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**THE CRADLE OF CHRISTIANITY:  
CHAPTERS ON MODERN PALESTINE  
BY THE REV. D. M. ROSS, M.A.  
HODDER AND STOUGHTON, 27, PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON:  
MDCCCXCI (1891)**

(Page 185b) 3. THE SAMARITANS

Almost in the heart of Palestine there is one spot whose beauty never fails to charm the traveler- the short narrow valley between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, in which is situated the modern town of Nablous (Shechem) with its 13,000 inhabitants. The secret of the beauty of the Vale of Shechem is the abundance of its waters. There are several copious springs in the hillsides whose waters are led off by aqueducts to create the gardens and orchards which surround the town. The rich foliage of the trees- figs, mulberries, apricots, walnuts, quinces, pomegranates, vines, and olives- forms a charming contrast to the somber bareness of the upper slopes of Ebal and Gerizim.

Where the narrow Vale of Shechem opens out into (page 186) the green corn-plain of Maknah, about two miles east of Nablous, the traveler visits one of the most interesting spots in the whole of Palestine- Jacob's Well.....

..... (page 187) .....

Full of the thoughts awakened by the reading of the narrative in the fourth chapter of John's Gospel, and by our inspection of the well which figures so prominently in that narrative, we rode up to our camping ground amongst the olive trees on the slope above the town of Nablous. We had no sooner got out of the saddle and drunk our afternoon cup of tea, than we were waited upon by Jacob Shellaby, the *Shekh* (chief) of the descendants of the people to whom belonged the woman of Samaria who held the memorable interview with our Lord. But before going farther with the narrative of our experiences in Nablous, it will be necessary to give a historical note about the Samaritans. (page 188)

In the time of our Lord the Samaritans occupied parts of the central district of Palestine between the Plain of Esdraelon and Judaea, and must have numbered many thousands. The feud between the Samaritans and Jews was fiercer than that between Romanists and Orangemen in Ireland. The Jews of Jerusalem could think of nothing more contemptuous to say to Christ than this: "Thou art a Samaritan." The feud was of old standing, dating back to the years succeeding the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon and the erection of the second temple towards the close of the sixth century B.C. When the Assyrians had subdued the northern kingdom at the close of the eighth century B.C., many of the Israelites were taken captives to Assyria, but a considerable proportion of the population was left on the soil. The remanent Israelites were afterwards joined by colonists from various districts of the Assyrian empire, who had to be instructed in the religion of Jehovah. The succeeding generations of the Israelites lost their purity of blood and of religion through intermarriage with these colonists, and may have seemed to the returning Jewish exiles to be a degenerate race. The Jews of Jerusalem refused to grant the request of the inhabitants of Samaria (Samaritans) to be associated with them in the rebuilding of

the temple- the beginning of the embittered relations between the two communities of Jehovah-worshippers which we find reflected in the Gospels. Some time in the fourth century B.C. the Samaritans erected on (page 189) Mount Gerizim a temple of their own, which was destroyed by one of the Maccabees two hundred years afterwards. Like the Sadducees, they acknowledged the authority only of the five books of Moses, and cut themselves off from the progressive element of the Jewish religion, represented by the prophets\* After the empire became Christian under Constantine, the Samaritans came into frequent conflict with the imperial government, and were reduced in numbers by war and persecution. In the middle ages we hear little about them. A century or two ago there were communities of Samaritans at Damascus, Jaffa, Gaza, and Cairo; but almost since the beginning of the century included. They are a curious fragment of a nation drifted down the stream of time from the far-off past- the only known survivors of the ten tribes which formed the northern kingdom of Israel.

To return to our narrative. The bazaars in Nablous were interesting; so was the fine Crusader Church, now turned into a mosque. But what interested us (p.190) most was a tiny building in the south-east quarter of the town, reached through unspeakably filthy lanes. This was the Samaritan synagogue, to which we were conducted by Jacob Shellaby. Jacob is a man of commanding presence, and can speak English well. It was he who in his boyhood was let down by Dr. John Wilson to the bottom of Jacob's Well, and recovered Dr. Andrew Bonar's Bible, which had accidentally fallen in three or four years before. He had many questions to ask about Dr. Wilson, Dr. Bonar, Dean Stanley, and Canon Liddon, all of whom he had met, ether in Palestine or in Europe. He was a communicative guide. We were not quite sure whether he was equally trustworthy. + The synagogue is a mean whitewashed building. In the enclosed court in front of it, the boys and girls of the community were being taught by their schoolmaster. They were sitting cross-legged on mats, and were sheltered from the sun by an arched roof thrown over part of the court. They were afflicted with no shyness in the presence of visitors. They looked upon our visit as an agreeable interruption to their work of writing Arabic words on a tin slate with pen and ink. They sang us a Samaritan hymn, with a good deal of rollicking hilarity. Our guide informed us that they had a lesson from the New Testament (p. 191) every day as part of their ordinary school work. The two or three dozen bits of humanity gathered together in that tiny court were playful enough; they were not burdened with the thought of their importance for the continued existence of the Samaritan race.

Before we could enter the synagogue itself we had to divest ourselves of leggings and boots. There is standing room inside for two or three hundred persons. The stone floor is covered with mats, the walls are bare, and there are no seats. A part of the building is reserved for women, and is raised a foot above the level of the rest of the floor. Over one end a curtain is drawn, behind which are kept the sacred books. The high priest, a young man of strikingly handsome appearance, with dark brown lustrous eyes and peach-bloom complexion, and clothed in white robe and crimson turban, drew aside the curtain and produced his treasures for our inspection. These consist of several copies of the Samaritan Pentateuch, each of which is written on one continuous piece of parchment rolled round two cylinders. They are written in the early Hebrew characters, which were displaced by the modern characters centuries before the time of Christ.

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\* Those who are curious to know how the Samaritans with their jealousy of the Jews of the south came to accept Ezra's Pentateuch and accord it so supreme a place in their religion, may consult Professor Robertson Smith's article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol *xxi.*, p. 224.

+ Major Conder relates that Jacob had explained to him how he prepared ancient (!) MSS. For sale to scholarly tourists: "Tent Work in Palestine," vol. I., p 35.

The oldest and most valuable roll is enclosed in a case of embossed silver, with representations of various parts of the temple furniture, such as the table of shew-bread and the ark. The Samaritans say that it was written by Abishua, the (p.192) grandson of Aaron. If that story were true, modern theories of the composition of the Pentateuch would be quickly disposed of; but even Christian scholars allow that the MS. May be almost as old as the Christian era. It is prized by Hebrew scholars for the light it throws upon the history of the Hebrew text of the Pentateuch. This ancient roll is treated almost as a fetish by the Samaritans. Only once a year- on the Day of Atonement- is it shown to the congregation. The part of the MS. Which was unrolled for our inspection was the passage in Numbers containing the old Hebrew blessing: "The Lord bless thee and keep thee." It was more faded than the rest through the kisses bestowed upon it by the worshippers, when the roll is produced upon it by the worshippers, when the roll is produced one a year for their adoration. Now, as in the time of Chris, the Pentateuch is the only part of the Old Testament which the Samaritans acknowledge to be Divinely authoritative. And with a conservatism which out-does the narrowest conservatism of the West, they cling to the five books of Moses as the last and only Divine word which has been spoken to man.

After we had inspected the synagogue and the famous roll, -or rather, rolls, for three were produced for our inspection, -our guide conducted us to his private house, where he offered for sale a variety of Samaritan liturgies in MS. His grandson read to us from an Arabic New Testament the story of Chris's interview with that woman of Samaria who (p.193) has invested her race with a peculiar interest for Christians. We were assured by Jacob Shellaby that he is himself secretly a Christian, and that he is only waiting for the adherence of the rest of the community to the Christian faith, to declare himself openly. On our repeating what we had been told to a German missionary in Nablous, he asked us if Jacob's story had had the effect of increasing our bakshish, and on our answering in the affirmative, he contented himself with a shrug of the shoulders. The Samaritans profit by the interest of Christian travelers in themselves and their MSS.

Our guide accompanied us to the summit of Gerizim, which is something more than 1000 feet above the level of the town and 2855 feet above the level of the sea. For the first ten minutes of the ascent we were within sound of the rush of rivulets and aqueducts, and in the neighbourhood of richly foliaged fruit trees. Then we had half an hour's steep climb on the stony hillside, till we reached the broad plateau. On the highest part of the mountain there are the ruins of a fortress and a church of the time of Justinian. Some pieces of smooth rock were pointed out as the site of the Samaritan temple, and our guide had stories to tell us of twelve stones which belonged to Joshua's altar,\* and of the spot where Abraham was on the point of offering up Isaac. But the most interesting (p.194) thing to be seen on Mount Gerizim is the place where the Samaritan Passover is celebrated, on a bit of level grassy ground one or two hundred feet lower than the summit. That ceremony is the one survival in the world of the elaborate sacrificial system of the Old Testament. Unfortunately we were a couple of weeks too early for witnessing the ceremony, but with the help of descriptions<sup>+</sup> we had read and Shellaby's graphic explanations we were able to picture the scene. By the middle of the month of Nisan all the Samaritans are encamped in white tents on the grassy ground I have spoken of. Towards evening on the fourteenth day of the month, twelve men clad in white surplices chant the story of the Exodus from Egypt, and recite appropriate prayers. As soon as the sun has dipped below the Mediterranean, which is just visible in the far distance, the high priest repeats in a loud voice the verse, "And the whole assembly of

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\* Joshua xii. 30-32. For Ebal the Samaritan Pentateuch reads Gerizim.

<sup>+</sup> Dean Stanley, "Jewish Church," vol. i., p. 438, and Professor Socin, in Baedeker.

the congregation shall kill it in the evening” (Exod. Xii.6). Men and boys, robed in white, lay hold of the seven unblemished lambs standing near, and draw the knife across their throats. Fathers dip their forefingers in the warm blood of the lambs and draw a line on the children’s faces from the top of the forehead to the point of the nose. The carcasses of the animals are hung up in a deep trench, dug in the ground to serve as a roasting oven. (p.195) Bundles of twigs are placed over the mouth of the trench and then covered with turf. In another part of the ground there is another trench, in which the wool and entrails of the lambs are burned. Reading of the Pentateuch goes on till midnight, when the lambs are ready to be eaten. The men partake of the feast in a crouching attitude and with staves in their hands. After the feast is over the time is spent in prayer and the reading of the Pentateuch.

Our few hours’ intercourse with the Samaritans stirred many thoughts. We had had evidence of their superstitious reverence for the letter of Scripture, and we had seen the spot where they worshipped God by bloody sacrifices. And from the summit of Gerizim- the holy place of the Samaritan externalism and conservatism- we could see in the glorious light of that bright and breezy afternoon the very spot on which had been uttered the battle-cry of spirituality, freedom, and progress in religion: “Woman, believe Me, the hour cometh when ye shall neither in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem worship the Father. God is a Spirit, and they worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.”.....

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

As like most travel books the words are the opinion of the author. It is always interesting to see how writers take the information of bad sources to complete their work. On some of those mentioned:

REV. D. M. ROSS, is **DR. DAVID MORISON ROSS** (1852- ?) of Westbourne Church,

**Henry Parry Liddon** (1829-1890) was an English theologian. In 1870 he was made canon of St Paul’s Cathedral, London. In 1882 he resigned his professorship and traveled in Palestine and Egypt. Canon HP Liddon bought six manuscripts in Palestine in 1886 and presented them in 1890 to **Oxford, Keble College.**

**Major Conder** is **Claude Reignier Conder** (1848-1910) He wrote *Tent Work in Palestine* and *Syrian Stone-Lore; Or, the Monumental History of Palestine*. Member of Palestine Exploration Fund.

On a side note: Conder is one of the many proposed candidates for the [Jack the Ripper](#) murders.

Dean Stanley is **Arthur Penrhyn Stanley**, (1815–1881) Dean of Westminster, he wrote *LECTURES ON THE HISTORY OF THE JEWISH CHURCH*

**Dr. Albert Socin**, (1862-1899) Professor of Oriental Languages at **Bale** was the chief writer of *the Handbook for Palestine and Syria*, edited by **Kael Baedeker**, also the publisher. Socin was appointed in 1890 to Leipzig, University of Tübingen. Socin is one of the founders of the German Palestine Society, and 1878-1885, the annual Scientific report. Albert died in Leipzig.