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Stirring Times
or
Records from Jerusalem Consular Chronicles of 1853 to 1856

By the late **James Finn**, M.R.A.S.,
Edited and compiled by his widow
With a preface by the Viscountess Strangford,
in two volumes, Vol II.,
London,
C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1 Paternoster Square,
1878

(p. 115)....

In April last, three of our members attended the Passover Sacrifice of the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim, by invitation of the Priest of that sect, and the spectacle has been described at our meeting as one of indelible interest: it was the only opportunity of the kind presented to Europeans since the very earliest ages of Christianity.

(p. 92)...One or two volumes of ancient Samaritan MS. Were received for the Jerusalem library, and some were also obtained for the British Museum library and sent to England.

(p. 266)

Chapter XXVI.

Succour to the Weak.

From the exciting topics of the preceding chapter let us turn to one of a different character, namely, to existence of the sect of the Samaritans, still clustered round Mount Gerizim in Nabloos (Shechem), few in number, and subject to Mohammedan oppression. The intervention of the British Consulate on their behalf had some time before obtained for them permission to resume their Passover sacrifice on Gerizim, their sacred mountain.

This year they sent a deputation to London to solicit subscriptions on behalf of their poor, and of certain individuals of their body who were cruelly and illegally imprisoned as debtors.

Their petition was addressed to the Government and people of Britain, written in duplicate on the same large page, in Arabic and in their own ancient and peculiar language, each version being ratified with a seal of the community, which is inscribed in both Arabic and Samaritan characters. The agents, Jacob esh Shellabi, one of themselves, excited particular interest among oriental scholars and others in England, and met with success at the Foreign Office.

(p.267) Lord Clarendon sent them a donation of 50 *l.*, in case of their circumstances being as they were represented to be; and the dispatch contained an instruction that in case of necessity good offices might be exerted to save the Samaritan people from persecution, from whatever quarter it might be directed against them.

This was at the end of September, 1854, and in the succeeding April His Lordship repeated the assurance of the interest which Her Majesty's Government took in the Samaritan sect, and instructed Lord Stratford de Redcliffe to use his good offices with the

Porte in favour of the community. British patronage to this extent proved of considerable benefit to the poor people for some years, and they were at all times grateful for the same.

While dealing in this sense with Asiatic people – the strong adopting the cause of the weak – the Scriptural proverb is peculiarly applicable, ‘A word spoken in season, how good is it!’

Many a heart has been cheered, and many a tear been dried of the widow, the orphan, and the dungeon prisoner, by virtue of those few words sent from London, without direct political interference, without calling in question the right of the Turkish Government to rule its own subjects.

Priest Amran and his people will ever bless the friendly offices of England at that period – which were, however, afterwards impeded and defiled by the Turkish Government, in the person of a most able and unscrupulous Pasha, so soon as the termination of the war had let loose intrigue, and had invigorated the internal management of affairs by Turkish officers.

(p. 268) EDITOR’S NOTE.

Overt acts of oppression and injustice were not attempted till interested and watchful advisers persuaded the Turkish officials that England had reverse her benevolent policy, and that henceforth illegal or oppressive measures towards the Sultan’s subjects would meet with neither notice nor check; but that rather any Englishman, or British authority, would be put down, or by reason of his native instincts, to shut his eyes, or to behold in silence, acts iniquitous in themselves, and impolitic as undermining the fabric of the Turkish Empire, and sapping the young life and liberties of its best subjects.

Turkish Pashas were but human after all. Some among them had, within the last twenty years, been intelligent enough to perceive that their own self-interests were best furthered by obedience to the Sultan’s pleasure and set purpose of toleration for all his people, just because their obedience was watched and reported with commendation, (and any disobedience was as surely reported, with blame,) by independent observers, who were able to have their representations transmitted to the highest authorities, when investigations into their accuracy were sure to follow. During twenty years this system had worked, and had been great; the poor and the oppressed rejoiced, for justice had begun to be a reality as well as a name.

But there were many, and especially among the fanatical school, to whom supervision was irksome and distasteful, as being exercised by Christians and Europeans. There were others who longed to get back to the good old days when irresponsible government meant liberty to make a fortune speedily, to exact bribes, to imprison for reward, to release for a consideration. To those it was music to hear that non-intervention was to be the grand fruit and result of the Crimean War; that there was to be once more ‘liberty’ – to do evil; ‘toleration’ – of abuses.

These were not patriotic Turks, or they would have seen (p. 269) what deadly ruin to their Empire the restoration of such ‘liberty’ and such ‘toleration’ must work. They were poor fools, intoxicated with pride, and only too glad to heed the whispering of flattery, that now at last Turkey was independent, that she had entered into the comity of nations, and that it behoved her to exercise her independence, and refuse to be led in leading strings.

Henceforth the provincial governors were to be men under no guidance but their own; free to walk to destruction, and to carry with them the people under them, and the Sultan over them; under no obligation to listen to any words of unpalatable truth, or to have dealings of a friendly character with men who could point out to them the dangers ahead, into which the troubled waters whence she had had but so lately barely escaped. The helm had been reversed, though men perceived it not. Mischief works quickly. Insurrections, risings, seditions, massacres, were not far distant; but most of the Turkish Pashas believed, with a joy pitiable to witness, that the Ottoman Empire was now at last firmly established, and that her independence was for ever firmly

established, and that her independence was for ever beyond the possibility of menace or of danger. They believed it because they were told so; and ruin had begun.

I recollect one case of oppression shortly previous to this time, that of a young Samaritan, then a Moslem. While a mere child, some Mohammedans having treated him with sweetmeats, taught him to repeat their confession of faith, 'There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is the Apostle of God.' Immediately two of their number repaired to the Kadi's Court, and deposed an oath (their form of legal oath consists merely of holding up the right hand and saying the words 'By God,' an expression used all day long in conversation profanely, without real solemnity at all) that they had heard the child make the (p. 270) above confession. The judge accordingly deemed him to be a true believer; and in consequence, he was taken away from his 'infidel' parents. In vain he protested that he was no Moslem, but a Samaritan, and that he knew nothing about Mohammed; in vain were all the tears and wailing of his parents and friends: the law was inflexible to enforce creed of Islam or death. They endeavoured to overcome his obstinacy by bribes of everything likely to prevail with a boy; and, this treatment failing, they brandished a sword over his head, and still only succeeded by laying his head at the mouth of a cannon!

Poor fellow! At one of my interviews with his people he came into the room among the strangers, now grown a fine tall man, but wearing a white turban (proper for Moslems) instead of a red one (the colour used by the Samaritans is red). His two brothers were present, and after his departure they related the history to me. I well remember the mournful expression of his countenance and the silent tears of his family; but even they, while hoping against hope for his restitution to them, though it might be by miracle, considered any undertaking on our part doubtful of success, as so many years had already passed were fearful of persecution arising were the Moslem rulers to get an idea into their heads that the Samaritans applied to the Christian Consulate for help.

This was before their condition had been taken into consideration by the British Government as above mentioned. So much of vexation and oppression might in divers ways be brought to bear upon the community (p. 271) which could not claim cognizance of authorities elsewhere.

Before leaving this remarkable people it may be observed that their number is now but small, being reduced to about 150 souls at the very utmost, and all are gathered together under the shadow of Mount Gerizim, their other settlements in Gaza, Cairo, &c., having become extinct. They are a handsome race in stature and feature, with a refined, pale complexion, and (probably the effect of close inter-marriages, to which they are driven by their fewness), they all bear a noticeable family likeness to each other.

They are extremely cleanly in persons and houses, a quality favoured by the abundance of water with which the town is supplied; for numerous and copious are the springs which hush from their mountain, at its centre, and in the valley at its foot.

Their ancient enmity towards the Jews still subsists, although under the Mohammedan oppression, which crushes both parties, that animosity chiefly appears in the form of dislike, which keeps them aloof from each other; indeed, there are scarcely any Jews resident in Nabloos.¹

¹ For the best account of their manners and customs, history, &c., see Mill's 'Modern Samaritans' (Murray), 1864.

When coming to Jerusalem, which they occasionally do on business, the Samaritans lodge and eat with the Karaites, as being their nearest friends. The Rabbinical Jews make no secret of their hatred of both peoples, more especially of the latter; so much so that they will not accept a convert from amongst them unless he first passed through the stage of professing to be a Moslem or (p. 272) a Christian, as being a less odious kind of infidel, and this merely on account of rejecting the Pharisaic traditions, and adhering to the plain grammatical text of the Pentateuch.

(p.360).....R. Jacob Abulafia related some droll anecdotes about the Samaritans and his conversations with them. He ridiculed their excessive legal washings, which made them seem to be always crying out טמא (Tamay) 'unclean,' like the ancient lepers; and told how on one occasion when Priest Amran had spoken irreverently of King David for having set up a schismatic kingdom and temple at Jerusalem, and then composed Psalms of his own, declaring that the Lord had rejected the altar (p. 361) at Shiloh and Gerizim, and chosen Jerusalem for himself, he (Abulafia) had cried out, 'Silence, or I will tear that beard out of your chin, if you dare to say any more against King David and Zion;' 'of course,' he added 'the Jews can have no alliance with the Samaritans.'...

...(p.370) We were residing in the Samaritan quarter where the houses and the people are cleanly. Their women are kept more reserved at home, if possible, than the Moslem women. Most of the apartments (all opening upon the terraces) have Samaritan inscriptions over the doors.

How wondrous is the medley in Palestine of modern events with matters of extreme antiquity! Our recent news from the seat of war- (eagerly discussed by our Samaritan friends, as by all people throughout the length and breadth of the land) had no connection with Mount Gerizim and the Cutheans of Sahlmanezzer. Yet there we were, natives of the isles afar off, a link between that Russian war and (through their Turkish rulers) the undoubted people descended from the Cutheans, who had never been removed from the shadow of that mountain for above 2,500 years; who had resisted for a time both Macedonian and Roman legions, and who still inscribe over their portals in archaic characters, peculiar to themselves, texts from the primitive law of Sinai in obedience to Deut. Vi. 9, as taught them by the solitary priest in Bethel out of the Sacred Volume treasures in Jerusalem= our home- whither our faces were now set upon our journey South.

(p.372)...After crossing the plain of Mukhna, Mr. Bowen guided us to the tomb of Eleazar, the priest, son of Aaron, at the village of Awarta. It is a handsome building with large old trees about it, both terebinth and karoo. The whole is kept clean and in good repair by the Samaritans. On the walls are pilgrims' names in profusion, written in charcoal or by scratches; the Jewish names (for there are Jewish names) were either in the common square Hebrew character, or in running-hand, either Sephardi or Polish. Samaritan names were either in their own characters or in Arabic.