

The Samaritans

The town of Samaria was established by King Omri as the capital of Israel c. 880 BC. The term “Samaria” first appears as an anachronism¹ in 1 Kings 13:32, in a record of events about 40 years earlier. At some point after Samaria’s founding, it became representative of the whole kingdom, being used as a synonym for Israel.

The term “Samaritans” appears in the Old Testament only in 2 Kings 17:29, although they are referred to elsewhere (Ezra 4:1-2, 7-11). They are featured prominently in the Gospels, where we learn of Jewish prejudice against Samaritans, and Acts. A Samaritan woman is shocked when Jesus spoke to her, for as John explained, Jews had no dealings with Samaritans (John 4:9). Jesus’ enemies called him a demon-possessed Samaritan, a double insult (John 8:48). When Jesus was not welcomed by a Samaritan village, the disciples were quick to propose calling for fire from heaven to kill them, prompting Jesus’ rebuke (Luke 9:51-55).

The history of this hatred begins with the division of Israel in 930 BC and the eventual destruction of the northern kingdom in 721 BC. After conquering Samaria, the Assyrians exiled almost 30,000 Israelites to Mesopotamia and Media. Afterward, they brought in people from other conquered nations as part of their resettlement policy to keep subjects from rebelling. Some Israelites had fled to Judah and were welcomed by Hezekiah. Those who remained in Israel became mixed ethnically and religiously with the people Assyria brought in (2 Kings 17). When the Jews returned from captivity around 537 BC to rebuild, the Samaritans asked to join them, and the Jews refused. The Samaritans and others then tried to deter the Jews with threats, mockery, and letters to Persian kings (Ezra 4; Neh. 4). The efforts only delayed the Jews, who finished the temple (516 BC) and, later, the walls of Jerusalem (c. 444 BC)².

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After the fall of Israel, the Samaritans worshiped both Yahweh and false gods (2 Kings 17), but at some point, they abandoned their idols. King Josiah surely had something to do with that, as his reforms extended into Samaria (2 Chron. 34:6-7, 33). But after the post-exilic conflicts, the Samaritan religion evolved separately.

The timeline of the Samaritan religion isn't certain. At some point, they developed their own version of the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy). In the original Hebrew version, Moses had taught that God would choose a place of worship in the land of Canaan after the Israelites conquered it, but it was not revealed until the reigns of David and Solomon. David was instructed to build an altar in Jerusalem, and he moved the ark there after making it the permanent capital of Israel (1 Chron. 21:18). Afterward, Solomon built the temple there, in the place God had chosen (2 Chron. 7:12). The Samaritans, who only accepted the Pentateuch as Scripture, added Mt. Gerizim to Moses' words. Obviously, they didn't want to worship at Jerusalem, since it was in their enemy's territory. Mt. Gerizim was in Samaria. This location was supplied in extensions to the Ten Commandments (Exo. 20:17 and Deut. 5:21). One is reminded of Jeroboam's similar changes (1 Kings 12:25-33). Where the original text said, "God will choose a place," the Samaritan Pentateuch reads, "the place God has chosen" (Deut. 12). These changes provided the basis for worshipping at Gerizim instead of Jerusalem. When Jesus spoke with the woman at the well in John, she brought up this controversy. Jesus briefly stated that the Samaritans had been wrong but also revealed the impending changes of the new covenant (John 4:20-24).

Jesus' interactions with the Samaritans were unheard of. His Good Samaritan parable was absolutely shocking. His goodwill toward them probably prompted the Jews to call him a Samaritan.

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The Samaritans built a temple on Mt. Gerizim. Traditions date its construction to the Persian (5th/4th century BC) or Greek (4th century BC) periods. In the mid-2nd century BC, the Jews gained independence from the Greeks. Around 111, the Jewish leader, John Hyrcanus, sought to expand their territory. He attacked Samaria and destroyed the Gerizim temple. It was never rebuilt, but the Samaritans continued worshiping there. Today, there are two very small Samaritan communities remaining.

The Samaritan Pentateuch, aside from the motivated additions concerning the place of worship, is an important text. All our English Translations are derived from the Masoretic Text, a Hebrew version of the Old Testament from the Middle Ages, with extant manuscripts dating to around 1000 AD. The Greek Septuagint, translated around 200 BC, was the version most frequently quoted in the New Testament and used by the early church. Complete versions date to the 4th century AD, and fragments date to the 2nd century BC. The Masoretic is preferred primarily because the Septuagint is a translation, whereas the Masoretic is in the original language. A direct translation is preferred over a translation of a translation for obvious reasons. Our manuscripts of the Samaritan Pentateuch date to about the 12th century—close to the oldest Masoretic manuscripts— but the Samaritan Pentateuch provides a distinct textual tradition thought to date back nearly to the Jews' return from exile. Sometimes, the Samaritan and Septuagint independently agree against the Masoretic, making a case for alternate readings (Exo. 12:40)³.

The Samaritans occupy an important place in Biblical history. Though they were excluded from the Messianic ancestry, they were waiting for him. They were the first non-Jews to receive the good news of salvation in Jesus (Acts 8).

Footnotes:

¹ By "anachronism," I mean simply the convention of using a contemporary name for an ancient place. In this case, the inspired author narrating Jeroboam's reign used "cities of Samaria," which to his audience meant Israel, even though Israel was not known as Samaria in Jeroboam's time (1 Kings 16:24, 29). Apparently, the record was written more than 30 years after Jeroboam's death, after Omri moved the capital from Tirzah to Samaria. Samaria was a well-established synonym for Israel by the time of the writing prophets (Hosea, Amos, Micah, Isaiah).

² Ezra combines events separated by almost a century. Ezra 4:1-5 refers to Cyrus (559-530 BC) and Darius (522-486 BC). Cyrus conquered Babylon and permitted the first group of Jews to return home and rebuild around 537 BC. Deterred by their enemies, the Jews stopped rebuilding the temple until 520 BC. Motivated by Haggai and Zechariah, they completed it in 516 BC, exactly 70 years after its destruction. The walls of Jerusalem, however, remained in ruins, advertising Judah's shame and therefore inviting blasphemy against its God. In the next sentence, Ezra jumped ahead to the reign of Ahasuerus, the Hebrew name for Xerxes I (486-465 BC). He is the Persian king featured in Esther. The Jews' enemies elevated their opposition under his reign by writing a letter to him accusing the Jews of preparing to rebel by refortifying their capital. The Samaritans gained the approval of Ahasuerus in stopping the Jews. Work on the wall ceased before much progress was made. Ezra 4:24 then jumps back to the delay on the temple several decades earlier. For readers accustomed to chronological order, this is confusing. Ezra combined the events to demonstrate the ongoing trouble faced by the returned exiles. Finally, under Nehemiah, the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt around 444 BC.

³ In the Masoretic, Exodus 12:40 places Israel's time in Egypt at 430 years. However, that conflicts with other Scriptures, most notably Galatians 3:16-17, where Paul calculated the promise to Abraham to the Law (shortly after the Exodus) as 430 years. The Septuagint and Samaritan Pentateuch solve the conundrum by including the information that was lost in the Masoretic. In agreement with the inspired apostle and other texts, the Septuagint and Samaritan say in Exodus 12:40: "Now the sojourning of the children of Israel **and of their fathers**, which they sojourned **in the land of Canaan** and in the land of Egypt was 430 years." Unfortunately, translations have offered no more than vague footnotes, if that. The Exodus is dated to about 1446 BC by virtually all conservatives. But Jacob's entry into Egypt is a crucial anchor point for all dates before the Exodus. The "Long Sojourn" is based solely on the Masoretic, and the "Short Sojourn" is based on the Septuagint, Samaritan, Paul, and other Scriptures. The Short Sojourn has two 215-year parts: (1) The sojourn of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Canaan, and (2) Jacob's family's time in Egypt.