

These views are not necessarily the views of the Samaritan-Israelites. We post the articles from Scholars and individuals for their significance in relation to Samaritan studies.)

From Sinai To Shechem

By Edward L. Wilson.

(*The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, November 1888 to 1889,
The Century Co., New York, T.Fisher Union, London. Vol XXXVII New Series Vol. XV)

Page 206d-208 (This is only a section the article)

The neighboring highways are about the roughest over which any one traveling in Palestine ever rode a horse. Indeed, sometimes the traveler is obliged to dismount to help and encourage his poor bewildered horse to follow him. The rougher climbs over, however, the reminder of the journey to Shechem is one of the most varied and enjoyable in all the land. Instead of the small, compressed, ground-down sort of appearance which generally pervades southern Palestine, every prospect seems to please. Thriving olive groves, rich grain-fields, myriads of gaudy flowers, hills covered with growing crops, and the long inclines, terraced now with stone walls, now by the natural formation of the rock, vary the prospect. Such is the outlook presented in all directions, except on the left, towards Mount Gerizim, around the shoulder of which runs the road. Farmers are seen plowing, the women are plucking the tares from the wheat, and the children are helping. Ascending and descending, every foot of the way from Shiloh to Shechem shows the care and attention of an industrious people. Perhaps it is the fresher air that gives them more vigor than have those who inhabit the white chalk-hills and the almost bare valleys of the south country. Even the flowers look fresher, newer, and happier. Every step taken by the horses starts a gossipy wagging of heads and a widening of eyes among the daises which line the narrow roadway. A glorious surprise comes when the last ascent previous to Gerizim itself is reached. At the (page 207) right, spreading eastward for nearly a mile and a half and from north to south for seven miles or more, is a glorious valley, broken up into sections of green and gold and pink, with not a line of fence or wall to disturb it, and only the groves of olives, the trunks of which, twisted and braided together, relieve the uniformity of the expanse. Away over on its eastern side is a line of hills, as dark as a row of olive trees. On the left Gerizim and Ebal stand out majestically against the blue sky, with the wide vale between them, in the midst of which lies Shechem. Then, far in the north-west, rising like a great white screen, as though outstretched for the whole grand evening spectacle to be projected upon it, is snowy Mount Hermon. The whole populace of the town of Hawara, located on the steep incline of Gerizim, comes out to witness the panorama. But all the novelty they see is the stranger; all the music they hear comes from the bells on the necks of the luggage mules. Soon after this village is passed the road forks. At the right one of the best roads in Palestine leads to Jacob's Well. A shorter cut to the vale of Shechem is made by keeping to the left, but it is by no means so picturesque as the other. For the best view, Shechem should be approached from the south, and just at the close of day. Then the long, wide shadows of Mount Gerizim, projected upon the plain, are welcomed by the husbandman who has been toiling all day under the cloudless sky. The first lowering of the temperature is the signal for the flocks to break away from their flower-besprinkled pasture and to turn themselves towards their folds; the men and women, often laden with some product of the field, also turn homeward. A great finger seems to have been placed across the lips of nature, so still and so quiet all becomes with the departure of the sun and the advance of the twilight. It must have been at that same hour when "all the congregation of Israel, with the women and the little ones, and the strangers that were conversant among them," congregated, "half of them over against Mount Gerizim, and half of them over against Mount Ebal," while Joshua read all the words of the law, the blessings and the cursings. And it must have been so silent, too, when a quarter of a century took place, and Joshua "set them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem."

It is a strange experience to pass through the lovely vale of Shechem and, gazing at Ebal on the right and at Gerizim on the left, to think of how many noted people journeyed likewise long before Christ came. The list of sojourners and travelers includes Abraham, Jacob, Simeon, Levi, Joseph (buried here), Joshua, Abimelech, and Rehoboam. Jesus was a visitor here, and Shechem was the birthplace of Justin Martyr. The Roman scepter, the Christian cross, and the crescent of Islam have held sway in Shechem. The garrison whose bugle awakens the echoes of Ebal and Gerizim today recalls memories of blessing and cursing, and with American rifles, though under command of Ottoman officers, keeps peace among the turbulent people. Shechem is a cosmopolitan place, and some of her people represent the oldest races. For example, about all the Samaritans that are left congregate there. Within the whitewashed walls of their tiny synagogue is the inscribed "original" of their Pentateuch. This document varies in many particulars from the Pentateuch of the Jews, and is under careful watch. They hold that it was written by Abishua, the son of Phineas, the son of Eleazer, the son of Aaron. After the proper persuasion of backsheesh, he consented to exhibit the antique document and to stand beside it in the synagogue court while its photograph was made. Its great silver case and the rods of the scroll make it very heavy, so that an assistant was required to help the priest carry it. After placing it upon a

chair, they vary carefully unfolded the embroidered scarf of crimson satin which covered it, and thus displayed the engraved silver case. In time the doors of this were thrown open, and the precious document was made visible. It was rolled like a Jewish scroll upon two metal rods that are much longer than the scroll. These rods protrude at each end for the protection of the parchment. The letters are Samaritan, but they are written in the Hebrew language. The engraved scenes upon the case are said to represent the ground plan of the Tabernacle. In their ceremonies they follow the injunctions of Exodus xxviii. and Leviticus viii. Once a year the Samaritans hold their religious feasts upon the summit of Mount Gerizim, "the mountain of blessing." It is their Moriah. The men, as a rule, are fine looking, pleasant in manners, and superior to the average Syrian. The women are lighter in color than their sisters in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, and seem to be of a very different race. Their hair is black and wavy, and their dress is unlike that of the Mohammedans and Jews. They seem to be happy and are devoted to their creed. Their strange little family numbers less than two hundred.

The location of Shechem is delightful. The whole vale, running east and west, is alive with gushing cascades and bounding streams, fed partly by the twin mountains Ebal, on the north and Gerizim, on the south. Luxuriant olive groves and fig orchards, interspersed with (page 208) fruit trees of various kinds, are dotted hither and thither, everywhere. But the city itself is not so attractive. Many of its streets are cavern-like, for they run under houses. They would afford an excellent opportunity for the trial of some rapid-transit scheme, were it not that they are so narrow and continually thronged with the noisy, hurrying multitude. The better view of life is had from the housetops. They are reached from the streets by stone stairways. There the people take their leisure, do a great deal of their trading and much of their work. Thus the houses seem to be, as indeed many are, hoisted a story or two in the air. There is no regularity of style about them, and it is all one's life is worth to try to find the way among them without a guide and a torch. Only from a height can the real beauties of Shechem be seen. Then the broad domes of the mosques and their graceful minarets stand out finely; the variety of houses shows forth and the open streets are indicated, first by the sound which comes up from the multitude, and then by the gay bazaars which line them. Fine views are had from "Jacob's Tower," a picturesque structure in the south-west corner of the town. It is said to have been the home of the patriarch whence he sent Joseph to Dothan to look after his recreant brethren. Strangely enough, amidst all the buzz and noise of the town comes the clatter of the cotton-gin, for Shechem is the great cotton center of Palestine. It is also headquarters for the best olive-oil soap. Two miles down the vale is the well of Jacob where the interview between Christ and the Samaritan woman took place. Directly north, and almost in a line with the well, close to the base of Ebal, is the tomb of Joseph. All along the side of this mountain, when the new covenant was made, Joshua mustered the tribes of Reuben and Gad, of Asher and Zebulun, of Dan and Naphtali. On the other side, against Gerizim, the tribes of Simeon and Levi, of Judah and Issachar, of Joseph and Benjamin were gathered. As one stands looking from the top of Jacob's Tower the present seems to vanish and the past arises again with a strange reality. Not a single feature of nature appears to have been touched out by the wizard pencil of time. Every light and every shade is accentuated by the long perspective of history. The pages recorded here must face those of Sinai. The vale of Shechem is the consonant of the plain of Er raba. Somewhere and somehow, running through the intervening pages, are the threads we have tried to gather up and follow, guided by the entanglements of tradition and persuaded by the reasonings of the modern explorer. He sounds of idolatry were left at Aaron's Hill, and the blast of the trumpets cheered the desolation of Wady Sheik; then the departing hosts followed across the wilderness, where the manna and the quail were provided, through the inclosure of Hazeroth to the wondering-place of Kadesh-Barnea, where the provision of good water was followed by the long tarrying. On they went until, climbing the flinty ridges of the border, the place was reached where denuded nature grew more consistent and the long inclines were found clothed with lovely flowers. There the land, "with milk and honey blest," was seen as the spies had seen it. On and on, by the way of the desert wilds again, to Nebo, to the sacred river, and across it to where all intrusion of barrenness ceased and the Promised Land was reached. Just so we may see it to-day.