

intense interest that would attach to the discovery of David's tomb, with an inscription in the oldest form of Hebrew ever found!

4. Might not this question be submitted to a committee of experts who should decide upon the most promising points for probing the ground?

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## THE SAMARITANS.

I. *Their Numbers.*—There appears to be some mistake abroad concerning the actual number of the Samaritans, and this, of course, affects the question of the probable survival of this interesting people for a longer or a shorter time. In Dean Stanley's "Lectures on the Jewish Church," Part I, Appendix II, mention is made of "the whole community—amounting, it is said, to 152, from which hardly any variation has taken place within the memory of man." This was during the Prince of Wales' visit to Palestine in 1862, and it does not lead us to expect any early decline. But Captain Conder, in "Tent-work in Palestine," assures us that year by year the Samaritans are dying out. "Clinging to Shechem and the Holy Mountain, they are the last left of the nation which in the fifth and seventh centuries spread far over Palestine and Egypt." "In 1872 the little community numbered 135 souls, of whom no less than 80 were males. The Moslems say that the number is never exceeded, and that one of the 80 dies as soon as a child is born. By the defection of Jacob Shellaby with his family they have been reduced to a total of 130 souls."

A decline of 17 souls in ten years—reducing the numbers from 152 in the year 1862 to 135 in the year 1872—would bring the numbers down to 110 in 1887, if the decline continued, and end in the speedy extinction of the race. On a recent visit to Nablus I made inquiry on this point, and my questions were put to the High Priest himself. His reply was that his people numbered from 96 to 100, but this (he said) was without counting certain women and children, who might bring up the number to 165. If these women and children were included in Dean Stanley's estimate, there would appear now to be some increase in the number of souls; but if they were not taken into account either by Dean Stanley or Captain Conder, it would seem that the decline of the little community is proceeding at an accelerated pace.

II. *The Ancient Copy of the Law.*—Travellers have spoken of the great difficulty they experienced in obtaining a sight of the most ancient Samaritan roll. In 1865 it was considered a great favour, I believe, shown to Sir Charles Wilson, that he should be allowed to photograph it for the Palestine Exploration Fund. Captain Conder describes the difficulties raised, in a later year, when he and Mr. Drake visited the Synagogue. The High-Priest Amram first brought out the latest scroll—written in black ink on parchment, rolled on two rollers, and enclosed in

two cylinders of brass—and affected to be surprised when Mr. Drake asked to see the next. They did see the next, which was of older appearance, also in a brass case, with huge knobs to the rollers. The High Priest and his nephew Jacob now declared that there was no older scroll, but Mr. Drake knew that there was, and eventually they succeeded in seeing it. It is kept in a silver case, and purports to have been written by “Abishuah, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, in the thirteenth year of the possession by the children of Israel of the land of Canaan and all its boundaries.”

Captain Condor found that the priests manifest the greatest reluctance to showing this sacred relic ; it is a Samaritan Fetish, and is only seen by the congregation once a year, when elevated above the priest’s head on the Day of Atonement.

I suppose, therefore, that the priests have adopted a new *ruse* to throw the curious off their guard, and that I and my companions were too credulous on our recent visit. We were shown first a book of the Law in volume form, which was said to be 750 years old. Next, an older looking copy, a *roll*, asserted to be 1,260 years old. Lastly, a roll in a silver case, which we were assured was written by Abishua, the great-grandson of Aaron, 3,472 years ago. I only carried in my mind that the first and second copies usually shown to travellers were comparatively modern, and I must insist on seeing a third ; I did not remember that all three were to be *rolls*. And when the High Priest declared on his word that the third book which I had seen was really the oldest they possess, I thought probably he was to be trusted. I was a little surprised that he should sell me a photograph of himself, holding this roll open ; but I supposed that a good deal of reticence might have disappeared since 1865, and *backsheesh* was year by year proving more potent.

I may mention that the silver case which contained the oldest copy of the Law shown to us was covered with engraved symbols, among which I noticed the cherubim (which appeared to have the head and wings of a bird) ; “Aaron’s rod,” which was quite a tree, and very much like the conventional tree of mythology ; and the “flames from the altar,” which had a conventional form, such as is seen in hieroglyphics. This silver case, we were told, was 300 years old.

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