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SAMARITANS AND JOHN 4

There are at least two sides to every story. The Jews and Samaritans in Jesus' day shared the basic story of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses and the Exodus, and the Law and God's chosen people. From there they dissented—who were God's chosen people and where should they worship?

One of the problems in any study regarding Samaritans is a definition of the term. It may indicate a person who was living in the area called Samaria. Many such persons were not of Israelite descent. For example, Assyrians brought in foreigners to live in that region in the eighth century BC. Herod himself imported six thousand colonists, mostly ex-soldiers, to live in the capital city Sebaste (formerly called “Samaria”) during the first century BC.¹ “Samaritans” of this definition were largely pro-Roman. “Samaritan” may be a better term to describe this group.

However, “Samaritan” could refer to a particular ethnic/religious combination, similar to the term “Jew”. In the story of the Samaritan woman in John 4, she makes reference to Mount Gerizim: “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain.” (John 4:20a NIV) In her particular case, “Samaritan” likely means this second definition: an Israelite descendant that belonged to a religious cult centered on Mount Gerizim and Shechem. Jews at that time did not distinguish between the first definition or the second, referring to the Samaritans as “Cutheans”, a name for a

¹ Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.-A.D. 135)*, Vol. 2 (rev. and ed. Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, and Matthew Black; trans. T. A. Burkill et al; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 162-3.

group of people from an area northeast of Babylon.² Even Josephus accused the Samaritans of identifying themselves as “Sidonians in Shechem.”³ This blurring of Samaritan/Samaritan identities allowed the Jews to combine their hatred of Roman oppressors and moral outrage at supposed syncretistic religion.

According to the Jews, Samaritans appeared after the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. The Assyrians took the Israelites into exile and brought in foreigners to settle the land. The Israelites remaining in the land intermarried with the foreigners. Though the Assyrian king sent back Israelite priests to teach them, the Samaritans intermingled foreign religions with the Israelite one. Thus, to the Jews the Samaritans represented impure bloodlines and impure religion.

According to the Samaritan Chronicles (medieval histories based on ancient accounts), the rift between Samaritan and Jew began much earlier, in the eleventh century BC. Eli the priest rebelled against his mentor Uzzi and started a rival religious center in Shiloh while Uzzi and his followers continued worship at Mount Gerizim and Shechem. Harassed by King Saul, they were forced to worship at their homes instead and then had to move east of Lake Galilee. When the Assyrians took the Israelites into exile, this proto-Samaritan group—consisting of Ephraimites, Manassites, and Aaronite priests—was taken as well. The foreigners that the Assyrians brought into the land requested help from those who had previously worked it, and the Assyrian king sent back the proto-Samaritans, who re-settled at Mount Gerizim and Shechem. This group became the “Samaritans,” who considered themselves to have the proper priesthood and the proper place of worship and therefore the proper religion.

Modern studies of Jewish and Samaritan beliefs, practices, and Scriptures lead scholars to

² Robert T. Anderson and Terry Giles, *The Keepers: An Introduction to the History and Culture of the Samaritans* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 15.

³ Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 161.

place the schism between Jews and Samaritans somewhere between the second to fourth centuries BC. Scholars recognize that nothing about Samaritan beliefs and practices indicate a pagan or non-Israelite background.⁴ Both Samaritan religion and Judaism spring from the same root religion of YHWH worship in ancient Israel. Papyri dating from the fifth century BC show requests from both Jewish and Samaritan priests for temple-building funds, indicating a schism already existed at that time.⁵ Genetic studies on modern-day Samaritans reveal that they have been an isolated group for approximately 80 generations, which indicates a break from other semitic groups somewhere between 2,000 and 2,400 years ago.⁶

The Samaritans get their name from *samerim*, which means “keepers”, as in “keepers of the law.”⁷ They prefer to use the term “Israelites” to refer to themselves. In addition to the “righteous three”—patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—Samaritans greatly revere Joseph and claim to be his descendants. They revere Moses above all. The only canonized Samaritan Scripture was and is the Samaritan Pentateuch.

Like the Jews, Samaritans in the first century had messianic expectations. Though the Jews mostly looked for a Davidic political leader, Samaritans looked for a prophet to fulfill Deuteronomy 18:18⁸: “I will raise up for them a prophet like [Moses] from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him.” This

⁴ Reinhard Pummer, “The Samaritans: A Jewish offshoot or a pagan cult?” *Bible Review* 7, no. 5 (Oct 1991), n.p. [cited 14 Nov. 2009]. Online: <http://www.basarchive.org.ezproxy.baylor.edu/bswbSearch.asp?PubID=BSBR&Volume=7&Issue=5&ArticleID=11&UserID=2532&>

⁵ Robert T. Anderson, “Samaritans,” ABD 5:941.

⁶ B. Bonn -Tamir, et al, "Maternal and Paternal Lineages of the Samaritan Isolate: Mutation Rates and Time to Most Recent Common Male Ancestor." *Annals of Human Genetics* 67, no. 2 (March 2003): 161.

⁷ Anderson, “Samaritans,” ABD 5:941.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5:942.

prophet, called *Taheb*, was expected to be from the priestly Aaronic line,⁹ though his ancestry was contested.¹⁰ Samaritans divide history into Eras of Divine Favor and Eras of Divine Disfavor, and the Taheb was expected to usher in a new Era of Divine Favor. The Taheb was also expected to open an ancient sanctuary on Mount Gerizim and to institute “true worship” among the people.¹¹ As a kind of second Moses, Taheb will reveal God's truth to his people.¹² Somewhere between 26 and 36 AD, a Taheb pretender led several Samaritans up Mount Gerizim, promising to reveal sacred things that the ancient priest Uzzi had hidden there.¹³

Seeds of discord were sown during the Persian period. At this time people groups exiled by the Babylonians were allowed to return to their respective homelands and the Persians provided funds for building temples to native gods. Both Samaritans and Jews would have received funds for building rival temples to YHWH. (Though Josephus claimed the Samaritan temple was built under Alexander, it may have actually been built in the fifth century BC.¹⁴ A few scholars believe the Samaritan temple never existed.¹⁵) The Persians may have encouraged rivalry between the two groups in order to prevent a unified rebellion in Palestine. The foreign peoples brought in by the Assyrians first offered aid and then antagonism toward the returning Jews (Ezra 4) and the Jews associated these foreign peoples with the Samaritans.

The Jews returning from exile believed that the exile was their chastening. Punishment had been meted out to them and they earnestly desired to avoid further punishment. A false rival

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5:944.

¹⁰ Anderson and Giles, *Keepers*, 124.

¹¹ John MacDonald, *The Theology of the Samaritans*. (NTL; London: SCM, 1964), 362.

¹² *Ibid.*, 365.

¹³ Anderson and Giles, *Keepers*, 122.

¹⁴ MacDonald, *Theology*, 24-5.

¹⁵ Anderson and Giles, *Keepers*, 129-30.

YHWH religion would be abhorrent, since it could incur the wrath of God again. By distancing themselves from the “false” religion and chastening it when the opportunity arose, Jews hoped to rescue themselves from the punishment they thought God would likely send the Samaritans' way.

Both Jews and Samaritans accused the other of tampering with Scripture to bolster their religious positions. The differences between the Jewish (or Masoretic) Pentateuch and the Samaritan Pentateuch are minor but serve to shift emphasis toward Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim. For example, the Samaritan Pentateuch extends Exodus 20:17 to say the Israelites are commanded to build an altar at Mount Gerizim and in Deuteronomy 27:4 the directive to build an altar on Mount Ebal instead reads Mount Gerizim. The Samaritans refer to Ezra as “The Accursed” and felt he incorporated many “fables, legends, and lies” into Judaism, including worship at Jerusalem and insisting that Samaritans were descended from Gentiles.¹⁶

Much of the antagonism between the two groups during the Greek period is related by the Jewish historian Josephus. Josephus records the Samaritans' reputation for variable loyalties, aligning themselves with Jews when it seemed profitable to them, but abandoning that alliance when the Jews are considered troublesome.¹⁷ Jews considered Samaritans to be fair weather friends at best, and traitors at worst, in both a political and religious sense. The Greek army under Alexander met with resistance from Jews and initial acceptance from Samaritans. Ptolemy requested a copy of the Samaritan Pentateuch for his library in Alexandria and emissaries from several countries poured into Samaria, inquiring about their religion¹⁸ and likely sparking jealousy. In response to Jewish rebellion, the Greeks forced both Jews and Samaritans to dedicate their temples to Zeus (2 Maccabees 6:1-2)., though Josephus and many other Jews believed that

¹⁶ Anderson and Giles, *Keepers*, 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 14.

¹⁸ MacDonald, *Theology*, 25.

the Samaritans willingly attributed their temple to Zeus.¹⁹ During the reign of the Hasmonaeans, the Jews ruled Samaria and treated the Samaritans harshly. Jewish governor and high priest John Hyrcanus destroyed the Samaritan temple in 128 BC. Under Roman rule, Samaritans returned the favor by desecrating the Jerusalem temple in 6-9 AD and slaughtering Jewish pilgrims in Galilee in 52 AD.

Based partly on John 4, scholars acknowledge the Gospel of John reveals a great interest in Samaritans as well as an awareness of their beliefs.²⁰ Some scholars go so far as to suggest that the Gospel of John was written at least partly for a Samaritan audience.²¹ Within John's Gospel, Jesus is repeatedly associated with Moses, particularly with an eye to showing the superiority of Jesus²², for example John 1:17: "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

In John 4:9, Jews and Samaritans are mentioned twice, while the Samaritans' gender is only mentioned once, indicating that the primary purpose of this dialogue will be more of a religious nature rather than a sexual one—a Jew conversing with a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans do not share vessels, according to John 4:9. (This is a preferable translation to "Jews do not associate with Samaritans."²³) Though this statement could be applied to ordinary vessels such as the Samaritan's water jar, its greater meaning applied to religious vessels. According to the Samaritans, the Taheb would reveal the religious vessels that Uzzi had hidden on Mount Gerizim. In referencing these vessels, John is starting to set up Jesus as the Samaritans' Taheb.

¹⁹ Anderson, "Samaritans," ABD 5:942.

²⁰ MacDonald, *Theology*, 420.

²¹ Anderson, "Samaritans," ABD 5:942.

²² David M. Hay, "Moses through New Testament spectacles." *Int* 44, no. 3 (July 1990), 243-4.

²³ Gerard S. Sloyan, *John*. (IBC; Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 53.

In verse 12, the Samaritan asks whether Jesus is greater than Jacob, using a Greek construction that assumes a negative reply.²⁴ It has been asserted that John's Gospel reveals Jesus to be greater than Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with John 4 being the passage that reveals him to be greater than Jacob.²⁵ While surpassing the “righteous three” would be impressive to Samaritans, it would not be sufficient for them. The Taheb would have to be a prophet like or better than Moses. But Jesus is up to the task: he offers water that gives eternal life (vs 14). To prove he is a prophet, Jesus sets up the Samaritan by asking her to retrieve her husband (vs 16), and then responds to her reply by saying she has had five husbands (vs 18). (Though Jewish law forbade that many marriages, Mosaic—and therefore, Samaritan—law did not.²⁶) According to the Samaritan in verse 19, Jesus has now established himself as a prophet—a very important step.

The Samaritan tries to cut to the heart of the dispute between Jews and Samaritans by bringing up the Jerusalem/Mount Gerizim debate (vs 20). Both sides insisted that proper worship was tied to the proper location, but disagreed on that location. As expected by the Taheb, Jesus says a new time or a new age is coming. This age will have proper worship without needing a proper location. He also chastises the Samaritan by saying the Samaritans worship what they don't know while the Jews do (one possible suggestion for this is that the Samaritans were handicapped by limiting themselves to the Pentateuch²⁷), and that salvation comes from the Jews. By this he indicates two things: 1) that he, a Jew, is the conduit of salvation and 2) that he is restoring true worship. Now Jesus is a possible candidate to fit the Taheb mold. When the Samaritan goes to tell her village about him, rather than bring up the worship location issue she

²⁴ Gail R. O'Day, “John 4:4-42,” (NIB; ed. Robert K Feaster et al; Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 566.

²⁵ Jerome H. Neyrey, "Jacob traditions and the interpretation of John 4:10-26." *CBQ* 41, no. 3 (July 1979), 420.

²⁶ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*. (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 61.

²⁷ O'Day, “John 4:4-42,” 568.

emphasizes Jesus' abilities as a prophet. She is excited but perhaps not fully convinced—her question, “Could this be the Christ?” is again constructed so as to evoke a negative reply.²⁸

Jesus stayed with the Samaritans for two days as a teacher. Through his words, many of them believed in him as the Taheb—the Messiah. They now realized that God's chosen people were those who worshiped in spirit and in truth, and location was no longer a point of contention between them.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 569.

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