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SAMARIA AND THE SAMARITANS.

THE following are extracts of a letter from Dr Bowring, containing an account of his visit to Samaria and the Samaritans:—

"One of my principal motives for wishing to visit Sychar was to ascertain the situation, and, if possible, to make the acquaintance of that fragment of the old Samaritans who still inhabit their ancient capital, still observe their ancient rites, still preserve the most remarkable peculiarities which characterized them at the period of the gospel-history; and buy inquiries were greatly facilitated by the circumstances around me.

I found that the number of Samaritan families now living at Sychar is 11, consisting of about 120 persons. They are very careful in their registration of births, marriages, and deaths, and profess to have the ancestry of the principal individuals of their body up to the time of Moses. 'The numbering of the people' takes place every year; and they assured me, they observed the greatest accuracy in their family-records. Their number had at one period been reduced to as low as (in individuals, but they were now somewhat on the increase. For their chief priest, who, as they avow, is directly descended from Shem (and who himself wrote out for me his family-genealogy in Arabic), they entertain the highest reverence. His influence over the little community seems boundless. They told me they had no positive information of any Samaritans except themselves, who 'all worshipped on Mount Gerizim;' but they had heard that some of their faith were scattered in distant lands, and still preserved the religious usages of their forefathers. They had even been told that there were Samaritans in England, and in the English countries to the east (meaning British India), and were very curious to know whether I knew or had ever heard of such Samaras or Samaritans, and whether it would be possible to establish intercourse

with them. They seemed much afflicted when I told them that I believed there was no reason to suppose that any of their race existed in any portion of the British empire. They said they had been visited by many Christians, and especially by English Christians, of whom they spoke with great respect, and asked me to explain why a nation so far away should take any interest in a few poor families who were neither Christians, nor Jews, nor Mussulmans. I asked them whether they had ever heard that our Prophet had spoken of one of their nation as the good Samaritan,—referring to his conduct as a model of humanity and charity? I repeated to them the parable as it was taught by our Saviour; and the chief priest answered, ' We had at that time a good Hakin (physician) amongst us—surely it must have been he!' And they told me of a tradition among them, that this Hakin was universally honoured for his active beneficence. Had their tradition its origin in Christian history, or was the parable of Jesus itself a reference to a tradition existing in the time of our Lord?

I was escorted by the Samaritan scribe to the temple, through many dark and winding streets. On reaching the portal, he required me to take off my shoes, as did he and the other worshippers, some of whom were in the act of prayer—prostrate on the ground—with their foreheads pressing the dust. The chief priest came to meet me,—a man of calm, sober, (p. 618) and imposing mien, with a long white beard, little distinguished from those around him by his dress; his countenance, however, and the countenances around me, having nothing of the Hebrew expression, but resembling much those of the Druses of Mount Lebanon, the ancient Syrian race. His reception was most cordial. He introduced to me his son, and his son's sons, his successors in the priesthood, which he said he had held in inheritance from the time of the giving the law. He spoke calmly of Christians and Mussulmans, but of the Jews with extreme bitterness, as corruptors of the Holy Book, who had turned away the true worshippers from the sacred mount Gerizim. He brought from the interior of the temple the ancient copy of the Pentateuch, which he assured me was the unpolluted original, and was 3460 years old. It was in a silvered tin case covered with scarlet silk; he allowed me to unroll it. Its appearance was of far higher antiquity than any MSS. I have ever seen. It has been carefully and frequently repaired; it is in the old Samaritan character, and I found it was read with facility by himself and his descendants, and was habitually used in the service of the temple. But the language has ceased to be employed for colloquial purposes among the Samaritans, though they all profess to understand it,—and they may, perhaps, to about the same extent in which Hebrew is understood by the Jews. The chief priest frequently reverted to the controversy as to the superior sanctity of Mount Gerizim, or Jerusalem. 'Here is the law,' he said, 'here is the book; here are the very words. They (the Jews) could not deny the authority, so they falsified the passage.' I obtained from the chief priest *a* specimen—a very tolerable fac-simile of a part of the Samaritan Pentateuch, and the scribe promised that he would give me a copy of the verse which the Jews are asserted to have eliminated from the original text; but I have not yet received it.

In their domestic manners and customs, the Samaritans are but little distinguished from the races that surround them. They are bigamists, but not polygamists; and divorce is of easy attainment. Their women veil themselves like the Syrians in general; for the practice of veiling now pervades all classes; and I have often heard it inquired by Syrian Christian ladies, whether the respectable women of England were so immodest as to walk out with uncovered faces? It would not appear that the use of the veil was so universal in the

patriarchal times, nor was it habitual. It is recorded of Rebecca, that she veiled herself, but only when Isaac approached her as a stranger; when she rode on her camel in the presence of her servants, her face was uncovered; and in the case of Tamar, the circumstance of her being veiled was deemed injurious to her reputation. But in the apostolic times the veiling or covering the head had become a general practice; and Mahomet—whose ritual recognised so many of the usages of Oriental life—made the veiling of women a peremptory religious duty. In fact, a stronger reproach cannot be addressed to a Mussulman lady than that her face had been seen out of the harem. When, by any accident or intrusion, a stranger encounters an unveiled woman in the East she generally shrieks out aloud, and exclaims 'O my misfortune!' 'O my misery!' and in these particulars the Samaritans are not distinguished from their neighbours.

But small as is their number, great is their national pride. The chief priest told me he considered they were the appointed conservators of the purity of the Mosaic faith,—the guardians of holy writ,—the favourites of Jehovah, into whose hands were committed, to be preserved through all time, the truths communicated to the patriarchs by the great lawgiver. He referred to the preservation of their Pentateuch as an evidence of Divine favour. Our land, said he, has passed from conqueror to conqueror; we have been persecuted by one set of invaders after another; our town, our country, have been the seat of civil war; three times have we been compelled to hide our Holy Book in the recesses of Mount Gerizim, where it once remained concealed for more than seventy years; but we still exist, a nation apart, with our own temple, our language, the customs of our fathers; and you see before you, now three generations of our priests—myself, my son, and my son's sons (pointing to a middle-aged man who hung over him while he was speaking, and two little boys who were sitting at his feet).

In truth, the whole body of the Samaritans, though removed from abject poverty, are not many degrees above that condition. I inquired who was the richest man among them, and was told that 2000 piastres (L, 20 sterling) was probably the largest fortune among them. But the Mahomedan governor bore testimony to their general respectability. He said they were a quiet and harmless people, and among the most trustworthy of the population of Nablous. The governor, however, did not confirm their statements as to their unshaken fidelity to the faith of their fathers. He said that many of them had become Mussulmans, and that there had been a notable diminution of their numbers. Their enmity against the Jews is so strong, that no Hebrew is admitted into the Samaritan synagogue. Happily the ill-will that exists has seldom an opportunity of wreaking itself on individuals, for in Nablous there are no resident Jews, and it may be doubted if any of the Samaritans ever come in contact with their rivals. The governor told me he was not sure that the Jews ever visited his capital. I had no opportunity of ascertaining whether the feeling of dislike was reciprocal between them and the Samaritans. Perhaps few of them are aware of the existence of any of the Samaritan race.

The existence of the Samaritans in their present unchanged condition, representing as they do the habits, language, opinions, and ritual of their ancient nation, is one of the most interesting facts with which I am acquainted. During my abode among them, I could not dissociate my mind from the fancy that I was living in the very days of the apostles. So little altered was the phraseology, so kindred the prejudices, so similar the worship, to those of which the narrative of the New Testament has conveyed to us the record, that I could hardly fancy sixty generations had passed away since the time when that narrative

was written; for as every fact reported is accordant with the existing state of things, so there is an abiding truth and life in every touch left by the gospel-historians. My second visit to Nablous was the sequence of my being unable to enter Jerusalem, in consequence of the plague having broken out in the Holy City; but the disappointment has almost ceased to be a subject of regret, when I think of the opportunity which that disappointment gave me of passing another day at the foot of Mount Gerizim, among the men and women of Samaria, still to be seen, still to be studied, in all that characterised them when Jesus and the apostles sojourned among them more than 18 centuries ago."

Comments on this section from the Editor of theSamaritanUpdate.com

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