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A Samaritan Pentateuch in London.¹

BY PROFESSOR ROBERT W. ROGERS, PH.D., F.R.G.S.

I HAVE been much interested in the Samaritans for a number of years. I have traced out, with much interest, the various allusions in the Assyrian inscriptions to the colonizations in Samaria, have examined their manuscript in various museums as well as in their own little temple on Mount Gerizim in Palestine, and have talked with their priests in that far-distant shrine. I have happened to enjoy the personal acquaintance of scholars who have devoted years to the study of their books, among them Professor Merx of Heidelberg, Vollers of Jena, and Kautzsch of Halle, and Dr. Neubauer and Mr. Cowley of Oxford. For many reasons and in many ways have these interesting people, with a strange history, appealed to my interest. How I wish that I could stir up the reader's interest in them, in their history, and in their sacred books!

I was startled, fairly startled, a few months ago to read that Isaac, second priest of the Samaritans at Shechem, had been in London and had sold to the trustees of the British Museum "a fine large copy of the Samaritan recension of the Hebrew Pentateuch." I could scarcely believe my eyes. Was it really true that the poor little remnant of the Samaritans had sold one of their precious copies of the laws of Moses? For centuries they have preserved with reverential care two copies of their holy books, the one receiving a little more veneration than the other. To the passing traveler they were wont to show the less interesting one, and to scholars who could not be readily deceived they rather reluctantly showed the older one. I had some trouble in getting Jacob, the chief priest, to show me the older manuscript, but he brought it out finally and taking off the silk wrappings unrolled it and laid it in my hands. There was very little time to examine it, and indeed the Samaritans have never allowed any scholar to collate it with our ordinary Hebrew; but it was a joy to handle it and to look somewhat hastily at its script. The chief priest assured me that it was written three thousand five hundred and one years before, by Abisha son of Aaron, and at my request he wrote on the back of his own portrait both in Samaritan and in Arabic character the words Abisha son of Aaron. I knew well enough, from previous studies, that the volume was in reality not more than seven hundred years old—but even that age would make it venerable. How tenderly they handled those two manuscripts! It seemed as though they would never part with either of them. But now one of them, probably the second and or the first, has been sold to the British Museum. It has gone to a good place, and I am thoroughly glad. At Nablus it was constantly in danger. Fire might destroy it; fanatical Mohammedans might steal and destroy it; as it was, besides, useless to learning, for scholars could not study its text and secure its testimony

¹ Article LXX.

concerning the text of the Old Testament. It is now in as safe a place as could be found in all the world, and it is also in a place so hospitable to research that any capable scholar will be permitted to study it, and the early publication of its testimony is certain. Let us take a glance at it, even though at long range

The Samaritans accepted only the five books of Moses as canonical, and their copy of those Scriptures is written in the Hebrew language. but in the Samaritan characters. Their own speech was a dialect of the great western Aramaic stock, and so is related to the language once spoken by our Lord; their present language is Arabic adopted from their Mohammedan conquerors. The Hebrew-Samaritan Pentateuch has continued through all their history to be their standard edition of the Scriptures, but it was translated for popular use several times as their language was changed by social contact. Thus there are reasons for believing that they had a Greek version, in use at the period when Greek was spoken among them, though no copy of it has come down to us. They had also a translation into their vernacular Samaritan Aramaic, which was made by several hands and is for the most part extremely literal, and the manuscripts which have come down to us, though few in number, present many variations. When they began to speak Arabic in the eleventh century an Arabic version was made, and many manuscripts of it are preserved. These versions were useful enough in their way, but men must always have turned back to the two great Hebrew-Samaritan manuscripts at Nablus as to the fountain head of sacred learning.

The precious manuscript which has now found a resting place in London is dated at the end in the year of the Hejira 740, which corresponds to the year of our Lord 1330-40. It is perfect, not a single leaf being lost. There are thirty-two lines of writing on each page, (p. 325) the dimensions of the page being seventeen inches by fourteen inches, and the total number of leaves is 199. Genesis begins on folio 13, Exodus on folio 51a, Leviticus on folio 92b, Numbers on folio 121a, and Deuteronomy on folio 163a. The text is divided into small sections, and at the end of each book there is a note giving the number of the sections in that book, just as the number of the verses in each book is registered in our Hebrew Bibles.

The history of the manuscript has been remarkably well preserved in four deeds of sale which are written at the end of it. It was written by Abram ben Ya'Kub in 1339-40 A. D., and probably at Damascus, for his own personal use as a member of the Samaritan community in that city. It remained in his possession for sixty-five years, and was then sold by Barakah ben Abi Fath ben Ya'Kub to Ab-Yuthrana ben Ab-Hasda. The contract was dated in the month of Shawwal in the year of the Hejira 807 (April, 1405 A. D.), and the deed was written by Phineas, who was then high priest at Damascus. The son of the man the man who thus bought it sold it again in November, 1464 A. D., to Ya'Kub b. Yusuf, and the contract was written out by Sheth Aaron, priest and chief reader in Damascus, and witnessed by the priest Abraham son of Abraham the Levite. (How interesting it is to find all these old biblical names among these people, for Ya'Kub is Jacob and Yusuf is Joseph.) In 1578 the manuscript was sold again, this time for four hundred and eighty pieces of silver, the seller being Abu Hafs son of Abu-Azzi, of family of Manasseh, and the buyer being son of Isaac. It is perhaps worth noting that the seller's name is Arabic, though he of Jewish descent. Last of all the manuscripts sold in 1799-1800 A. D. by "our master," whoever he may have been, to Solomon, whose family name is illegible. This brings the history of the manuscript down very nearly to our own day, but still leaves us in ignorance of how it came into the hands of the Samaritan community which has now happily sold it to the trustees of the British Museum. Never mind that.

Perhaps the reader is already too weary of this tedious paragraph and glad that the manuscript contains no more wearisome deeds of sale. Perhaps he will find more interesting a brief description of some of known peculiarities of the Samaritan-Hebrew Pentateuch, and some contrasts with the Hebrew Bible as we know it.

As the Samaritans accepted only the Pentateuch, which they are supposed to have secured about 333 B. C., they, of course, did not allow any other prophet but Moses. But the book of Deuteronomy (34, 10) says: "And there hath not arisen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face;" this passage is changed in the Samaritan version so that it reads: "there *shall* not arise a prophet in Israel like unto Moses." Other changes were necessary because of the adoption of Mount Gerizim as the site of the Samaritan temple. Deuteronomy (27. 4) reads: "And it shall be when ye are passed over Jordan, that ye shall set up these stones, which I command you this day, in Mount Ebal," but in the Samaritan text the word Gerizim is deliberately substituted for Ebal. Again, after Exod. 20. 17 there is added a command to build an altar on Mount Gerizim, and after verse 19 there is interpolated a passage partly drawn from Deut. 18. How many more variations there may be will not be known until the British Museum has had time to publish the whole manuscript. We may confidently hope for some light from it, though we must not expect that the light will be blinding. How slowly the study of the text of the Old Testament progresses!

The Samaritans have yielded up one of their greatest treasures. It may not be long until they will be ready to hand over their other manuscript, for they are surely approaching extinction. Once they were a numerous and powerful people. In the year 67 A. D., Cerialis, a legate of Vespasian, slew eleven thousand six hundred Samaritans in an uprising on Gerizim. In spite of this slaughter they were not extinguished, but in the fifth and sixth centuries were widely scattered, chiefly for commercial reasons, and bad representative communities in Damascus, and even a synagogue in Rome. They now number only about one hundred and twenty, or as Professor Kautzsch supposes, at the very outside only one hundred and eighty persons, who await the Messiah, expecting him to appear six thousand years after the creation of the world. It is a cheerless community and a shadowy hope.

Drew Theological Seminary, Madison. N. J.

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Manuscripts from Damascus

By **Professor Robert W. Rogers**, L.L.D. F.R.G.S.

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The discovery of the manuscripts of Damascus is directly due to the munificence of a Berlin lady, Fraulein E. Konigs, who provided the funds necessary to enable Professor von Soden to make a long journey in the East in interest of his study of New Testament manuscripts.While Professor von Soden was in Damascus he visited the great mosque and saw in its court the beautiful little domed building on columns. He knew that it was called the Kubblet-el-Khazneh (dome of the treasure), and doubtless read in his Baedeker the words that the eminent orientalist Professor Socin had written, that according to Mohamedan accounts "it was never to be opened." Professor von Soden made inquiries among the people and heard from them that when Damascus was taken by the Mohammedans, the Christian documents captured were put into this room and that it could only be opened by the sultan's order. Other orientalists, travelers, and scholars have

many a time looked at the little building and wished that it might be entered, and its treasures examined- if, indeed, there were any treasures there. But they had gone away hopeless, for they knew no means of inducing the sultan to order the doors opened. When Professor Socin was in Damascus for the last time Germany had no influence in the Orient, and was, indeed, scarcely known to its peoples. Professor von Soden has fallen on better days, for the name and fame of Germany have penetrated the Orient's darkest corners, and every Mohammedan looks on the German emperor as the sultan's best friend. He determined to ask the German Foreign Office to use its influences in moving the sultan to order the Kubbet opened for examination. The immediate success is instructive. The sultan ordered it opened and all the manuscripts which should be found therein catalogues. On passing it may be remarked that an American scholar remained two whole years in Constantinople seeking permission to excavate in Babylonia and failed. Why this difference between the treatment of Germans and Americans? Professor von Soden remained in Berlin, and Fraulein Konigs sent a young scholar, Dr. Bruno Violet, to enter the Kubbet and examine its contents. No man knew what might be found, and it is interesting to read the list of books which Professor von Soden wished for, but can hardly have expected to find. He thought of a possible ancient manuscript of the New Testament, a rival of the Codex Vatieannus or Codex Sinaiticus; or of the long-lost and sadly missed "Five Memorials of Ecclesiastical Affairs," by Hegesippus, the earliest of Church historians; or of the Diatessaron of Tatian; or of the Diatessaron of Tatian; or of the "Expositions of the Oracles of the Lord," by Papias. Alas, as he himself says, these were only dream pictures, none of them were found. Indeed, when Dr. Violet had spent nine long and weary months in the study he was compelled to acknowledge that he had found nothing of the first importance. But he has surely found a number of fragments of considerable interest. For general instruction, I here condense the report which Professor von Soden has given of the finds, adding sundry explanations of my own.

The mass of the manuscripts found in the Kubbet were in a sadly fragmentary condition: some were eaten by mice, others were perforated by bookworms, and all were torn or mutilated. Most of them were Acts of Mohammedan Mosques, pieces of the Koran, and bits of Arabic and Turkish literature. These are of too recondite a character to detain us here, and we must pass on to enumerate matters that come a little closer to us.

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Perhaps of even greater moment than these are numerous fragments of Samaritan Manuscripts. We know less, far less, about the Samaritans than about the Hebrews, and recent studies have increased our interest in them. A copy of the calendar of the Samaritans was found among these manuscripts, and a fragment of the Hebrew Pentateuch is Hebrew character. As Professor von Soden remarks, these manuscripts, though fragmentary, form a new proof of the presence of a body of Samaritans in Damascus.

Comments on this section from the Editor of theSamaritanUpdate.com

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