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**SACRED CITIES:  
NARRATIVE, DESCRIPTIVE, HISTORICAL.**

BY

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(p. 69)

The next morning, before breakfast, I went with our guide to the Synagogue and witnessed the novel worship of the Samaritans. This is the oldest sect that has kept up continuous worship in the world. They are few in numbers, counting only one hundred and fifty-two men, women and children. It was Saturday, their Sabbath, equally with the Jews, and they assembled early in the morning. The room is small, capable of holding only fifty or sixty persons. They are all dressed in uniform, in long white robes and red turbans, and the priest in red robes and a white turban. He takes out the manuscript or roll of parchment containing the Pentateuch, which is all of the Old Testa- (p. 70) ment which they acknowledge as genuine. The manuscript is on rolls, like all ancient books, adorned with gilt devices, and inclosed in white figured silk. They claim that it is thirty-five hundred years old, but though worn with much kissing and handling, and somewhat patched, it is probably not two thousand years old, though there is some reason for assigning it to the age of Manasseh, about three hundred and thirty years before Christ. They all stand up, the priest takes the parchment from the recess, carefully unrolls it, reads a long passage, kisses it fervently and rolls it up, when the people utter their loud responses, without much concert or sense, the boys screaming as loud as possible so as to outdo the elder ones. They may be sincere, but it seemed a wild jargon to me, with little order or devotional feeling.

They still hate the Jews, who will "have no dealings with the Samaritans" except in the matter of trade, and the two sects do not intermarry. They are fast running out. They eagerly inquire of travelers from other countries whether there are any Samaritans in their respective places of residence, and express their disappointment when told that there are none. Yet they think they have the best system of religion in the world. They afford a melancholy example of religious fanaticism. Different accounts have been given of their origin. They are probably descendants of Babylonians and Assyrians, who were sent hither after the capture of the Israelites, to re-people the land and who were joined by renegade Jews. Their worship was at first wholly idolatrous, but having been frightened by lions, they applied to the King of Assyria (p. 71) for an Israelitish priest. He introduced the Jewish mode of worship, but they still continued to "serve their own

gods," even while "they feared the Lord," and thus did their worship become corrupt. But they had so far imbibed the Jewish spirit that when the Jews returned to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem, they applied for permission to aid in the work. This was refused, and it was this refusal that laid the foundation for the subsequent hatred which existed between the two races.

Henceforth, the Samaritans did all in their power to retard the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Afterwards, in the fourth century before Christ, Sanballat, the Persian governor of Samaria, obtained permission from Alexander the Great to build a temple on Mount Gerizim which should be the rival of the temple in Jerusalem. Manasseh, the son-in-law of Sanballat, who had been expelled from Jerusalem for marrying into a pagan family, was made High Priest. The ruins of this temple are still seen on Mount Gerizim. From the time of building this temple and even before down to the present, some twenty-two hundred years, has their worship been kept up. They are "the oldest and smallest sect in the world."

Three times a year they go to the summit of Gerizim, up the steep and narrow pathway and stone steps from the city, and celebrate their festival. The Passover occurs in April, and on this occasion the whole population take part in the ceremonies. In the afternoon they encamp in tents, in imitation of the Israelites, put on their sacred costumes, and half an hour before sunset engage in their devotions with their faces (p. 72) turned towards the holy place on the mount, and just as the sun goes down behind the western ridge of hills, seven youths, dressed in white robes, rush forth and slay the seven lambs that have been brought up here for the purpose, and prepare them for roasting. The bodies of the animals are pierced with sticks in the form of a cross and placed in a pit dug in the ground over the fire which has been kindled at the bottom of the pit. By the light of the midnight moon, they partake of the feast which

"Smokes on Gerizim's Mount, Samaria's sacrifice."

Rapidly they tear the flesh piecemeal with their fingers, in obedience to the command given to the Jews, "ye shall eat in haste." At an early hour all descend to their usual habitations at the base of the mountain.

A few rods from the scene of sacrifice is the Holy Place, an extensive naked surface of a rock inclining towards a cistern on the west. This is their Kibleh, or holiest spot, where the tabernacle of the Lord with the ark of the covenant was formerly placed. They approach this with their shoes removed from their feet, and when they pray, they turn their faces towards it. Near by is a thick wall and vast ruins of a square structure which, some suppose, are the remains of the Samaritan temple, but which others believe to be those of a fortification erected by Justinian. On one side of the inclosure is a large Wely or sheik's tomb, which can be seen afar off, similar to those which are often seen in Palestine. If an ambitious man wishes to secure popularity among the people, he builds a costly tomb to the memory of some great man or saint. If a wealthy man (p. 73) wishes to atone for some wicked deeds that he may have committed in his eagerness to acquire wealth, he builds a splendid tomb, whitewashed and garnished, on some conspicuous spot, where it can be seen by travelers at a great distance.

Near the walls of the castle are several flat stones, lying on the surface of the ground, underneath which the Mohammedans say lie the twelve stones which the Israelites brought out of the Jordan when they entered the Promised Land. These are to remain in

their places until the prophet and guide appears. In another part are what they call "the seven steps of Adam out of Paradise." The trench where the lambs are sacrificed is formed of two parallel rows of rough stones laid upon the ground. There are indications of a city on this mount.

Mount Ebal, on the north, is not so often visited by tourists, but it is said that the best view of the town can be obtained from it. It has no ruins on the summit except a queer old square structure with thick walls of rough stone. The sides of Ebal on the south bordering on the west side of the city are fertile, and at the proper season full of vegetative life. Dr. Robinson says: "Here a scene of luxuriant and almost unparalleled verdure burst upon our view. The whole valley was filled with gardens of vegetables and orchards of all kinds of fruits, watered by several fountains which burst forth in various parts and flow westward in refreshing streams. It came upon us suddenly, like a scene of fairy enchantment. We saw nothing to compare with it in all [other parts of] Palestine. Here, beneath the shade of an immense mulberry tree, by the (p. 74) side of a purling rill, we pitched our tent for the remainder of the day and night."

As we rode out of the city through the western gate, we saw gardens watered by the fountains, filled with fresh vegetation, carrots, melons, cucumbers, figs and oranges, the whole enlivened by the songs of thousands of birds. The whole valley is one of unusual fertility. Immense wheat and barley fields at the present day wave in the breezes on the east and the west of the city. It was this feature, undoubtedly, that attracted Jacob hither, and induced him to purchase it for the pasturage of his son's flocks. Hence the significance of the words, "Joseph is a fruitful bough whose branches run over the wall." (Gen. xlix: 22.) It is an interesting fact to the modern tourist in Palestine that as he enters the tomb of Joseph near the well, he will see a trailing vine whose "branches run over the wall," thus illustrating literally the words of Jacob at the distance of three thousand five hundred years from the present.

Some have asserted that Ebal is more desolate than Gerizim, and assign as the reason that the curses of the Israelites were pronounced from it. But Dr. Robinson says that he could see no essential difference in the appearance of the two mounts. They both have a barren and desolate look alike, save in the ravine which slopes down from Gerizim into the city. It exhibits a little more fertility by reason of the natural fountains that send their fertilizing streams down the declivity. The slopes of both mountains are alike cultivated, though the summits exhibit few marks of vegetative life. It is a blind and ignorant superstition that would pro- (p. 75) nounce Gerizim blessed and Ebal cursed because Jehovah ordered the rewards of obedience to be announced from the one, and the retributions of disobedience from the other.

It is interesting to the intelligent reader of Bible history, while standing in the valley between the summits, to call to mind the scene related in the eighth chapter of Joshua, according to the prophecy in Deuteronomy. Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph and Benjamin stood on Gerizim, and Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulon, Dan and Naphtali stood on Ebal. The valley is narrow, only sixty rods wide near the eastern extremity, so that, as has been actually demonstrated, the voice of an individual can be clearly heard from one mount to the other. A natural amphitheatre slopes down from the summit of Ebal, and opposite to this is another amphitheatre on the sides of Gerizim. It has been conjectured that the tribes were assembled here while the vast congregation stood on each side of the ark of the covenant in the vale below. And Joshua read before the priests, the elders, the

judges, the officers, and the men, women and children, all the words of the law, both blessings and cursings, as Moses, before their passage over the Jordan, had commanded him. The representatives of half the tribes stood on one peak and half on the other. The place was fitted to inspire solemnity and wonder. Two bold peaks rose up before the people. And the people themselves were not the least inspiring element in the scene. As Dr. Thompson says: "This is beyond question the most august assembly the sun ever shone upon; and I never stand in that narrow plain, with Ebal and Gerizim rising on either (p. 76) hand to the sky, without involuntarily recalling and reproducing the scene. I have shouted to hear the echo, and then fancied how it must have been when the loud voiced Levites proclaimed from the naked cliffs of Ebal, 'Cursed be the man that maketh any graven image, an abomination unto Jehovah.' And then the tremendous *Amen!* tenfold louder, from the mighty congregation rising and swelling, and re-echoing from Ebal to Gerizim and from Gerizim to Ebal, *Amen! even so let it be accursed!* No, there never was an assembly to compare with this." ("The Land and Book," Vol. II. 204.)

Nablous is a city containing some eight thousand inhabitants, mostly Mohammedans, there being only eight hundred Greek Christians and one hundred and fifty Samaritans. It extends along the narrow valley and up the slopes of the mounts, and is surrounded with trees and verdure, and presents to the outside observer a very picturesque appearance, with its brown stone houses three and four stories high, overlooked by its dark minarets and white domes, its white limestone and crenellated walls. The interior is not so inviting, for its streets are narrow and winding, damp and gloomy, few windows fronting the streets and a general air of desolation spread over all things. In the winter season great streams of water run through the streets, and as the city lies on the water-shed which separates the Mediterranean from the valley of the Jordan, these streams run in opposite directions in the east and west ends of the city. It lies nearly seventeen hundred feet above the sea, and Ebal rises ten hundred and Gerizim nine "hundred feet above the city. Tombs in great numbers have been cut into the steep rocks of Ebal on the (p. 77) north, and Joseph's tomb, a square stone structure, with a white dome some twenty feet above the surface of the ground, shaded by high trees, is seen not more than a fourth of a mile from Jacob's Well, near the base of Ebal. On the eastern slope of Gerizim are numerous little clusters of houses and ruins of those that once stood here. Three miles east of the city is seen Salim on the slope or ridge beyond the valley of Moreh, where John baptized "because there was much water there." Numerous fountains are still seen here, and sheep, goats and donkeys, cattle and horses were crowding around these while we were riding through the valley.

The city of Samaria lies on a conical hill, eight miles north-east of the city, near the path that leads to Jenin. It is mostly in ruins. It is traditionally asserted that the body of John the Baptist was deposited here, and a church bearing his name once stood here, but its walls are rapidly crumbling. Some pillars of an old temple are standing at the base of the hill. Thus has Samaria, once a royal residence, rebuilt in splendid style by Herod the Great, yielded to the devastating influences of time.

Nablous has had an eventful history. Abraham pitched his tent under a Terebinth near, Jacob purchased a field in its suburbs, and sent his son Joseph hither to search for his brethren; the Israelites under Joshua erected an altar here, and it became a city of refuge. Abimelech slew his brethren and proclaimed himself the ruler of Israel, on which occasion Jotham gave forth his fable from one of the spurs of Gerizim, the most ancient

of its class; Rehoboam was proclaimed king (p. 78) here, and after the nation was divided, Jeroboam fortified and enlarged the city and made it his capital. In the year 721 before Christ, Salmanazer led away the inhabitants in captivity to Babylon. The descendants of the new inhabitants built a temple on Mount Gerizim as the rival of that in Jerusalem built by the Jews, and this in turn was destroyed by John Hyrcanus B. C. 132. Jesus preached here after his conversation with the woman at Jacob's Well, and gained many converts. The celebrated Christian father and writer, Justin Martyr, was born here. It was held awhile by the Crusaders and afterwards given to the Mussulman. The inhabitants have manifested oft-times a rebellious spirit, and were severely punished in 1834 by Ibrahim Pasha.

The Greeks are kind and hospitable to strangers. Amid all these changes the Samaritans have kept up their worship, and Mounts Gerizim and Ebal and Jacob's Well have remained to teach us the judgments of Heaven and the importance of worshiping God "in spirit and in truth."

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

This reference is not 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

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**John Stebbins Lee** (1859-1868) was the first president of St. Lawrence University (Canton New York) ; his title was in fact Principal of the Preparatory Department, an essentially "remedial" program that gave students the academic tools to go on to Theological School study. His daughter, Florence Lee Whitman, is said to haunt 1 Lincoln Street in Canton.

Author traveled in the years 1868-9 (shown in Preface, p. v)