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SKETCHES AND MEMORIES OF PALESTINE.

BY REV. JAMES DE NORMANDIE.

ON Monday morning, the 4th of March, we went out of the Damascus gate for the last time, and from every hill-top turned a long gaze backward to Jerusalem, until the descent into the valleys shut it entirely from our sight. It was pleasant to see it; it was pleasant to leave it. Its memories grow even more sacred when all its incidents are reduced to their actual measure, and the exaggerations of the imagination to the verities of history. Its chief lesson is the great idea of the Jews, still held to, that the truest glory is to be sought in the future, and not in the past.

A short ride of twelve miles brought us to our encampment at Bethel, in a large, beautiful grass-plot, soft with springs, once apparently a great reservoir, with a few houses of an Arab village on the rising ground where once was the city and sanctuary of Bethel. Here was the scene of the first controversy and separation in the patriarchal church when the two nomad sheiks, Abraham and Lot, chose of the land before them, which has been compared to the choice of Hercules in Grecian mythology. Here are still the stones of which unnumbered altars might be made, or their surrounding terraces lift themselves into a dreamy staircase reaching to the skies. Here in later days the stone-altar grew to a house of God. When the division of the twelve tribes was consummated, Bethel became the capital and sanctuary under Icroboam. Here he built a temple, and placed a golden calf, and himself burned incense at the altar. Here the prophets had a school. Here the judges held their assemblies. Here, from the hilltop, can be seen, in the distance, the valley which appeared "fertile as the garden of the Lord," or as the land of Egypt. Here Deborah was buried beneath the oak of weeping; and here, when Beth-el had been changed to Beth-aven, — the house of God to the house of idols, — was heard the cry of (p. 230) the inhabitants to the hills above, "Fall on us;" and to the mountains, "Cover us."

After leaving Bethel, we come to a more fertile land, — the heat in the valley is intense, and vegetation assumes something of a tropical richness. The roadside is strewed with the anemone, iris, poppy, buttercups, and here and there a grand terebinth-tree. The hill-sides are in some places terraced to the very top; great groves of almond, fig, and olive trees are seen everywhere; villages are numerous; fields of grain, rich and waving. I could not but think, as we rode through the beautiful valley of Hawara, with its luxuriant growths of flowers and trees and grain all around us, how the sense of the Scriptures is so constantly perverted; for there were two clergyman of our party, whose chief effort seemed to be to discover the curse resting upon the land of Judea for the sins of the

people. One of them remarked to me that not only was there a curse resting upon the whole earth for the fall of Adam, so that it would not produce as much as it otherwise would, but upon Judea especially; and not only would it be impossible to raise abundant crops there, but one would even be wanting in the proper disposition of faith who should attempt it. The simple fact is, that, when improved means of cultivation have been applied to the soil, no land could be found more productive than the valleys of Judea; and the barrenness and desolation, where they are not volcanic, are the result of barbarism.

One great reason why missionary work has been so unsuccessful in Palestine, is that persons who have gone there with such low, literal, and unworthy views of the Bible and of God, were found to be, not higher, but far lower than the Mussulmen.

After riding through some valleys of oppressive heat, we came to one suggestive of sweetest rest. Its shady retreats, its rills trickling like tear-drops from the dark-shadowing rocks; its caves, the lurking-places of Bedouins; its sacred memories, — make it a place for dreamiest meditation. It is supposed to have suggested the eighty-fourth psalm, the favorite hymn of the mystics and pietists and perfectionists. "How (p. 231) amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth, for the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God. Yea, the sparrow hath found an house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, even thine altars, O Lord of hosts! Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee, who, passing through the valley of Baca, make it a well. They go from strength to strength, every one of them in Zion appeareth before God. A day in thy courts is better than a thousand."

At last we came to an open space, where another valley meets the one we are in at right angles. Two high peaks stand fronting each other at its entrance, and the plain made by their confluence is the parcel of ground Jacob bought; and, although the gurgling streams are near, he could not trust the strange and hostile Canaanites, and so dug a well for his own flocks. A rude heap of stones marks the spot of the well, now filled up within ten or twelve feet of the surface. There is hardly a doubt, that this is the very place commemorated by the conversation with the woman of Samaria; and reverently we sat down by it, for here was the birth-place of the absolute and everlasting religion. If I were to build a world-temple where the discords of Christendom might be stilled, it should not be at Jerusalem, with its mass of tradition, and its grand temple worship; nor at Bethlehem, with its beginning of the faith; nor at Nazareth, with its quiet and untold life; nor yet by Galilee's murmuring waves, with their story of the miracles: but at Jacob's well, still uncovered to the bending sky of love, still open for the spirit-worship, where wearied man could find the hidden spring of everlasting life, and, by the toil of duty and prophecy of love, scatter the questionings of selfishness and the shadows of mortality. Not far from the well is a white tomb, said to be Joseph's, but more probably of some Arab sheik. Soon after entering the other valley, we come to Nabulus, the ancient Shechem, and the most flourishing manufacturing place we saw in all the land; but as we passed beyond the city we met a long line of the lepers with their piercing cries and terrible deformities.

In the city of Nabulus is the Samaritan synagogue, and, (p. 232) near by, their school, where a few children were gathered, and at their work. This sect is the oldest and smallest in the world, and still it keeps its religious rites as strictly as when the rival and enemy of the Jews. There are but one hundred and forty of them in all the world, and this number varying little within the memory of man, — a part here, and a part in the neighboring

town of Jenin. Their copy of the Pentateuch (a great pile of parchment, written in a small, regular hand) they claim to be more than three thousand years old, and they worship it almost as Deity. One of the reasons the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans, is, that a bitter strife had been going on, for more than five hundred years before Christ, about this very book, — the Jews claiming the truest and oldest copy, and each accusing the other of falsifying the texts about Ebal and Gerizim. The other reason was this: The Samaritans, being directly on the great caravan route from Damascus to Egypt, had more dealings with the Egyptians and Assyrians and Syrians; and the Jews, who had already developed an intense national feeling, and refused all intercourse with foreign tribes, suspected the Samaritans, not only of adopting some idolatrous rites, but also of becoming a more mixed race than themselves, and so refused to accept their assistance in rebuilding the Temple at Jerusalem: whereupon they built their altar on Gerizim, and held it as sacred as Zion; and the bitterness grew to a proverb, " A bit of the Samaritan's bread is swine's flesh."

Above the town of Nabalus rises the beautiful hill Gerizim, with noisy brooks around its base, and olive and fig groves far up its slope. A long and rather fatiguing walk brings one to the place where the Samaritans celebrate their Paschal feast, in its main features, as it was done five thousand years ago, the only Jewish sacrifice still lingering in the world. Not far from the brow of the hill is a platform where the service takes place. The whole sect comes to the spot, and encamps in tents; the women shut up from sight, the men standing around upon the rocks in the old sacred costume. Some of the elders are clothed in long white robes. Six youths, who are to perform the sacrificial part, have a (p. 233) peculiar costume. Six sheep play around among the worshipers. As the sun goes down, the worship draws to its culmination, and the chanting and prayers and gestures and prostrations become more vehement. The law says in the account of the Paschal sacrifice, "The whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it in the evening;" and so, just as the sun sinks to the horizon, the sheep, which have gradually been driven nearer together, are suddenly thrown on their backs, and the knives flash in the hands of the six youths, and the six offerings are lifeless on the ground. Dipping their fingers in the blood of the victims, the young men touch the foreheads and noses of all the children; and all kiss each other, after the Oriental fashion, on each side of the head. In a hole lined with stones, a short distance from where the animals were slaughtered, they are boiled in great cauldrons, and afterwards roasted; the congregation standing round, and eating bitter herbs and unleavened bread. At midnight, when the Paschal moon is high and bright, the covering of the hole is taken off, and a great cloud of steam and smoke rises to the skies, and the feast begins. With their loins girded, their shoes on their feet, and their staff in their hands, according to the Commandment of the law, they eat in great haste; and the remnants are gathered into another hole, and burned. In the morning they go down the mountain, and resume their occupations in the town. (See Stanley's Sermons in the East, p. 177.) We could see the ashes of the last sacrifice.

Opposite Gerizim is Ebal; and, when the ark was set up in the middle of the valley, half of all Israel stood over against Ebal, and half over against Gerizim, — six tribes on Ebal to utter the curses, and six on Gerizim to utter the blessings, while all the people said Amen, — and religion's first responsive service began.

On the top of Gerizim are the ruins of the old Temple, where the sacrifices were once performed, and from there a lovely view is given to the traveler, — valleys, hills, springs,

groves; but ever the eye turns to that little mound where once was the sacred well. Along the valley, which one must needs go, because it is the high road from Judea into Galilee, (p. 234) we see a weary traveler, coming with tired step, and sitting by the well-side, and longing for its cooling waters. His followers have all gone up the other valley to the city to buy them some provisions. A woman, with her water-jar on her head, comes to the well to draw. The tired traveler asks for a drink. The Samaritan woman speaks of the national prejudices. The tired traveler, who saw a spiritual meaning; in everything, speaks of the gift of God, and the living water. The woman refers to their patriarchal glory. The traveler hints of an everlasting well. The woman speaks of their sacred mountain. The traveler looks up to Gerizim, and Gerizim and Zion are of equal holiness, and of equal insignificance before the God who asks for and accepts the worship which is in spirit and in truth, — anywhere, so it be in spirit; anyhow, so it be in truth.

One can hardly avoid the thought, as he stands by the well-side in Samaria, and thinks of the temples and orgies which profane almost every one of the sacred places, and sees this one left desolate, but holy among its ruins, that some time a more Christian worship may appear on that very spot.

About six miles north of Jacob's well, we reach a large basin, surrounded by hills, one of the striking features of Palestinian landscape. In the centre of this basin, rises another hill, with steep sides, and a long, almost flat top. Here once was Samaria, the capital of the ten tribes after the separation. Here Herod established a royal city, and built a magnificent temple.

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

REV. JAMES DE NORMANDIE was Pastor and chairman of National Conference of Unitarian and Other Christian Churches,

No book has been located using the title and author.