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**Modern Observation of the Levitical Passover Ancient Shechem—
How the Feast is Prepared**

In the town of Nablus (the ancient Shechem), which lies on the neck of land between the Mountain of Cursing and the Mountain of Blessing, that is to say between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, lives at the present day a set of people absolutely unique in the world. Originally many in number there remain now but a few score of them. One of them it was who talked with the Man of Nazareth as he sat on the well of their forefather Jacob, that hot day close on 2,000 years ago. The sect of the Samaritans have retained the old forms and ceremonies of religion unchanged from the time of Moses and Aaron, and from the latter the present high priest, by name, Jacob Aaron, claims lineal descent. Among the ancient religious ceremonies still observed among them is that of the Feast of the Passover, which they keep in strict accordance with the law of Moses, unlike their brethren the Jews, who have in many ways modernized that solemn occasion.



The first feast of the Passover was ordered to be slain at sunset and eaten at midnight, and this is the rule observed by the Samaritans year by year; with the exception of this year, when it was slain at noon and eaten at sunset. The reason was this. In accordance with their reckoning the feast fell this year on a Friday (our Good Friday), and in order to obey both commands, namely to burn anything that might be left over, with fire, and to extinguish all fires before Saturday (the Sabbath), it was necessary to eat the Passover, burn the remains, and extinguish the fire before midnight.

So after attending an Arabic service in the Protestant Church we hurried up Mount Gerizim, near the top of which the tents of the Samaritans were pitched, and arrived just in time to be present at the first ceremony of the day, namely the prayers conducted by the high priest before the slaughter of the lambs.

The service began at twelve o'clock, and was held in the open air on a flat, circular plot of ground surrounded by stones loosely piled together a few feet high; inside the enclosures none but Samaritans were allowed to stand, and round the circle were stationed Turkish soldiers to insure the absence of outsiders. In front of the circle stood the High Priest, clothed in a long loose green silk robe, and wearing on his breast a gold medal presented him by the community on his completion of forty years' service in that capacity. On his head he wore the ordinary tarboosh of the country with a white cloth bound round it turban fashion. Behind him stood the male Samaritans each wearing a long white garment over his ordinary clothes, put on expressly for the prayer hour only.

The postures during prayer are varied, sometimes standing, sometimes kneeling, and sometimes entire prostration, with the forehead touching the ground. The language used is rabbinical Hebrew and all the prayers are chanted in a monotone, at first softly but at times swelling out into a perfect roar of sound. Part of the service is in the form of responses by the High Priest and the community. Among the praying figures browsed the seven lambs appointed for the slaughter. The last prayer was said in Arabic, and was for the Sultan Abdul Hamid Khan; a very beautiful prayer it was.

Behind the prayer circle there was a long, deep, square trench dug in the ground. In this a fire was burning, and over it at one end of the trench were two huge cauldrons containing boiling water. Beside the trench and distant from it about three or four yards, another deep pit had been dug; it was perhaps eight to ten feet in circumference and six feet deep, and was lined with stones. In it a fierce fire had been kept burning for some five or six hours.

Prayers over, the sheep were caught and hustled and bustled about till they were brought to the edge of the trench in which was the fire. They were held there by young men while several more prayers were chanted, and then amidst much shouting the two butchers went round and killed the lambs over the fire in order that the blood might run into it and be burned. In a few seconds all was over and the lambs with their throats cut lay in a row.

It seemed to be part of the ceremony to dabble in the blood, and some fathers whom I saw had put their babies' fingers in the warm blood and then dabbed their faces with it. The act of slaughter is exceedingly quick, being done at one gash as the knife must not be brought back; the larynx is severed in order that the animal may not make any sound, if it did it would be disqualified. When all are killed an examination takes place to insure their having been properly slain in accordance with the law and if, as in this case, it is satisfactory, boiling water from the cauldrons is poured over the carcasses to enable the hair to be pulled off as they are not skinned. The carcasses are then slung on



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Preparing for the Passover.
The carcasses are slung on poles held on two men's shoulders and opened up and cleaned. The right shoulder, together with liver and heart and all entrails, are burned on a grating placed over the fire in the trench.

poles held on two men's shoulders and opened up and cleaned. The right shoulder, together with the liver and heart and all entrails, are burned on a grating placed over the fire in the trench. As there were only two butchers among the Samaritans this year, this process took some little time; each lamb (p. 416) when finished had a pole thrust straight through it, and was then laid on a grating made of branches of trees and well salted. When all the lambs were finished and laid there, further prayers were said over them. The oven or pit was now heated again and flames belched from its mouth. Seven stalwart young men seized the seven spits and stood round the edge till the flames subsided somewhat, and at a given signal from the High Priest they simultaneously plunged the lambs into the furnace; the grating was then placed on the top of the oven with a covering of grass and finally a thick layer of mud was patted down on the top to keep all air from penetrating. This closed the mouth of the oven, and the first of the ceremonies of the day.

We were then invited into the tent of the High Priest and were offered Passover bread, and cheese, and coffee and lemonade were handed around. As we sat talking to him and his brother and sons, he brought out at our request the old copy of the Pentateuch, which

is said to be in the handwriting of Abiathar, the son of Phineas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, and there is little doubt that it actually is so. I believe the photograph I am able to send is, if not unique, at any rate one of the very few which exist of this wonderful old roll of manuscript.

We asked the High Priest who the Samaritans are descended from and he told us the following interesting facts about them:

After the Assyrians had carried away into captivity part of the population of the Kingdom of Israel, the country they left was gradually colonized by foreigners, who intermingled with the people of Samaria. The population thus acquired a mixed character, and then the original inhabitants returned after the captivity. There was a marked difference between them and the Samaritans. The Jews refused to hold any intercourse with them, and refused their aid in building the walls and temple in Jerusalem. They even refused to let them participate in their worship. Eventually under the leadership of a certain Sanballat the Samaritans built a city and Sanctuary of their own on the top of Mount Gerizim; the ruins of which we could see from the tent where we sat. From that time the town of Shechem (Nablous) rose in importance, as it lay at the foot of the mountain, and Samaria declined. Conflicts between the Samaritans and the Jews were many, and during the time of the Romans many of the former were killed. Their numbers are steadily decreasing; at the present time they do not number more than 200. Thus at the Passover seven lambs were sufficient for all who could partake of it.

As sunset draws near a crowd again collects round the closed oven, waiting for it to be opened. Half an hour before the sun actually set this was done and the roasted scraps were fetched from the floor of the oven by men who jumped down and picked up a few scraps at a time. The morsels were placed in six large rush baskets; these were then placed in the center of the praying ground. The High Priest took his place as before, but this time he laid beside him on the ground, a pair of shoes, an ebony walking stick, inlaid with silver, and a towel; each man did the same with the walking stick, a towel or handkerchief and his shoes. A long form of prayer was again gone through which ended just after sunset. As they rose after the final prostration each man girded his loins with the towel, grasped the staff in his hand, slipped his feet into the shoes and stood around the baskets from which he seized morsels and ate them, together with small sandwiches of unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

After the first few mouthfuls had been eaten in the open, baskets were carried away to the tents where women joined in finishing the meal.

We saluted the High Priest once more and took our departure down the mountain, having witnessed one of the most ancient and unique ceremonies in the world, which carried us back in thought many thousands of years to the days of Moses and the flight from Egypt.

Comments on this section from the Editor of theSamaritanUpdate.com

This reference is not known to be 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