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(p.505) From Good Words. THE SAMARITAN PASSOVER.

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IN the spring of last year we heard from a German missionary at Gaza that a slight alteration in our plan of journey would enable us to see the Samaritan Passover. One of the advantages of travelling in Palestine with a small party is that dates and routes can easily be modified. There were only two of us, and we were of one mind in thinking that that ancient ceremonial would be a natural sequel to our impressions of Mount Sinai and the Desert. So it was that, on the 9th of April, we pitched our tents in the Valley of Shechem, outside the town of Nablus, and within a mile of Jacob's Well.

The camping-ground was chosen by our clever dragoman, Joseph Raad, in order that we might visit the Well frequently during the two days which would pass before the feast. In spite of the telegraph-post by which it is surmounted, and some unseemly surroundings, there are few sites in the Holy Land which cast such a flood of light upon the Gospel narrative. Little companies of tired travellers making their way from Galilee to Jerusalem and halting by the roadside for noonday rest, solitary women stepping gracefully with pitcher on head from the village of Sychar (Ascar), and the broad expanse of waving corn ripening into the harvest, give a living reality to the fourth chapter of St. John. But no local feature is more suggestive than the close proximity of Mount Gerizim, which rises into a graceful dome one thousand feet above the Well. The woman of Sychar had only to lift her eyes when she said, "Our fathers worshipped *in this mountain*." The hilltop, which had been crowned by an imposing and elaborate building until the days of John Hyrcanus, was almost within sound of the voice of Jesus when he replied, "The hour cometh when ye shall neither in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem worship the Father." You look up to the mountain, and all is bare; your field-glass shows you a few broken and half buried stones. The time has come; there is no worship of the Father there, and you remember how the Temple at Jerusalem is in the hands of those who reckon it a sin to call God "Father." Yet we could dimly descry preparations for such worship of God as still lingers on that mountain.

Most of the towns of Palestine, although ugly and mean in themselves, are "beautiful for situation." But there is no finer site than that of Nablus, the ancient Shechem. It stands in a deep valley, which might almost be called a glen, with Mounl Ebal and Mount Gerizim

towering above as northern and southern sentinels. The valley is watered by more than eighty copious streams, and is fertile in such fruit-trees as Jotham named in his parable. The air is fresh and bright, while the shadows cast by the Hill of Blessing and the Hill of Cursing give that variety of color which one misses in many of the most beautiful parts of the Holy Land. The town itself is prosperous, with some twenty thousand inhabitants, occupied in agriculture, and the manufacture of soap and oil. Most of them are Mahommedans. A single non-resident Greek priest supplies the wants of the Eastern Christians, and at the Protestant Church, which belongs to the Church Missionary Society, there is only a handful of worshippers. But the part of the population about which we were most anxious to learn was the Samaritan community. Although trading quite freely with their neighbors, they live entirely by themselves. Their quarter of the town was empty except for a few sick folk and the very smallest babies. The rest of the tribe had gone to the top of Mount Gerizim five or six days before. Their synagogue was closed, and they had taken with them their most precious treasure — the famous ancient copy of the Pentateuch, which is their Bible, their *magna charta*, their ark, their altar, their holy of holies.

In order to make what follows intelligible, a few words must be said about the history of this astonishing people.

(p.506) When the Jews returned from the Captivity, there appeared a schism of which it is hard to trace the origin. It arose partly from intermarriage between the Jews and the non-Jewish inhabitants, partly from the suspension of regular religious instruction, and partly from a dispute about the rebuilding of Jerusalem. This is not the place to discuss the matter fully. It must be enough to say that thereafter, side by side with the Established or State Church of the Jews, there existed a large and prosperous body of Dissenters or Nonconformists, who boasted, as Dissenting Churches often do, that they preserved the original religion in its purest form. On the top of Mount Gerizim they built a temple of their own and invested it with all the sanctity of David's Temple. Although it was probably against their will at first that they did not worship at Jerusalem, they made a virtue of their necessity, and declared that their worship alone was authentic and inspired. They asserted that the Jewish edition of the five books of Moses had been tampered with, while they entire' rejected the historical books and the prophets. They believed in the unity of God and in his special favor towards Israel. They circumcised their children on the eighth day. They observed the Sabbath and the annual Jewish festivals. They held a certain faith in future rewards and punishments, although some authorities maintain that, like the Sadducees, they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Further, they believed that God would raise up a prophet like unto Moses. They did not call him the Messiah, but the Restorer and the Guide; yet they said that his name would begin with the letter M. After making various important disclosures, he would die and be buried beside Joseph in the Valley of Shechem. Seven thousand years thereafter the world would come to an end.

Keen and bitter was the animosity between Samaritan and Jew. In no way did Jesus give greater offence than by speaking kind words about Samaritans. Indeed, the worst which his own enemies could say about him was that he was a Samaritan and had a devil. In

spite of the Evangelist's preaching, they resisted Christianity firmly, and when the Roman Empire became Christian they came into violent collision with it, sometimes siding with the Jews, sometimes attacking them. In the sixth century, they rose against the Christians, and massacred them by thousands, bringing down upon themselves a stroke of vengeance from which they have never recovered. But meanwhile they had spread not only over Palestine, but into Egypt, and they actually had a synagogue in Rome. In the twelfth century there were about a thousand of them in Nablus, but these were gradually dwindling away. Until the seventeenth century they had synagogues in Cairo and Damascus; these disappeared. Seventy years ago they had a synagogue at Gaza; now that has disappeared, and the only remnant is forty or fifty families, numbering some say one hundred and thirty-five, some one hundred and fifty-two, some one hundred and seventy souls, who cling to their historical capital. Probably, according to the laws of population, they must ultimately disappear; but during the last seventy years their number has scarcely changed. At present the males outnumber the females, and several of the young men are waiting the growth of wives. They still hold rigidly and literally to their old articles of belief. Even as an example of religious persistency they are a marvel; but the marvel becomes something more than marvellous when we consider whence they derive the religion to which they cling so tenaciously. It is the religion of the Books of Moses separated from the religion of the rest of the Bible.

On Monday, the 11th of April, we mounted our horses and faced the steep hillside immediately behind Nablus. A stiff half-hour's climb brought us to the ridge or backbone of Mount Gerizim, and then we had another half-hour's gradual ascent along an irregular (p. 507) plateau. When within seven or eight minutes' walk of the actual summit, we came within sight of the smooth piece of grass where the rite is celebrated. It is in a slight depression, not quite on the ridge, selected, no doubt, for shelter's sake. Yet it stands out free and open to the sky, commanding the whole country. The first sight which caught the eye was a huge column of smoke, rising unbroken into the breathless blue from a large fire which a dozen men in white linen dresses were carefully nursing. Within a few yards the tents of the tribe, twenty-five or thirty in number, were pitched quite in military order. The women were at the tent doors putting finishing touches to their own toilets and their children's. We passed on to examine the ruins at the summit, which is, perhaps, one hundred feet higher. There are the foundations of a great fortress, built in Justinian's time, and remnants of a gigantic flight of steps, which probably led straight down to Jacob's Well and Joseph's Tomb. The only traces of the sacred buildings of the Samaritans are a few large stones built into a wall, said to be the stones which Joshua brought out of the Jordan, and a sacred rock corresponding to the Jewish *sakruh* in the Mosque of Omar. This rock, too, has a cave or vault, and it is associated with countless legends. They say that it is the spot where Abraham offered Isaac,<sup>1</sup> where Jacob saw the angels' ladder, where Joshua built an altar,

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<sup>1</sup> The late Dean Stanley favored this claim. It will be noticed that at several points the writer's observation differs from Dean Stanley's picturesque account, contained in his "Lectures on the Jewish Church." More than thirty years have passed since the date of his visit, and there may have been modifications of the ceremony.

a tabernacle and a temple. Indeed, they go still farther back, saying that it is the centre of the earth, the place where Adam worshipped, the only hill that was not covered by the flood. Unlike the rock at Jerusalem, it is quite neglected and overgrown with grass; but we were warned that if our profane feet touched it there would be vengeance either from men or from God. From the only complete building — a little Mahomedan shrine, part of which is used as a cow-house — one has a splendid view, stretching from snowy Hermon to the hills above Jericho and the Mediterranean Sea, with the meadows across which Jesus journeyed towards Jerusalem nestling below.

Hearing the sound of psalms from the tents, we knew that the feast was beginning, and that we must hurry back. We found all the men, fifty or sixty in number, gathered round the Tabernacle. Extremely handsome they are, tall and lithe, with statuesque features, clear brown eyes, aquiline noses, strong, firm lips, and that rich, peachy complexion which marks the pure Jewish stock. They were dressed in loose trousers, and long white robes or jackets. A few of the officials wore colored turbans. The Tabernacle was an ordinary tent, distinguished only by being oblong instead of round. At one side it opened into a court or square marked off by loose stones. There was no ornament of any sort, except on the dress of the high priest, who was clothed in a grey-white satin robe, with a pure white hood of soft texture over his head — altogether, a grand-looking personage. He stood at the Tabernacle door, reading aloud, in a shifting monotone, passages from Exodus and Numbers with regard to the Passover. Some eight or ten of the older men stood beside him listening and giving a response now and then. They were not officials. The distinction was one of age, not of office, suggesting the natural origin of the eldership both in the Jewish and in the Christian Church. Huddled together at his feet were seven fat lambs, and a plentiful supply of hyssop was heaped beside them.

The body of the people were otherwise employed. Some were sharpening knives. Others were smoothing seven poles or spits about eight feet in length. The greater number were absorbed in dressing two pits or holes. The one was built of stone, ten feet deep and three or four feet wide. Blackened with smoke and stained (p.508) with blood, it had obviously been so used for many hundreds of years. At the bottom of it a large fire was being kindled. The other pit was shallower, and had never been used before; indeed, the process of digging it was barely finished. The women moved about freely, giving a hand in this and that piece of work, and the children played quite merrily, peeping into the pits, venturing to touch the knives, and gazing pitifully at the poor, shuddering lambs.

Meantime the hour of sunset approached, and all seemed to be ready. The high priest took two or three steps forward to a little mound, and at this sign the men came closer to the Tabernacle. The women vanished; but the boys and even some bold little girls stayed with their fathers, clasping their hands or their skirts as if going with them into a dark and solemn place. Then all was silent save the voice of the high priest, whose words grew louder and louder, rising rapidly from a low, plaintive groan into a fervent entreaty that the Lord would rescue his beloved from their slavery. We could not follow him distinctly, but words like "straw," "bricks," "Pharaoh" were repeated. For a while the congregation joined in at the ends of the verses with a sort of double amen; but eventually even this

response ceased, and the distant hollows of the everlasting hills gave back uninterrupted echoes of the weird complaint.

When the sun came quite near the horizon, they formed a close circle in the space between the Tabernacle and the pit; the seven lambs were passed along from hand to hand and held firmly, each by two or three men, at equal distances from one another within the circle. One of the turbaned men ran to the top of a neighboring knoll, from which the Mediterranean could be seen, and watched the sinking sun. The high priest's narrative had reached the very point at which the first celebration is described. He stopped, and all was deadly still. Then suddenly the man on the knoll raised his arm to signify that the sun had touched the sea, and in a moment seven knives flashed into the air; the seven lambs sank with a gurgle on the grass; a great sigh or shout of thankfulness rose into the air; and the high priest renewed his reading in a passionate and triumphant tone, as of a man who had heard that the Lord had smitten the first-born, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto the first-born of the captive that was in the dungeon. When he began to read, a turbaned man ran swiftly out of the Tabernacle with a bowl of the blood and a handful of hyssop, and passed from tent to tent, scoring the top of each tent door with a deep blood-stain. The congregation fell upon one another's necks, and kissed each other with deep emotion, many with tears in their eyes, and a look of intense relief as of those who have passed through a crisis much to be remembered.

Meanwhile some dozen men had fallen upon the carcasses. They fell upon them with a wild enthusiasm, pouring hot water over them, and dexterously removing the fleeces. The children rushed forward gleefully to assist in the plucking, like camp-followers plundering the slain in battle. Thereafter there was a careful examination. One of the lambs which had not died instantaneously was pronounced to be unclean. The other six, when the unclean parts and the right shoulders had been removed, were fastened on the wooden spits, placed carefully in the stone-built hole or oven already described, and covered in with earth and clay according to the precept: "They shall eat the flesh on that night roast with fire; eat not of it raw nor sodden with water, but roast with fire." The older men returned to prayer and Bible reading under the guidance of the high priest, while the younger gave themselves to the destruction of the one poor lamb which had not died worthily. They put it — with the wool and unclean parts of the others — into the great fire and watched with eager care till every morsel was consumed. Then they buried (p.509) the ashes in the smaller of the two trenches.

About this time, 8.30 P.M., most of the spectators — two score, perhaps, chiefly Mahommedans from Nablus — went away; but as we had resolved to see the feast itself we did not grudge a few cold hours on the hilltop, and we were well repaid. Although the recitation continued, with intervals, less attention was paid to it, and most of the Samaritans went to their tents, which we were allowed to visit. The high priest himself received us kindly, and gave us a glimpse of their precious Bible, as well as some interesting information. No recompense was asked except a subscription towards teaching children the Pentateuch, which we, being believers in the Bible, were most willing to give. They offered us shelter for the night, but we preferred to snatch a two hours' sleep in the open air after Jacob's fashion, and to stroll again among the ruins. The

paschal moon was shining brilliantly, lighting up the old stones, the corn-plains beneath, the firm outlines of Ebal, and the little encampment of the faithful.

Towards midnight, about four hours after the slaughtering, a cry arose that the lambs were nearly roasted. The noise of prayer grew louder, and the men gathered round the Tabernacle. This time they had staffs in their hands, and some, if not all, had sandals on their feet, according to the commandment. At a sign from the high priest the cover of the pit was removed, and a dense volume of smoke rose up towards heaven. The lambs were lifted out by the poles all black and stiff — wondrous they looked in the moonlight — and carried to the place of sacrifice, where they were placed upon mats. The prayers ceased suddenly with the word, "Ye shall eat it," and in a few minutes, without further ceremony, every man in the company had a chop or shank or piece of flesh in his mouth, eating rather greedily till the first burst of hunger was satisfied. Hungry they might well be after spending such a night. They ate the lamb with herbs, unleavened bread, and liberal draughts of white wine. Very soon, however, they began to think of one another, and pressed dainty morsels upon their neighbors, not forgetting the little boys who clung to their fathers' cloaks. I saw one man slipping a piece up his sleeve, probably as a conjugal peace-offering. It was a hearty, pleasant meal, a bond of friendship and of tribal feeling, although, according to Scripture, it was eaten in haste. Of course, we were offered no share, for does not the Bible say, "A foreigner shall not eat thereof; no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof"? When the men were fully satisfied, portions were carried to the women, who had been standing in the doors of their tents, and then the fire was kindled again. Every scrap that had not been eaten was brought together; they hunted by torchlight for stray morsels, like men searching for gold. All was carefully burnt, for the law of Moses says: "Ye shall let nothing remain until the morning; there shall not anything of the flesh remain all night." When this was over they met again in the Tabernacle for a long diet of prayer, which did not close till daybreak. Before midday their houses at Nablus were reopened, and they had returned to their ordinary avocations, leaving Mount Gerizim to be a grazing ground for cattle till another feast-day should come round.

Throughout the whole ceremony there was nothing of the nature of display. From first to last it was simple, human, and unaffected. We spectators were not recognized, except by way of common courtesy. We were treated exactly as two Midianites might have been treated if they had happened to come to the tents of Israel at Passover time.

For, of course, the chief interest of this unique scene lies in the living picture which it furnishes of that great ceremonial. Some little deviations there probably have been during those three thousand years; but in its essence and in its general features this must have been the character of the feast which more than any other outward mark distinguished the Jewish religion before the times of the Temple ceremonial. No doubt, in some respects, it has a half-savage character, with its bloodshed and burning and rapid eating after a long fast. There is an absence of what is called spirituality and of religious elevation. But the simplicity of it, its freedom from ritual, its family character, its obvious reminiscences of the habits of a wandering life, and, above all, its direct connection with

a great event of sacred history; these features show the original meaning of the Passover, and its appropriateness to the time of its institution.

Yet we must not exaggerate, or over-praise the early religious habits of the Jews. How different the thoughts which accompanied such a ceremony from the thoughts of God's people in later ages!" Sacrifice and offering Thou wouldst not. Will I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? — the sacrifices of God are a broken heart." How different the idea of those butchered and sheared lambs from the thought of him who was brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and was dumb as a sheep before her shearers! How different that half-savage feast from the quiet hour in the upper chamber, when Jesus said, " With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer"! How few the points of contact between the bodily satisfaction with which those Samaritans devour roasted lambs, and the feelings that arise in Christian hearts when we say that Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us!

Different? Yes: as the seed differs from the flower, as the struggling stream differs from the broad river, as the first thoughts of a child about God differ from the matured religion of the philosopher. Historically, they are one and the same. Through the working of the Divine Spirit of truth and reverence and humanity upon such a primitive usage, man has reached the grandest and broadest views of his relation to the justice and the mercy of the Most High. It is by the inworking of that Spirit that we have learned to reckon him who declared at Jacob's Well that God is a spirit, as the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.

(end)

*Note from this Editor of the SamaritanUpdate.com*

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