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The Peasantry of Palestine
The Life, Manners and Customs of the Village

By **Elihu Grant**
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(p. 125).....

Though they are so small a sect as scarcely to be counted in the enumeration of present-day religious bodies in Palestine, yet the Samaritans, because of their historical connection with the country and its religious genius, have a significance for us and a description of their great feast may be interesting.¹

About 5.30 o'clock in the afternoon of May 1, 1901, a small party of us who had been riding all day through the hill-country of Ephraim, came in sight of Jacob's Well,² or rather in sight of the walled enclosure about the premises, which the Greek Church has secured. For the first time in some weeks we saw also a line of telegraph poles and wires, that from Nablus to the east of Jordan. We rounded the lower slopes of Mount Gerizim and in a short time were going down the valley, having Gerizim on our left and Ebal on our right. This valley, in which modern Nablus, ancient Shechem, lies, runs east and west. The city of over twenty thousand inhabitants is about eighteen hundred feet above the sea-level, picturesquely lodged between the two moun- (p. 126) tains. The valley is narrow, so that a few minutes' ride from the center of the city would lead one to the slopes of either mountain, and an hour's climb to the top of either. The ascent of Gerizim is a simple matter; that of Ebal would be less pleasant on account of the prickly-pear (cactus) which grows very thickly on its sides. Approaching the city as we did from the east end of the valley, one sees an attractive group of cheerfully tinted buildings, some quite high for a Palestinian city, built rather towards the Gerizim side of the valley. Several tall palm-trees stand among the buildings. A little to the right, and quite prominent, is a Moslem cemetery, its graves covered with stones set up to look like small sarcophagi. The first building reached contains the barracks of the soldiers who do the police duty of the country round. Presently we join the road from Jacob's Well, which forms a V with our own. Rooms were secured at the Latin monastery. We had timed our visit so as to be present at the Passover celebrations of the Samaritans. The once powerful sect, constantly diminishing, is now confined to this one city. Friends living in Nablus report it as numbering but one hundred and twenty souls. The next day, as we rode up the mountain to the Passover, we passed the little graveyard that receives the different members as they fall from the congregation. It looks like a bit of plowed ground, with its simple broken surface. The Samaritans we found near the top of the mountain. There they were at their great camp-meeting of the year, living in tents near the place of sacrifice, which is just below and a little west of the very summit of Gerizim. Moslem and Christian spectators were sitting or walking about the encampment, and here and there among these were Moslem soldiers, the inevitable accompaniments of Eastern religious celebrations.

As there was time before sunset, we went to the summit, a few minutes' walk above the camp. It is a good situation for a citadel and fortification, and we found the ruins of one (p. 127) strewn all over the cap of the mountain. As one stands at the northeast end of the very summit, near a Moslem wily (small memorial building to some saint), the view is superb; mountains on every hand, among them Hermon, farthest yet grandest of them all. Just below us, like a velvet carpet of regular pattern, is the fertile plain of Makhna, running north and south. True to Syrian religious custom, according to which every sect or religion makes a convenient grouping of all its holy places, we have only to look around to see the celebrated places of sacred writ. Here, the Samaritans claim, is the true Shiloh, the true Bethel, and also Mount Moriah. Over there to the southeast, across the Makhna, is the little village of Rujib, which they say is Ai, while the village of 'Awarta is the burial-place of the sons of Aaron. Not accuracy, but convenience

¹ 2 Kings 17:24-41; John 4:9, 12, 20.

² John 4:6.

and monopoly, seem to guide Eastern religionists in identifying holy places. Near this the northeast end of the mountain is a portion of the foundation of the ancient Samaritan temple. A little to the south, on the east side, is a large expanse of rock, sloping westward. Here, they claim, was the true site of the tabernacle, the altar being the rock, the slope of which allowed the blood of victims to flow into the pit at the lower end. At the west end of the ruined castle are shown twelve huge stones which, they say, are the ones that Joshua took from the bed of the Jordan.³ At the northwest side is an old pool.

Returning now to the encampment, which was in excitement over the coming ceremony, we found a sunken space about three feet deep and about twenty by forty feet in area. It ran north and south and was enclosed by a wall. A tent had been standing in the southerly end as we went by on the way up the hill. This was now taken down and allowed to lie flat on the ground, affording a good-sized space for the priests, who came into the enclosure with some twenty other men with their prayer-rugs. These Samaritan (p. 128) tans were fine-looking people. I think that they had the finest faces I ever saw in such numbers in the East. They had well-formed heads, and there was quite a variety of facial types, some round and chubby, others long, some dark and others light. They all, old men as well as little boys, had clear, delicate skins. The high priest was tall and slight. His beard was gray and his countenance very pleasing. The second priest was a larger man, heavy and well proportioned, with a brown beard. In the middle of the enclosure was a little pit with fire over which were three large kettles of boiling water. Near it were seven lambs ready for the sacrifice, nosing around and chewing contentedly. The enclosure soon filled up with the Samaritans. The high priest and the men with him took their places on the canvas facing the east, towards the rock of sacrifice just mentioned and began the ritual of the Passover. The high priest wore a long green robe. The others were dressed in white. The rest of the men and children stood about, inside the enclosure, taking part in the service. When about half through with the service the high priest turned and faced the two irregular rows of worshipers behind him and began the prayers, among them one for the Sultan. We noticed on the breast of the high priest a badge said to be the gift of the Sultan. After the prayers all except the high priest went to the other end of the enclosure while he began reading the twelfth chapter of Exodus. The sun was about to set. The Passover moon, like a silver globe, came over the top of Gerizim in front of us. Just as the priest came to the word *kill*, at a certain place in the chapter, the eager look on the faces of the Samaritans gathered about the animals became very intense, and as the fatal word was pronounced with unusual emphasis the knives of those in readiness were set to the throats of the sacrificial victims and the high priest turned his face again towards the east in supplicatory prayer. The blood was caught and a little of it was daubed on the (p. 129) faces of some of the children. Then hot water was used to help pull off the wool from the sheep, as they were to be roasted in their skins over the large fiery pit, which all this time had been in preparation just outside the enclosure to the southeast corner. Men had been continually replenishing it with fuel until the rocks were very hot. A rustic frame of crossed sticks was provided to cover it when all was ready. Long wooden spits were brought and the lambs, with heads on but the right fore limbs removed, were fixed for roasting. The refuse parts were destroyed by fire. Unleavened bread, a sort of thin, rolled pastry, was passed about in little bits with bitter herb rolled inside. As it was late and the ritual over, the actual consumption of the lambs, which comes along towards midnight, being said to be a very ordinary affair, we started down the mountain for Nablus. The moon, now golden, flooded the beautiful valley with its light. Such a night! We soon reached our rooms in the town and said "good night" all around.

Comments on this section from the Editor of theSamaritanUpdate.com

This reference is not listed 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

Elihu Grant (1873 - 1942) was an American scholar and writer on Palestine. Grant was ordained Methodist minister in 1900. His visit to the Samaritans was May 2, 1901

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elihu_Grant

³ Josh. 4:3-5, 20.