

The Samaritans

Contributed by Stephen Langfur

The Samaritans are an offshoot of Judaism. The name derives from their region of origin: the northern part of the central mountain range, which 2 Kings calls "Samaria" after Ahab's capital. Two millennia ago, they were a multitude. After an unsuccessful revolt against the Christians in the 6th century, followed by persecutions and conversions to Islam, their numbers had dwindled by 1909 to a mere 140. During the 20th century, they married Jewish women who adopted their ways, so that now their number has increased to about 600. They live in Nablus, on the summit of Mt. Gerizim, and in Holon, an Israeli city southeast of Tel Aviv.

The Samaritans hold that they are the true keepers of God's commandments. They trace their origins to the time of the Judges: Eli the priest deserted the way of the Lord when he founded a center at Shiloh. In their view, the development from Eli through Samuel to Solomon's Temple was sacrilege. Rather, Mt. Gerizim near Shechem is the holy place appointed by God.

Until recently, non-Samaritan scholars traced Samaritan beginnings to the time of the Assyrian exile, connecting them with the mixed population described in 2 Kings 17:24-41. The Assyrians did indeed exile Israelites from the northern kingdom (27,290 according to the Assyrian king, Sargon II -- surely less than the whole population), and they did transfer foreigners from various lands into the cities of Samaria. The Biblical passage states that these strangers learned the religion of the land, while keeping their own cults also.

Recent scholars, however, doubt a link between 2 Kings 17:24-41 and the Samaritans. They see no reason to connect a mixed population with such a distinctive group. (The word shomronim in 2 Kings 17:29 seems to mean simply the "people of Samaria.") A number of points speak against a link:

1. The Samaritans accept only the Torah as sacred, from Genesis through Deuteronomy. (The Samaritan Torah represents a "Palestinian textual family," different from the "Babylonian" version that became definitive for other Jews. It is written in a script related to the palaeo-Hebraic that was fashionable during the nationalistic and religious revival of the Hasmoneans.) About their Torah There is a very strong scholarly consensus that Deuteronomy was the "book of the law" referred to in 2 Kings 22:8-13. It was discovered in Jerusalem a hundred years after the supposed schism of 2 Kings 17!

2. The Samaritans are extremely strict in their Jewish practice. There is no trace of mixture with other cults. "All the indications are that the Samaritans were an intensely conservative group within Judaism, jealously guarding ancient traditions and looking with suspicion on anything that smacked of innovation" (R. J. Coggins, Samaritans and Jews: The Origins of Samaritanism Reconsidered, Oxford: Blackwell, 1975 [Coggins, p. 111]).

3. Samaritan religious practice includes features (such as the separation of meat from milk) which first entered Judaism after the 2nd century BC.

4. The first clear mention of Samaritans as a distinctive group is in the Apocrypha consists of fourteen books of archaic style, often claiming authorship by biblical figures such as Enoch or Baruch, which were not admitted into the canon of the First Testament. The word is also used of certain early Christian writings which were not accepted into the canon of the Second Testament. apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus (50:25), which dates from around 180 BC: "With two nations my soul is vexed, and the third is no nation: Those who live on Mount Seir, and the Philistines, and the foolish people that dwell in Shechem."

5. After Ecclesiasticus, the Samaritans are frequently mentioned (e.g. 2 Maccabees 5 and 6). From Josephus

Flavius (36 – 100 AD), Jewish general, one of two directing the revolt against Rome in Galilee. After Vespasian captured him, he prophesied the latter would be emperor. When this proved true, the Romans honored him. He then turned historian, writing *The Jewish War*, *The Antiquities of the Jews* and many other books. Because of a paragraph about John the Baptist (and maybe a sentence about Jesus), the Church preserved his works. Josephus it is clear that they had their main center in Shechem and built a Temple on Mt. Gerizim. Josephus, however, shows a strong anti-Samaritan bias: he was the first to connect them with the mixed group of 2 Kings 17.

6. The archaeological dig at Shechem revealed that after 150 years of desertion, the tell was resettled in the 4th century BC. The city survived until about 110 BC. The dig on Mt. Gerizim has revealed another Samaritan city, going back as far as the 4th century BC. It was destroyed about the same time as Shechem. This would accord with Josephus' report that John Hyrcanus, Jewish king and high priest, reigned 134-104 BC. He was the son of Simon the Maccabee and the first of the second Hasmonean generation to assume the crown. He defeated the Edomites, giving them a choice of conversion or exile. Among the converts was Antipater, father of Herod the Great. Hyrcanus also defeated the Samaritans, destroying their cities and the temple on Mt. Gerizim. A Hasmonean fortress in the Judaeian desert was named after him. John Hyrcanus demolished the Samaritan Temple on Mt. Gerizim (*Antiquities* XIII 9,1).

The existence of a Temple apart from that in Jerusalem may seem a strange departure from Judaism, for "But to the place which Yahweh your God shall choose out of all your tribes, to put his name there, even to his habitation you shall seek, and there you shall come." Deuteronomy 12:5 strongly implies that there should be only one center of worship. Yet this passage does not specify Jerusalem. The only place of worship mentioned in Deuteronomy is the area of Shechem, between the mountains of Ebal and Gerizim.

What is more, we now know, from papyri discovered at Elephantine in Egypt, that the Jews had a temple there as well in the 4th century BC or a little later. Its existence does not seem to have troubled the priests in Jerusalem. The Jews of Elephantine even appealed for help to the Judaeans and the Samaritans, receiving a joint reply from the leaders of both groups. In fact, there were other Jewish temples as well at this time (Coggins, op. cit., pp. 101, 111). The passage in Deuteronomy, then, was not understood to mean "one center only."

The picture that emerges is this: The northern tribes acknowledged the temple in Jerusalem merely during the reign of Solomon. There were Israelites who never accepted Jerusalem as their cultic center. They had always focused rather on Mt. Gerizim. They began to crystallize as a distinctive group in the 4th century BC (the end of the Persian period). Around this time or after, they built a temple on their holy mountain. Only at this stage do we begin to hear of them as a distinctive group, the Samaritans.

In John 4:4 we read that Jesus "had to pass through Samaria," as if this were something a Jew might normally avoid. Likewise, on his last journey to Jerusalem, he goes by way of Jericho. These and other texts, including the Parable of the Good Samaritan, have led to the impression that relations between Jews and Samaritans were simply hostile. There was hostility, as a passage from Josephus also shows. Yet the same passage indicates that many Galilean Jews did make their pilgrimage to Jerusalem through Samaria. Talmudic references also indicate that pilgrims would normally arrive and depart over Mt. Scopus, north of the city. This could only make sense if they were going through Samaria. (Shmuel Safrai, *Die Wallfahrt im Zeitalter des Zweiten Tempels*, Neukirchener Verlag, 1981 | Safrai, pp. 135-136.)

To correct the impression of mere hostility, we may add that the Rabbis of the first two centuries AD recognized Samaritan ritual slaughter as kosher. Likewise Samaritan wine and The unleavened bread eaten by Jews during the week of Passover | matzah. Samaritan signatures were valid on a writ of divorce. They could make up a quorum for grace after meals. They could be ritually pure. In many cultic matters, then, they counted as Jews. On Samaritan ritual slaughter as kosher: Babylonian Talmud, Chullin 5b. On their wine: Babylonian Talmud, Chullin 6a. On their Passover matzoth: Tosefta Pessachim 113; Jerusalem Talmud, Avoda Zara V (44a) and Tractate Kuttim II2. On a bill of divorce: Mishna, Gittin I 5; On grace at meals: Mishna, Berachot VII 1. On ritual purity: Dewarim rabba II 33 | Rabbinic

citations. See also Safrai, op. cit., p. 113.)