching expression: he seemed to be looking through me, rather than at me. He had gained great influence, not only over his own people, but over the credulous of (p. 42) other creeds,

on account of his widely spread reputation for skill in the occult sciences.

His correspondence with Baron de Sacy, in the year 1808, has made his name well known in Europe to the students of ancient literature. He died in 1807, and the sketch reproduced here is probably the only portrait of him in existence. The celebrated roll of the law, which he supported with a rather trembling hand, was in a cylindrical silver gilt case, about two feet and a half long and ten inches in diameter, opening, as a tryptich does, on two sets of hinges. The outside of this case is embossed, and in some parts engraved. On one of the divisions there is a quaint representation of the temple and all its furniture, with several explanatory inscriptions. The other divisions of the cylinder are

ornamented with conventional designs, in *repousse* work.* The globular knobs or *cornua* at the head of the rollers have scrolls and flowers and ears of wheat embossed upon them. The handle of the middle pole is a flat pierced brass disc, very much battered about and seemingly older and of less delicate workmanship than any other part of the case. This disc is almost exactly like some of the perforated and polished metal standards which I have seen, mounted on long staves and carried in processions by dervishes, in Damascus and elsewhere. Sometimes the staves are adorned with embroidered banners, and sometimes only with shreds of green cloth. May not this appendage to the Pentateuch case be an ancient Samaritan



case be an ancient Samaritan standard?

Standards quite as simple in design were used by the ancient Assyrians, as may be seen by reference to the Nimroud marbles. Some of their standards were crescent-shaped, and others were circular discs perforated with various simple forms.

Mr. P. H. Gosse, in his interesting work called "Assyria, restored from her Monuments," says:—

"The paucity and simplicity of the Assyrian standards contrasted with the number and variety of those of Egypt and Rome, in which many sorts of animals, real or fictitious, and other objects, were elevated on the tops of spears, and served as the rallying-points for the divisions of the army to which they were appropriated. Standards and banners are frequently alluded to in the sacred Scriptures, and the tribes of the camp of Israel in the wilderness were distinguished by peculiar signs; but we possess no authentic information as to their forms or devices" (p. 42).

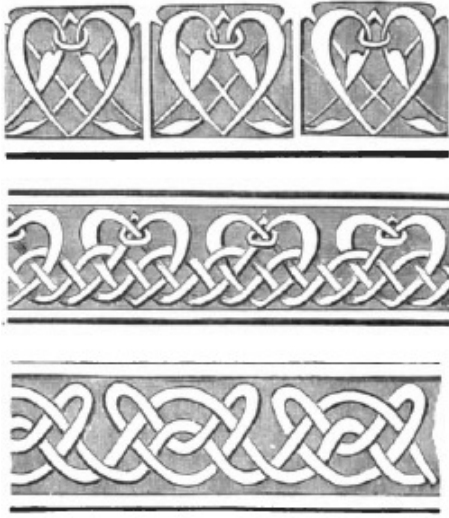
Does the above suggestion throw any light on the subject?

The accompanying illustration represents (two-thirds of the real size) the knob of another roll-case, which Priest Selameh showed to me. This is a very beautiful one, more harmonious and simple in design, and evidently of a later date than the curious old case containing the famous roll of Abishua, to which I must now return. A red satin cover, on which Samaritan inscriptions are exquisitely embroidered in gold, envelopes the treasure. The roll itself is composed of prepared goat-skins, twenty-five inches high and fifteen inches wide. They are very neatly joined together, but in many places they have been torn and rather clumsily repaired with parchment of various qualities. The writing is small and regular, and extends to above one hundred columns. A large proportion of it is too much obliterated to be easily read, and it has altogether a very venerable appearance.

The "volume" alluded to in the Psalms, and the "roll" described in Jeremiah xxxvi. as having been cut to pieces with a knife, and thrown in the fire, were probably of this kind. It was natural that a wandering and pastoral people like the Hebrews should seek some

* Mr. G. Grove made "some imperfect rubbings of this ease in 1861, and from these the authorities at the South Kensington Museum pronounced the work to be Venetian, of the fourteenth or fifteenth century." See the account of his visit to the Samaritans in "Vacation Tourists," 1861.

portable material on which to write, and it was as natural that their flocks should furnish it.



Eumenes, king of Peramus, who reigned from the year B.C. 263 to 241, and who was a great patron of literature, is said to have invented parchment; but the Hebrews long before that time had (if we may depend on the testimony of Josephus) attained to great excellency in preparing the skins of animals for the purpose of writing on them.

Ptolemy the Second, king of Egypt, who died B.C. 246, a contemporary of the abovementioned Eumenes, "was extraordinarily diligent in what concerned learning and the collection of books." He was anxious to procure, for his library, a translation of the Hebrew Laws into the Greek tongue. He accordingly wrote a very courteous letter to

Eleazer, who was at that time the High Priest at Jerusalem, begging him earnestly to send a copy of the Law to Alexandria, and with it some learned men of good character to interpret it. This letter was conveyed to Jerusalem by two of the king's chief officers, men whom the king described in his letter as friends whom he held "in very high esteem." They were accompanied by attendants, bearing magnificent presents for the High Priest, which are fully described by Josephus. They included vessels of gold, and a golden table adorned with precious stones, "to the value of a hundred talents."

"When Eleazer the High Priest had paid due respect to the ambassadors, and had given them presents to be carried to the king, he dismissed them."

Eleazer wrote an answer to the king's letter, and concluded it thus: "We have chosen six elders out of every tribe, whom we have sent, and the law with them. It will be thy part, out of thy piety and justice, to send back the Law when it (p. 43) hath been translated, and to return to us in safety those that bring it. Farewell."

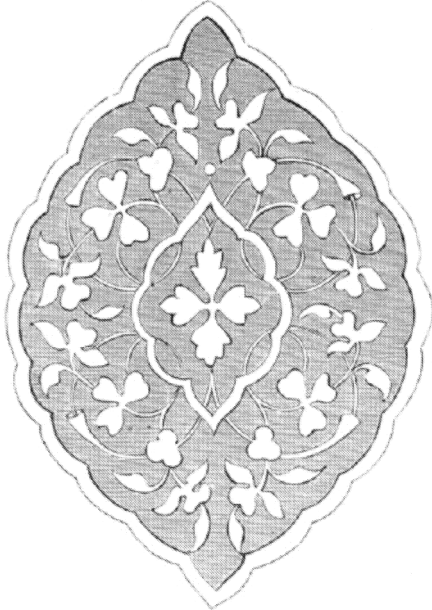
These two remarkable letters are given in full by Josephus. They are models of Oriental courtesy and dignity.

When the ambassadors and the Jewish elders arrived at Alexandria, the King made haste to meet them. "As the elders came in with the presents, which the High Priest had given them to bring to the king, and with the membranes, upon which they had their laws written in golden letters, he put questions to them concerning those books; and when they had taken off the covers wherein they were wrapt up, they showed him the membranes. So the king stood admiring the thinness of those membranes, and the exactness of the junctures, which could not be perceived (so exactly were they connected one with another); and this he did for a considerable time. He then said that he returned them thanks for coming to him, and still greater thanks to him that sent them. He gave orders that they should sup with him, and that they should have excellent lodgings provided for them in the upper part of the city."

In seventy-two days the Jewish elders completed their work, and then they presented to the king a fair copy of their Laws in the Greek tongue.

"The king rejoiced exceedingly, and gave to each one of the elders three garments of the best sort, two talents of gold, and a gold cup." •

Josephus does not inform us what kind of membrane it was, the extreme fineness of which so astonished and delighted King Ptolemy; but we may conclude that it was superior to any that the king was accustomed to see, although it is recorded that he then had in his library twenty times ten thousand books.



I have seen a few fine old copies of the Hebrew Scriptures in synagogues at Jerusalem, written on the finest vellum, and at Hebron, Tiberias, and Damascus, some valuable Hebrew books, both written and printed, are preserved. A written roll of the book of Esther is to be found in almost every Jewish house.

It is the established custom always to read the Law from an unpointed manuscript roll, at the services in the synagogues; but both Jews and Samaritans possess ancient copies of the Law written on skins of parchment and vellum folded in book form, instead of being sewn together.

This mode of folding skins and other materials into quires, and binding them together, is said to have been invented by Eumenes, the learned King of Pergamus, above referred to. This convenient form,

which has now become universal, soon superseded the rolls.

- The oldest and simplest example of bookbinding that I have ever met with, was shown to me by a Samaritan in the spring of the year 1856, and I made two careful drawings of the curious volume, which are here reproduced.

The original was about fifteen inches square, and nearly five inches in thickness. It consisted of fifteen parts or quires of fifteen sheets each, fastened together very securely with strong cord or twist. The leaves had evidently never been pressed, and no glue or paste of any kind had been used, but the back of the book was strengthened by two rather clumsy blocks of polished walnut-tree wood. Each block was pierced with six holes, through which the cords were passed and neatly secured, as the illustrations will show. I was surprised to find that the mode of finishing off the edges, at the top and bottom of the back of the book, very nearly resembled the method now in use. The wood and the cord had worn wonderfully well, but the unprotected outer leaves of this curious old volume had been torn and patched repeatedly.

I may as well remind my readers that, as the Samaritans write like the Hebrews, from right to left, that which appears in my sketch to be the end of the volume is really the commencement of it.

The destruction of the outer leaves of books bound in this incomplete way, naturally suggested the use of side covers and leather cases to protect valuable manuscripts.

• See the 2nd chapter of the 12th book of "The Antiquities of the Jews," by Flavins Josephus.

The Arabic word for a bookbinder, *majild*, implies that he binds "with leather," and in this material, in various colours, I have seen, in private libraries at Damascus, some exquisitely beautiful book-covers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The three borders on this page are from the leather covers of Arabic manuscripts of the sixteenth century, and are probably of Damascus work; they are certainly oriental.

The large centre ornament here engraved is a full-sized drawing of a design on the brown leather cover of a very interesting manuscript belonging to my brother, H.M. Consul at Damascus. It is a religious book of the Druses, written in 1560. It contains their history of the creation of the world and of mankind; a series of curious criticisms on the inconsistencies of Mohammedanism and Christianity; and an exposition and declaration of the Unitarian creed of the Druses. Some portions of this volume are obscure, and could probably only be understood by the initiated; but it appears to me, on the whole, to be the most interesting account of the Druse religion that has ever fallen into the hands of a non-Druse. It is fortunately in an excellent state of preservation. In time of war, the Druses frequently destroy sacred books, if they cannot conceal them.

MARY ELIZA ROGERS.

(To be continued.)

Comments on this section from the Editor of theSamaritanUpdate.com

This reference is located as #4082 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