

# **Background Study for Samaritans in the New Testament**

## **Samaria and Samaritans mentioned in the New Testament:**

- Matthew 10:5 – Jesus [temporarily] restricts his disciples from ministering among Gentiles and Samaritans and instead instructs them to first focus on Jews.
- Luke 9:51-55 – Jesus and the disciples pass through Samaria enroute to Jerusalem but are not welcomed along the way. James and John ask to call down fiery judgement on the Samaritans but Jesus refuses.
- Luke 10:25-37 – The parable of the Good Samaritan
- Luke 17:11-19 – the grateful leper among the 10 was a Samaritan.
- John 4:1-42 – the Samaritan woman at the well in Samaria
- John 8:48 – Jesus is accused of being a Samaritan.<sup>1</sup>
- Acts 1:8 – Jesus commissions his disciples to be witnesses in Samaria
- Acts 8:1-25; 9:31 – The Gospel and Spirit Baptism spreads to Samaria through Philip (the evangelist), Peter, and John
- Acts 15:3 – Paul visits Samaria after the first missionary journey enroute to Jerusalem

## **Historical Context**

### **The North/South Divide – 931 BC:**

Although the history of the Samaritans in the New Testament is somewhat elusive and uncertain, we can trace the origin of the rift between the Samaritans and the Jews back to the division of Northern Israel and Judea in the final days of the United Kingdom of Israel. After the descendants of Jacob left Egypt and wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, they entered into their promised land and established themselves along tribal lines. The tribes remained connected through their common heritage and religious practices and often united against their enemies in the region. They were loosely led by a series of judges, prophets, and other leaders. Eventually, the people came to believe that a strong monarchy would empower them further to defeat their enemies, defend their territory, and find lasting success. Their religious leader, Samuel, warned them against this but God allowed a Jewish monarch to be established. Only three kings ruled over a united Israel. First Saul from the tribe of Benjamin. Then David and his son Solomon from the tribe of Judah. After Solomon died, his son attempted to rule over the United Kingdom of Israel but heeded bad advice which resulted in division in the kingdom as seen in 1 Kings 11-12. This division was foretold before Solomon's death by the prophet Ahijah as an act of judgement by God against Israel for idol worship. Solomon's son, Rehoboam, hastened the division by accepting the bad advice of his younger advisors. Rehoboam was left to rule over two tribes in Southern Israel and their kingdom was called Judah and included both the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. A chief official from Solomon's court named Jeroboam arose to rule over the Northern Kingdom called Israel which included the 10 other tribes. The Levites largely remained in the southern Kingdom. This schism in Israel was never healed. Although Israel (the North) and Judah (the South) were sometimes allies they never reunited.

### **The Fall of the Northern Kingdom – 722 BC:**

Idolatry was often a problem for both Israel and Judah. However, Israel was more prone to idolatry since they were mostly cut off from Jerusalem. From the very beginning of the divided Kingdom, Jeroboam

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<sup>1</sup> Being called a Samaritan here is not only an insult, it also fits well into the previous conversation. Jesus is challenging the Jews' confidence in their status as the "children of Abraham" (see John 8:39-41). Jesus actually tells them that they act more like "children of the devil (John 8:44). This is a claim similar to that of the Samaritans who claimed to be the true "children of Abraham" and accused the Jews of being evil imposters. The Jews are essentially saying that Jesus is sounding like a Samaritan (and a demon possessed man) for making such outlandish claims about their heritage and status.

discouraged the northern Jews from traveling down south to Jerusalem to worship in the Temple. He saw this as a threat to his kingdom and leadership. Instead, he established numerous shrines and two primary alters in the northern kingdom, one in Dan and one in Bethel. At the two primary alters, he set up golden calves as idols. Thus, the very beginning of the Northern Kingdom of Israel's history was marked by idolatry. Unfortunately, this idolatry persisted (with some seasons of faithfulness scattered across the timeline) and resulted in severe judgement from God.

A pagan empire arose to the north and east of Israel called Assyria. This kingdom grew by brutal military force and conquest. Their expansion took them to the northern border of Israel. Finally, in 722 BC, God gave Israel over to the Assyrians on account of their rebellious sin and refusal to repent. Although the historical record confirms the Biblical report, 2 Kings 17 explains the events from God's perspective. The whole chapter is God's commentary on the events but in 2 Kings 17:7, the total defeat of Israel (the Northern Kingdom) was said to have taken place "because the Israelites had sinned against the Lord their God . . . They worshipped other gods."

God protected the Southern Kingdom from the Assyrians and they were unable to move further. Nevertheless, the Assyrians took control of the territory of the Northern Kingdom. They exiled many of the Jewish people from the land and imported many foreign gentiles to repopulate the region. This was not only an act of judgement but a strategy of keeping hostile territories weak through forced immigration and exile. If local communities were disunited and in conflict among themselves, they could no longer pose a threat to the larger empire. Thus, while many Jews remained in the defeated north, many Gentiles were also brought in and forced to settle on the land by the Assyrian leaders. This process is described in 2 Kings 17:24 but the actual process of this population shift took place over a lengthy time period.

The Jews who remained in the territory of the former Northern Kingdom were both an influence on the Gentile settlers and influenced by the Gentile settlers. 1 Kings 17:25-35 explained how a priest tried to help the newcomers worship Yahweh properly yet ultimately many in the North mixed pagan ritual and idol worship with Yahweh worship. The mixing of Jews and pagans in both marriage and religious practices was seen as detestable to the Jews of the South.

### **The Fall, Exile, and Return of the Southern Kingdom – 586 – 538 BC:**

Unfortunately, the Southern Kingdom did not heed God's warnings through the prophets. They also drifted towards idolatry and persisted in idol worship. Finally, God sent the Babylonians led by Nebuchadnezzar to bring judgement upon the Southern Kingdom. Around 586 BC, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, the temple was destroyed, and many Jews were exiled to Babylon. Daniel, one of these exiles, describes the fall of Jerusalem from the perspective of God in Daniel 1:1-2. This is also described in 2 Kings 24 and 2 Chronicles 36.

Around 540-539 BC, the Persians overthrew the Babylonians and shortly thereafter allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city including the walls around it and the temple within it. While Persia most likely allowed this for military reasons (a fortified ally in the southern part of their kingdom to be a buffer against Egypt) this was ultimately orchestrated by God who used the Persians as a tool to fulfill his promise to Israel. God promised to restore them and we see the beginnings of this in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

As the Jews prepare to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, neighbors from the old Northern Kingdom of Israel offer to help. Ezra 4:1-3 reports that the Jews in Jerusalem rejected the help from the North, most likely out of concern about defilement of the temple and the security of the fragile city. This rejection of the Northerners, the ancestors of the Samaritan people, causes the division and animosity between the North and South to grow. The Samaritans eventually built a temple for themselves on Mount Gerizim wherein they could practice their corrupted form of Judaism. This place of worship was mentioned by the Samaritan woman in John 4.

### **Greek Expansion and Influence:**

Eventually, the Persians would fall to the Greeks. Alexander the Great managed to unite the various Greek cities and communities in order to face the Persians with a united force. This proved to be successful and the Greeks managed to defeat the Persians and take control of its territories in the 330s BC. For a time, both the Jews and the Samaritans cooperated with the Greeks in exchange for protection, freedom of worship, and some political autonomy. Nevertheless, around 175 BC, a Greek ruler over that

region seized power named Antiochus Epiphanes IV. He demanded more and more from the Jews and began to impose more of his Greek culture on the Jewish community. He determined to persecute Jews who refused to adopt Greek culture. He also entered the Jewish temple (an act of defilement), worshipped idols in the temple, and sacrificed a pig (another act of defilement) to his idols.

This attack on the Jewish people, culture, and religion sparked a rebellion led by a Jewish priest named Judas Maccabaeus. Unfortunately, the Samaritans sided with the Greeks and fought against the Jews. The Jewish rebels engaged the Greeks in guerrilla warfare and managed to force them out of Jerusalem in 164 BC. Afterwards, the Jews pressed on into Samaria. Under the leadership of Judas Maccabaeus' nephew, John Hyrcanus, the Jews attacked the Samaritan community and totally destroyed their temple on Mount Gerizim around 112 BC. This time period brought the Jews and Samaritans into their sharpest division. Generations of division and animosity culminated in this military exchange that brought to death and destruction.

### **Roman Expansion and Influence:**

Around 63 BC, the Romans took control over Jerusalem but allowed the Jews to maintain their culture and religious practices as long as they remained loyal to Rome and paid taxes or tributes. The Romans forced a peace between the Jews and the Samaritans but the division remained and the communities would still strike against one another when they could. The largest such strike was reported by Josephus, a Jewish historian. He wrote that in 6 AD. A group of Samaritans entered into Jerusalem just before Passover and desecrated the Jewish temple by spreading human bones all around the facility. This made the Temple ceremonially unclean during a very important time for the Jews.

## **Samaritans During the Time of Jesus**

The animosity between Jews and Samaritans was evident in the Gospels. Yet Jesus often reached out to Samaritans and was willing to interact with them often. As you read passages involved Samaritans, it is important to realize the context from above and allow that to inform your understanding of the stories. The Jews and the Samaritans were historical enemies in numerous ways:

- Politically
- Ethnically
- Religiously
- Culturally
- Militarily