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The Texas Doctor and the Arab Donkey:
or, Palestine and Egypt as viewed by Modern Eyes
By Joseph Marstain Fort, M. D.
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(p. 456)...

This valley of Nablaus or Nabulus is finely watered; the brook from one of the springs flowing down near Jacob's well, turning south before reaching the well, flows between the well and the foot of Gerizim.

All being ready, we mount our horses and ride up the Nablaus valley to Shechem, having Gerizim on our left and Ebal on our right. The valley is narrow, but well set in olives and fruit trees. As we ride up the valley we pass a chapel where it is said forty Jewish prophets are buried, and where the pillar of Abimelech once stood. "When the men of Shechem gathered (p. 457) together and made Abimelech king by the plain of the pillar that was in Shechem." For this they had a lively time at this place for awhile, but finally this usurper Abimelech was killed, and peace reigned once more in Shechem. Before starting we learned that the remnant of the Samaritans were in camp on the top of Gerizim, celebrating the Feast of the Passover. So before reaching the town we turned (under the direction of a guide) to the left and began the ascent of this high mountain, whose top is twenty-eight hundred and fifty feet above sea level.

It requires an hour to reach the summit of this old mountain of Ephraim, which stands as one of the many monuments found in the Holy Land testifying to the truth of the history of this old land as given in the scriptures. The ascent is made by a narrow, crooked path, winding around great boulders, first in one direction, and then in another, till finally we reach the top and see spread out before us the tents of the Samaritans.

As we approach the tents we are surrounded by boys, each offering to hold our horses while we take a stroll around the encampment. These people are of medium size, light yellow or rather orange complexion, well-featured, resembling the Bethlehemites. Their women were dressed as neat and tidy as their extreme poverty allow. Some of them wore ornaments of earrings and necklaces and other showy trinkets.

They had slain, cooked and eaten the pascal lamb, in strict accordance with the requirements of the Mosaic law, the blood of the slain lamb having been sprinkled on the sides and over the doors of the tent. This scene was one of peculiar interest to me at the time, as I had just come from the land of Egypt, and (p. 458) having so recently passed through the land of Goshen, in which the Israelites lived and where they were sorely oppressed, the land from which went up their piteous cries to the God of heaven, having so recently stood where Moses and Aaron stood when carrying out under God's direction their grand mission of deliverance when, among other plagues sent upon the land of Egypt and its hardened monarch, the angel of death visited every household and robbed every Egyptian family of its first born, from the household of Pharaoh to that of the humblest peasant in the land; having just passed through the land where this feast of the

passover was instituted more than three thousand years ago, in commemoration of the special protection and preservation of the children of his own peculiar people on that fatal night when the cries and mournings of the bereaved Egyptians went up from every household.

I was standing in the midst of a remnant of this people while they were celebrating this ancient feast, instituted and inaugurated by God himself in the land of Egypt, to be perpetuated by them as a nation and as a people.

What a forcible and beautiful type of the efficacy of the blood of the Lamb of God, that saves from sin and the wages of sin, which is death.

To me this was a wonderful experience, an experience which I can never forget. The whole picture, as it was impressed upon my mind that evening as I looked upon the circle of white tents of this remnant of the Samaritans, performing a duty which God required of them and which they had faithfully per-



AMRAN, HIGH PRIEST OF THE SAMARITANS.

(p. 459) formed through all these centuries, interested me beyond measure.

There are now only about one hundred and fifty of the Samaritans living. Their high priest, "Amran," was very cordial in his greeting and seemed not only glad to meet us, but was anxious to interest us in his people. In the twelfth century Benjamin, of Judea, found about one thousand adherents of the sect of the Samaritans at this place. At that period there were also a few of them at Ascalon, Caesarea and Damascus. We learned that there were now only some forty or fifty families in all, and that their numbers were constantly decreasing. They live here in a distinct quarter of the town to themselves. It may not be uninteresting to the reader to learn something of the religious views and practices of this old sect that seems to be gradually fading from the earth. Not many years hence they will be spoken of as a people who once lived in Palestine, but who have now passed away with the flight of time.

The Samaritans are strict monotheists, and abhor all images and all expressions whereby human attributes are ascribed to God. They believe in good and evil spirits, in a resurrection and last judgment. They expect a Messiah to appear six thousand years after

the creation of the world, but they do not think he will be greater than Moses. Of the Old Testament they possess the Pentateuch only. They claim that the copy they have is one of five made by the grandson of Aaron. Three times a year, that is, at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of the Passover, they pitch their tents on Mt. Gerizim and celebrate these feasts. "While they celebrate all the Mosaic (p. 460) festivals, it is only at the Feast of the Passover that they offer sacrifices." If a Samaritan dies, his nearest akin, but not his brother, as prescribed in the book of Leviticus, is bound to marry his widow. Bigamy is prohibited unless the first wife be childless.

The summit of Mt. Gerizim consists of a large plateau extending north and south. At the north end we find the fallen down remains of what was once a large stone building or castle. It is thought this immense castle which encloses a large area, with walls from five to ten feet in thickness, composed of hewn stone, was erected during the time of Justinian, *i. e.*, during the 6th century. A little below the castle walls to the south, some massive substructions are shown as the stones of the altar which Joshua is said to have erected here. The scriptures, however, locate this altar on Mt. Ebal, on the opposite side of the valley. The scriptures read as follows: "Then Joshua built an altar unto the Lord God of Israel in Mt. Ebal," and this is the place, *i. e.*, Mt. Ebal, where Moses commanded the children before crossing the Jordan, that they should build this altar, and he told them that it should be made of whole stone, that they should not lift any tool of iron upon them, that it should be plastered, and that they should write upon them "All the words of this law," the law he was then giving them.

The whole surface of the plateau on Gerizim seems to have been at one time covered with buildings. We find portions of walls, cisterns and here and there pavements, running in different directions, all of which indicate that a town or city covered the plateau at one time.

I think' it reasonable to conclude that when Abram (p. 461) passed through Shechem and erected an altar there or near there, the city stood upon the heights of Gerizim. In those olden days cities were built upon the highest hills or mountains, as they were much more easily defended than when in a valley. We find when Rome was built it was placed on the summits of her seven hills, Athens upon the Acropolis, Corinth was on an acropolis. Jebus was thought to be impregnable by the Jebusites on account of its location. I might mention many others if necessary. The Romans seldom moved the site of a city taken by conquest, and it may be that much of the ruins now seen upon Gerizim reach no farther back than to the Roman occupation of Palestine.

Near the center of the plateau the Samaritans point out a projecting stone as having once been the site of the altar of their temple.

From the top of this mountain we see, looking east, the mountains of Gilead in the distance; looking north, old Hermon; westward, the hills and valleys slope away to the blue band of the distant Mediterranean.

Mt. Ebal is a higher mountain than Gerizim, it being 2,986 feet above sea level. Its ascent is even more difficult than Gerizim. A fine view is said to be obtained from its summit. I did not go upon Ebal, as up and down Gerizim satisfied me, as it did our company, for one day at least. These are the two mountains from which Moses commanded that the curses and blessings should be read to the children of Israel, which was done as he commanded.

On a hill to the north of Ebal once laid the city of Tirzah. We read that in the twenty-sixth year of the reign of Asa king of Judah, Elah the son of Baasha, (p. 462) began to reign over Israel in Tirzah. We are further told that before he had enjoyed his royal honors long, his servant, Zimri, who was captain of half his chariots, concluded that he would like to be king over Israel himself for a while. Let me say just here, if Elah had lived in this the 19th century A. D. instead of the 10th century. B. C, one would conclude that he had perhaps traveled over America and contracted some one or more of our American habits, for it is said Zimri found him in the house of the steward (of his own house) in Tirzah drinking himself drunk, and killed him and reigned in his stead.

Some reader of these pages may think and say that I am saying a hard thing of my own countrymen, and casting an unjust reflection upon them as a people. In answer to this I will say, this but accords with our reputation. I am the last man in the world that would rob my countrymen of their well-earned reputation. I believe we are regarded as a proud, independent, intelligent, law-abiding, fun-loving, whisky-drinking people. In justification of the above remark I will say, I see in my own city of fifteen thousand inhabitants more whisky-drinking in one month than I saw in four months of travel in foreign countries. In fact, during all my travels in those distant lands I never saw a single man under the influence of intoxicants until I reached London on my return; notwithstanding, I was on three continents, and among people who are regarded as heathens.

Nabulus, or Nablaus, has a population of ten or twelve thousand. There are about six hundred orthodox Greeks, a few Jews, some one hundred and forty or one hundred and fifty Samaritans, also a few Latins and (p. 463) Protestants, but the bulk of the population are Arabs, and Mohammedans of course. The environs of this place are "beautifully green and extremely fertile," and finely watered. Large, fine, bold springs may be seen in every direction bursting out from beneath the adjacent mountains. Beautiful streams of water run through all the streets. Nabulus boasts of twenty-two soap manufactories. It is manufactured *alone* for exportation, however, none being reserved for home consumption. I think this people have a hereditary aversion to soap and water. Or it may be that, like some of our christian sects, they have religious scruples in regard to the use of too much water. My intercourse with these Arabs convinces me that in one regard they are like another christian sect quite numerous in our own country, in this, they don't like for any one (especially strangers) to eat and drink with them. They esteem it exclusively a family or church privilege.

In the eastern part of the town we entered a mosque which was originally a church of the Crusaders dedicated to St. John, and probably afterwards belonged to the Knights of St. John.

On the southeast side of the town is another mosque, which is said to stand on the spot where Joseph's coat was brought by his brethren to their father Jacob. The Samaritans have a synagogue here and perform their religious services in the Samaritan dialect. The office of high priest is hereditary, and the present high priest, Amran, claims to be a descendant of the tribe of Levi. The copy of the Pentateuch which these Samaritans have is certainly a very ancient document; it is kept in a tin or metal box and is never taken out except it be placed behind a curtain, and when taken (p. 464) out all press forward to kiss it. We had in our company a lad some twelve or fourteen years old who went behind the curtain to see it. Amran said he was the first child or lad that was ever permitted to see it. Some one of the company asked the high priest if it was written in Hebrew? He rather

indignantly replied, "No, it is written in the language of Moses." I am pretty sure if Moses claimed any language as peculiarly his own, it was the Hebrew, for by birth he was a Hebrew. It is true he was raised in Egypt and educated with Rameses II, perhaps at Heliopolis, and of course was familiar with the Egyptian language. 'We also know that he was familiar with the Greek and Roman, and perhaps other languages. I imagine, however, that this copy of the Pentateuch was written in Hebrew, Amran to the contrary notwithstanding.

The ruins of the old city of Samaria lie some six or eight miles northwest of Nablus. The road runs along the eastern border of a lovely valley, at the foot of the hills which bound the valley on the east. Now and then we crossover a spur of the hills which project into the valley. Villages are more numerous in this part of the country. The peasants live in villages and till the valley lands. We daily meet these tillers of the soil, either going to or returning from their farms. They lash their long-beam one-handle plows on the back of the donkeys and walk behind them, never in front. You can drive a donkey, but you can't lead him. The donkey is very unlike the human kind in this respect. Both men and women can be led, but not driven. One of the most dominant, as well as one of the most unexceptionable characteristics of the whole donkey family, whether they have two or four legs, is stubbornness.

(p. 465) We see no fences or farmhouses here, no barns or outhouses, no gardens. Around some of the villages we find the orchards enclosed with cactus hedges, or stone fences. The houses in which these people live are miserable substitutes for residences; low, squatty, filthy pens made of sun dried brick, sod, or rough piled stone, roofed in with straw, or old mats, or sorghum stalks, arranged so as to leave a hole in the center for the smoke to go through.

When we ride through the narrow, filthy alleys of one of these Arab villages, old women, children and dogs come pouring out of these dens by the scores. The women, filthy, ragged and haggard; the children, with filth encrusted on their faces, unkempt, uncombed, half-naked, and mangy dogs, all inhabit the same one room dwelling.

Now, this is not an overdrawn or exaggerated picture of the peasants, their houses and their mode of living. It is just what we see in every Arab village, both in Egypt and throughout all Palestine. These are the people who occupy the country given to Abraham and his posterity, a country of untold resources, a picturesque country, a country susceptible of being made an earthly paradise; indeed, a country abounding in fertile valleys, rich rolling ridges, extensive plateaus, and mountain sides unsurpassed for fertility, abundant water power, and springs of pure cold water on every side.

Man could wish for no more desirable country than this. I know of no country with more natural resources and facilities for man's habitation than Palestine.

Zimri, having killed Elah, king of the northern empire, and having burned the king's palace, Omri, (p. 466)

Comments on this section from the Editor of the SamaritanUpdate.com

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The doctor's travel to Nablus was in 1891.