

The Samaritan, Most Ancient Jewish Sect, Appeal for Help.

Only 150 of Them Left.



A Bird's Eye View of the Ancient City of Samaria and its Surrounding Olive Groves. Copyright, 1903, by Wm. H. Rice, Phila.

I ALL of stature, gaunt, as through suffering, but dignified and silent, four men, clad in the robes of their priestly office, have just visited England to implore aid for a dying race.

They were representatives of the Samaritans of Palestine, who are so harried and taxed by the Turks that life is a continual struggle to them.

The oldest Jewish sect on earth, and once very numerous, the Samaritans have dwindled to thirty families and fewer than 150 persons. As a people they have defied the ravages of war, poverty and oppression nearly three thousand years. Never has their unity been broken; their customs and manner of worship have remained unchanged.

Except that they are so pitifully few in number, the sect is the same today as it was when the Good Samaritan of the parable succored the traveler who had fallen among thieves; its unbroken line stretches back to the morning of history, when Abraham crossed the Jordan and pitched his tents in the land of Shechem.

A long and valiant struggle for existence, asking nothing but to be let alone with their traditions and their religion, have these people made, but the rapacious Turk is now slowly crushing out the life of the little remnant. In despair they raise their voices to Christendom and cry, "Save us, or we perish."

VISITORS to the small city of Nablus, in North Palestine, are attracted there, more than anything else, by the pathetic little religious community that has clung desperately, through centuries of oppression and poverty, to the foot of its sacred Mount Gerizim.

No more tenaciously has the cactus root held to the granite sides of somber Ebal, across the valley, than has this devoted band nestled in its chosen abode to await the advent of a new religious era.

Of all religious sects, this is the most ancient, the most extraordinary, in a way, and yet the smallest numerically and the feeblest in the world. Their story is one of pathos and tears, yet of unflinching loyalty to the traditions and beliefs that have come down to them unchanged from the time of Father Abraham.

Among the millions of the human race, the Samaritans assert themselves to be the only true worshipers of God, the sole depositaries of His revealed will.

"The fire that was kindled from heaven on the sacred altar of the Jews has long been extinguished, says an authority in expressing the convictions of the Samaritans. 'The light that, age after age, shone out upon the surrounding darkness from the holy Mount at Jerusalem has been quenched in endless night, but its latest illuminations linger still on the cliffs of Gerizim, in the mountains of Samaria, a gleam of inextinguishable light.

"CHOSEN SEED OF ISRAEL"

"Clinging to these cliffs and steadfastly watching that heavenly light, these ancient Samaritans, as the chosen seed of Israel, are waiting in sure and certain expectation the coming of the cheerful morn that shall yet rise on the dark and dreadful night that is still gathering around them. 'We know that Messiah cometh, which is called Christ. When He is come, He will tell us all things,' is their cry."

A single long, narrow street, running east and west through a wonderful cleft in the mountain, composes Nablus. The Samaritans are clustered in a colony in the southwest quarter. Several hundred feet above them towers Gerizim, their sacred mountain.

While other people of Palestine have scattered to the four corners of the earth, the true Samaritan would never think of removing permanently beyond the shadow of his beloved Gerizim.

There, clustered together in a recess of the cliff, they dwell quietly, close by their little synagogue, where they assemble for devotions, conducted as they were 3000 years ago.

Every Samaritan dresses in white, especially when appearing in public, in the religious assemblies and on all festival occasions. In order to comply with Moslem regulations, rather than from taste, the men wear red turbans. The women are permitted to wear earrings, because of them the golden calf was made.

The valley in which the Samaritans dwell is a sparkling gem of nature. In all the country roundabout there is nothing that approaches it in beauty and fertility.



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Samaritan High Priest, and the Original Roll of the Pentateuch.

While barren lands and deserts stretch their miles over much of the surrounding country, this quiet, half-concealed little valley, blooms as the rose. The profusion of fruits and flowers suggests a glimpse of the tropics. Figs, mulberries, grapes, oranges, pomegranates, apricots, almonds and other fruits vie with each other in luxurious growth in this miniature Eden. Over all is a peculiar coloring of sky and atmosphere which has been described as "a lovely bluish haze."

Samaritans assert that their real name is Israelites—"the true Israel of God," they say, "in distinction from the Jews, descendants of Judah, who have forsaken the religion of their fathers."

They declare that a copy of the Pentateuch in their possession is older than that of the Jews. They have other ancient manuscripts of priceless value as well. Among these is a scroll which has been used in their synagogues for many centuries.

Enclosed in a silver case and kept in a chest, the original scroll is rarely shown to visitors. It consists of dingy skins, which were prepared long before the invention of parchment, sewed together. The skins are about fifteen by twenty-five inches, and are now worn and patched;

in fact, large portions of the writing are illegible.

When the Samaritans want a new copy of the Pentateuch, some scholar among them slowly prints it out by hand. They have no printing presses. A year is required to make a copy, which is never sold, but kept for the use of the community.

In religion the Samaritans are strict monotheists. They permit no pictures in their homes or temples—not even the portrait of a friend—holding fast to the injunction against representation "in the likeness of anything 'in heaven above or in the earth beneath."

They believe in good and evil angels, in heaven and hell, where good and wicked abide after death. After a future judgment, they believe that body and soul are reunited for a happy or unhappy existence, according to the life lived on earth. They fix the coming of the Messiah at 6000 years from the creation of the world.

"He will quickly come and gather all nations unto himself." His throne of universal dominion will be on Mount Gerizim. The twelve stones on which Joshua wrote the Ten Commandments will be recovered, as will the sacred vessels of the temple and the pot of manna now buried on the mountain.

Amram, then high priest of the Samaritans, related to the late Bishop Hurst, of the Methodist Episcopal Church, a few years ago, some of the theological views of the dying community.

For fifty-five years, he stated, men will go on increasing in wickedness, after which will come a time of great peace and purity. Then there will come on a new period of great wickedness, which will last 300 years. This time will be closed by the destruction of the world.

After this the general judgment will take place, when the righteous will go to live with God and the wicked will be finally dispatched to the domain of Satan.

The Samaritans assert that they alone have kept the faith as it was committed to Abraham; that other Jewish peoples have wandered away from pure religion and the prescribed worship. Enmity between the Jews and Samaritans, spoken of in the New Testament, continues unabated to this day.

Strictly orthodox are the domestic institutions of the Samaritans. Their names are taken from the ancient Scriptures. The family of their priesthood has descended directly from the tribe of Levi.

When Samaritans want to marry, which they do at an early age, the proposal of the young man is made—frequently by his father—to the

girl's father. The prospective bridegroom must guarantee an acceptable dowry before his proposal is considered.

Written out at great length, the marriage agreement is witnessed with much solemnity, during which ceremony prescribed portions of the law are read aloud. The wedding festivities last several days, and end with an interchange of gifts between the newly married pair and their friends.

A Samaritan priest never comes in contact with the dead. If the relatives themselves perform the last offices of affection for their departed ones, they subject themselves to the Levitical law, which provides penance for ceremonial uncleanness. For this reason, persons not of the sect are called in to perform the burial offices.

After morning services on the Sabbath following a burial, the entire congregation gathers about the grave and eats a simple meal, in accordance with the lovefeast of ancient times.

Every Sabbath is strictly observed, but the severest regulations and solemnity surround the Day of Atonement. For twenty-four hours the people do not eat, drink, sleep or converse. The entire time is given to silent meditation and reading the Scriptures.

Processions to the holy mountain mark the feasts of Pentecost, Tabernacles and Passover today, as they did 3000 years ago. The Passover is marked by especially solemn and ancient ceremonies.



Jacob's Well, Where Christ Talked with the Woman of Samaria. The Man and Woman shown Here are Samaritans. Copyright, 1903, by Wm. H. Rice, Phila.

Before the sun sets on the preceding day the entire community proceeds to the top of Mount Gerizim and encamps. For the Paschal sacrifice six lambs without blemish are provided.

As the sun sets the members of the congregation, in white robes, gather about the sacrificial fires. They chant prayers and sacred songs, reciting the entire history of the plagues of Egypt and the establishment of the Passover.

While this ceremony is in progress the lambs are led out, and the young men appointed to slay them draw their long, sharp knives. At a certain passage the lambs are slain and the slayers cross themselves with the blood.

Next the lambs are roasted over the fires, while bitter herbs, inclosed in strips of unleavened bread, are handed around. The people then retire to their tents until midnight, when the feast begins.

At that time the men of the congregation stand in two lines, with shoes on their feet, staves in their hands and rope girdles about their waists, as instructed by Exodus xii, 11.

After certain recitations each man tears off pieces of flesh and eats hurriedly and silently. Portions of the flesh are then taken to the women in the tents.

When the feast is over every particle of remaining flesh and bone is thrown into the fire and burned. The rest of the night is passed in prayer, and in the morning the people return to their homes and their daily occupations.

"Thus on this sacred mountain in Samaria the Paschal Lamb is offered year after year—the only Jewish sacrifice that still lingers in the world"—says a writer. Every detail of ceremonial as prescribed by the ancient law is faithfully observed.

Such is the strange sect in historic Palestine, the oldest and smallest sect in the world, which, for the first time in all its remarkable history, sends out a cry to be preserved from total extinction.