

THE FRINGE OF THE EAST
A JOURNEY THROUGH PAST AND PRESENT PROVINCES OF TURKEY
BY HARRY CHARLES LUKACH
Macmillan and Co., Limited
St. Martin's Street, London
1913

(P. 122b)

Nablus is in many respects a peculiar town. An exception to the general rule, it goes by its later, in preference to its earlier name, although its history as Neapolis fades into insignificance before the events which made Shechem a stronghold of patriarchs, judges, prophets, and kings. Again, unlike the majority of towns in Palestine and Syria, it is peopled by Moslems of a fanatical and unfriendly strain, who view strangers with displeasure. To-day it is chiefly remarkable as the ancient home and refuge of 'the oldest and the smallest sect in the world,' the tribe of the Samaritans, who, reduced to a handful of not two hundred souls, yet struggle doggedly to maintain, amid many tribulations, their sad and precarious existence.

Into the early history of the Samaritans it is needless (p.123) here to enter. Ever at enmity with the Jews, since these, on their return from captivity, rejected their advances, they have clung to Mount Gerizim as the only lawful *qibleh*, and have never ceased to regard Jerusalem and its temple as the shrine of an heretical people. Time was when they were many, and truculent withal. In the reign of Zeno they fell upon the Christians; in Justinian's time they killed the Bishop of Sichem, and sacked and burnt the churches. "Khoja, if thou must scratch," says a Turkish proverb, "blame not the lice, but thyself"; and the pitiful condition of the Samaritans at the present time is perhaps the result of the reprisals which followed upon these acts of aggression. For many of them were scattered and slain; and when Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela visited Shichem, he found only one hundred survivors. This was in about 1163; but after the battle of Hattin the Samaritans fell on yet more evil days. Those in Caesarea, Damascus, and elsewhere dwindled and disappeared; and from that time onward the remnant of the sect which survived has dwelt solely in Nablus. Here they lived with all men's hands against them, hated by Jew and Christian, oppressed by Arab and Turk. Poor and friendless, without protectors, they clung to life for the pursuit of two ideals, to continue their worship on Mount Gerizim, and to maintain the existence of their race. The former has not always been possible. For many years Gerizim was in other hands, and the Samaritans were forbidden to approach it; only in the latter half of the last century was access to it granted them once more. They never intermarry with strangers, and their numbers for some (p. 124) time past seem to have undergone little variation. In 1675 they wrote that there were few of them; 70 years ago they counted 40 families; in 1901 there were 152 persons, 97 males, and 55 females. At the present time, although a man, if his wife is barren, is permitted to take another, it is doubtful if they can muster 200.

In the south-west part of the town is the little Samaritan quarter. There, in a small whitewashed house which contains synagogue, school, and High Priest's residence, we were received by the High Priest and his family. The High Priest's name was Jacob, the son of Aaron, the son of Solomon; he was a tall, thin man of 70, whose sad and dignified mien betrayed weariness and

dejection. He was dressed as a well-to-do Syrian, but his turban, like those of all his people, was red; it being by the colour of the turban¹ that the different nationalities of Syria are distinguished. Thus, the colour adopted by Moslems is usually white, with gold or yellow silk embroidery; by the *hejaj*, or those who have made the pilgrimage, green. That worn by the Druses is snowy white, by the Sephardim black, and by the Samaritans red. It is a convenient system of identification in a country where the cut of the cloths is not necessarily an indication of the origin or religion of the wearer. Jacob's predecessor was his uncle Amram, the younger son of Solomon, his own father having died in his grandfather Solomon's lifetime; on his uncle's death in 1872, he succeeded in



THE HIGH PRIEST OF THE SAMARITANS



SONS OF THE HIGH PRIEST

Facing p. 124.

(p.125) preference to Amram's son Isaac, then still a child. This Isaac, when we met him, was a red-haired, jovial person, as far as any Samaritan can be said to be jovial; and was evidently a man or more vigorous character than his cousin the High Priest. He had been to Oxford some years previously in an endeavor to sell Samaritan manuscripts to the Bodleian Library, and I suspect that he is the power behind the Nablus throne, and inclined to domineer over the unhappy High Priest, cherishing, perhaps, some grudge at his having inherited his father's office. However that may be, he proved useful to us. Jacob the son of Aaron, while exceedingly courteous, appeared reluctant to display the famous *torah*, the Samaritans' oldest codex of the Pentateuch, which is shown to the people but once a year, and to strangers exceeding seldom; but a tactful allusion to Isaac's travels, a cunning display of our familiarity with his movements,

¹ In Syria the turban does not assume the dimensions which it has attained in India. It is merely a scarf, usually of silk, wound tightly round the base of the fez. The Beduin and peasantry wear a coloured cloth, bound with camel hair cord, instead of turban and fez.

made Isaac into an ally before whom Jacob gave way. He led us across the court and through a small door that opened directly into the synagogue, a plain whitewashed room with a vaulted roof and scanty furniture, and from a recess reverently withdrew the *torah*, which was wrapped in a cover of green embroidered silk.

According to Samaritan tradition, the *torah* was written at the door of the Tabernacle of the Congregation by Abishoa the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the High Priest, the brother of Moses, in the thirteenth year of the settlement of the Jews in Canaan; according to modern scholars it dates from the early centuries of the Christian era. It consists of the Pentateuch only, all of the Old Testament which the Samaritans accept, and is written in the Samaritan char- (p.126) acter on the hair side of a roll composed of the skins of lambs offered up in sacrifice. The roll is brown and brittle with age, and is encased in a silver cylinder, 'the tomb of the sacred book,' being wound on two rollers surmounted by silver knobs. The cylinder, on the back of which are engraved symbols of the Tabernacle and its fittings is in three sections, joined by two sets of hinges, and when open, shows a column of text, when shut, encloses the entire roll. In the middle is a third knob, a dummy, and its total height, inclusive of the knobs, is about two feet six inches. This is the chief, and, indeed, the only treasure of the Samaritans, who are miserably poor. The High Priest complained that on account of their poverty his people were forgetting the old Samaritan language, and that only the *kahens* (priests) could now read and write it. Even they do not employ it for any but liturgical purposes. The language of their everyday life is Arabic, and Samaritan has become, like Syriac, and some of the old Slav languages of Russia and the Balkan peninsula, a tongue which only survives in church services, books of prayer, and official documents. Not a few of the latter have been collected and published; and one epistle, written in the reign of Charles II., is of peculiar interest, as it not only throws light on the vexed question of the genealogy of the High Priests, but also illustrates the curious belief held for so many centuries by the Samaritans that there existed in England, France, and elsewhere in Europe large and prosperous Samaritan colonies, descended from captives carried away by the Franks from Nablus during the Crusades.

The letter is addressed to the Samaritan colony in (p.127) England. It begins by stating that the community in Nablus is weak and unhappy; that it has suffered a heavy loss by the death of its High Priest, the last of the race of Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron; and concludes by asking its brethren over the seas to send to it a priest of the Aaronic house, that the high priesthood might not be extinguished. The reason for this request was that a member of the Aaronic family alone can perform the functions of the high priesthood, the ordinary Levites being only able to undertake lesser priestly duties. Finding that no response came to their prayers, the Samaritans were obliged, no doubt, to have recourse to one of the latter, even though not properly qualified; for when, in 1820, the French Orientalist de Sacy inquired of the then High Priest, Shalmah-ben-Tobiah, as to his origin, Shalmah replied that he traced his descent from Uzziel the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, the head of one of the principal Levitic families. In 1842, however, the same High Priest, in the name of the people, addressed a petition for help to Louis Philippe, appending thereto a genealogy of his family, which, omitting all mention of Uzziel the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, showed him to be directly descended from Aaron. It may have been that, realizing the interest which the learned world was beginning to take in his descent, he thought it well to go more thoroughly into the matter, with the above satisfactory result; as to which of his conclusions was correct I will offer no opinion. In other respects this petition is a most pathetic document. "We diminish in numbers," it says, "from day to day. We adhere with all our might to the observance of the law of Moses, and from the day on which our fathers heard

the voice of the (p. 128) Eternal on Mount Sinai until now, we have not departed one whit from His commandments.”

“Ye must know,” it proceeds, “that we continue under the rule of the Ishmaelites. We honour them, and are satisfied with their government. Yearly we give them money, each one according to his ability, that they compel us not to renounce our faith.

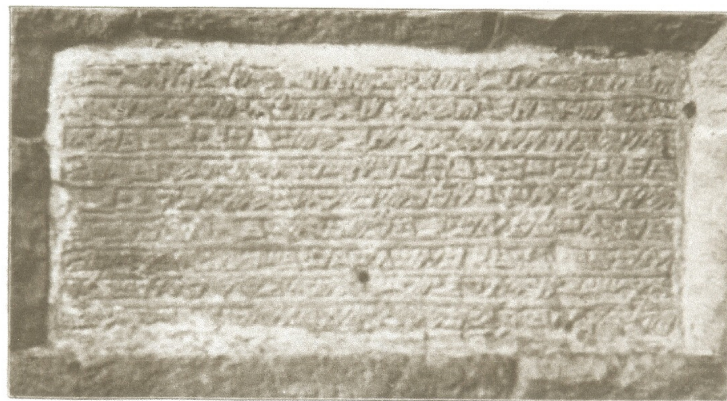
“But in these latter days the people of our town have turned against us, and will no longer bear with us. They forbid us to fulfil the precepts of our law, and we can no longer openly practice our religion. There is none to raise up our head; we are left abandoned to our misfortunes, broken-hearted, and knowing neither security nor rest. To you, therefore, we appeal, knocking at the gate of your compassion, and praying you to admit us to the shade of the roof of your mercy. For without you”- here comes the saddest, the most despairing phrase of all- “none would be troubled at our disappearance.”

The government of Louis Philippe, which on the receipt of the petition was fully occupied with European affairs, did not judge it desirable at the time to meddle with those of Syria, and a few years afterwards itself disappeared. The prayer of the Samaritans thus remained unanswered; but with the renewed interest which the French began to take in the country after the accession of Napoleon III., their situation was improved. If not befriended by the Turks, at least they were tolerated; and to-day, although still poor and few in numbers, their lives are safe and their worship not interfered with.

An American writer on the Samaritans, Dr. Barton, has pointed out, ironically perhaps, that, although they



THE SAMARITAN TORAH



SAMARITAN INSCRIPTION IN THE HIGH PRIEST'S COURT

Facing p. 128.

(p.129) still outnumber the passengers of the Mayflower, whose descendants now are legion, there is little likelihood of their leaving so vast a posterity. Such a consummation would hardly, indeed, be desirable. It is to be hoped, however, that for many years to come they will be preserved, not, as Napoleon once said of another tiny survival of a former age, *comme*

echantillon de republique, but *comme echantillon du passé*; for there still speaks through the Samaritans of Mount Gerizim, albeit in feeble tones, the voice of a past of which all other living traces have long since ceased to be.

Comments on this section from the Editor of theSamaritanUpdate.com

I do not recall ever seeing the photo of the sons of the High Priest before.