

OVERVIEW:

- The Samaritans were a mixed race of people, originally from Jewish ancestry, who were resettled by the Assyrians following the exile of the majority of the Jewish community to Babylon (721 BC).
- A number of other colonists from the Assyrian empire were also resettled into the region and intermarried with the remnant Jewish population. The Jews considered Samaritans as descendents of Gentile tribes who were brought into Palestine to take their places when they were in captivity.
- The region of Samaria was located between Judea and Galilee, south of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus would have had to travel through Samaritan territory as he made his way south along the River Jordan from Galilee to Jerusalem ('he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria' - Jn 4:3).
- Whilst drawing from a common religious heritage, Samaritans relied primarily upon the Torah of Moses, whilst Jews placed greater emphasis on the Law and the Prophets. Samaritans recognised as Holy Scripture only the five books of Moses, and the textual form they used was different from that in use among the Jews.

SOURCES OF DIVISION AND ANTAGONISM:

- There was a deep long-standing antagonism between Jews and Samaritans and each community avoided the other at all costs ('Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans' - Mt 10:5)
- The Samaritans considered themselves to be Jewish but the Jews of Judea and Galilee did not consider them to be 'real Jews', as inter-marriage between Jews and Gentiles was viewed as an 'abomination'.
- After the Jews returned from exile in Babylon they had insisted that the Samaritan 'Jewish' men renounce their marriages to Gentile women in order to be fully accepted back into the Jewish community. Their refusal to give up their families was one factor that led to division and animosity between the two communities.
- Problems between the communities were further exacerbated when, three hundred years earlier, the Greeks had used Samaria as a base to control Jewish territory.
- Another source of enmity between the Jews and Samaritans sprang from the Samaritans building a breakaway temple on Mt Gerizim ('Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem - Jn 4:20).
- While the Jewish Temple was situated in Jerusalem, the Samaritans regarded Mt Gerizim as sacred. In fact, upon the return of the Jewish community from exile, the Samaritans initially tried to prevent the building of the temple in Jerusalem, leading the Jews to ban any Samaritan from contributing to the building process.
- Over the centuries hostilities erupted between the two groups: for example, the Jews destroyed the Samaritan temple in 128 BC and, just prior to the birth of Christ, the Samaritans totally defiled the Jewish temple by scattering bones in the area of the sanctuary just before the Passover ('On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem' - Lk 9:52).



Look it Up

The woman from Samaria:

John 4

The woman with a bad reputation:

Luke 7, also Matthew 26, Mark 14

Who has never sinned?

John 8

Samaritans and Jews

Samaritans came from the region known as Samaria. Samaritans had their own religious traditions and did not have the same respect for the Temple in Jerusalem.

For over a century, there had been many bloody skirmishes between Samaritans and Jews.

When Jesus was a boy, there was a serious incident when some Samaritans had scattered bones in the Temple in Jerusalem. This was considered an outrage.

For all these reasons Jews and Samaritans hated each other.

Jesus did not only tell people to show kindness to others. He himself welcomed all kinds of people into his company.

The woman from Samaria

On one occasion, Jesus was travelling through Samaria. In the heat of the day, he sat down to rest by a well in the town of Sychar while his disciples went on to buy food.

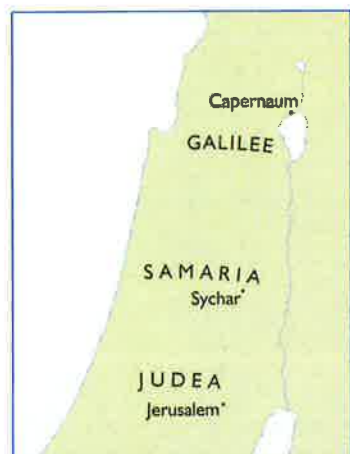
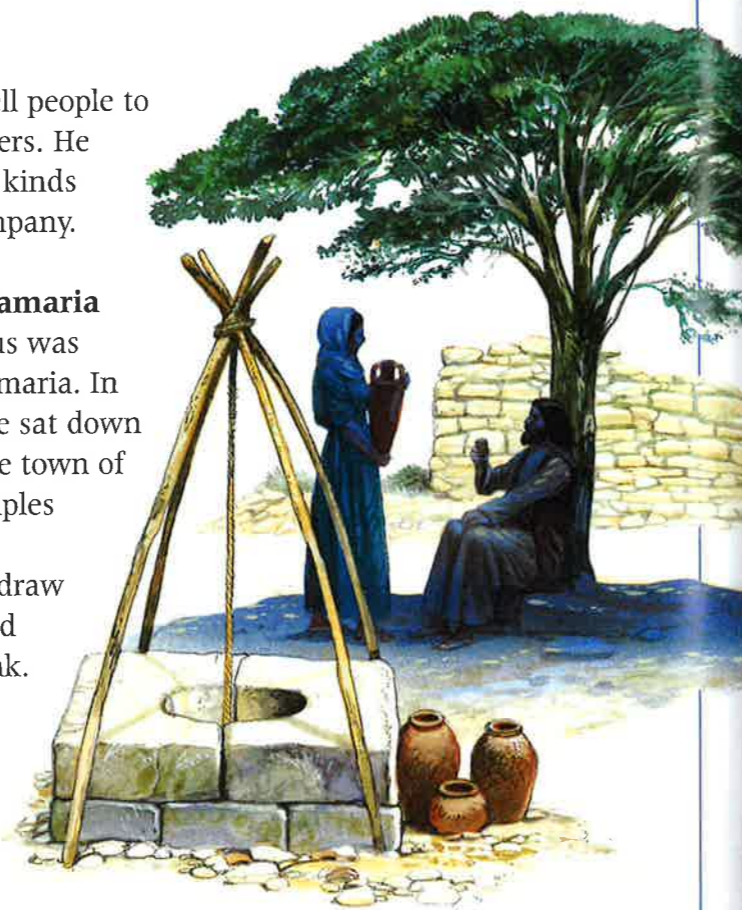
A woman came to draw water, and Jesus asked her to give him a drink.

She was shocked: she knew that most Jews would not share the same cups and bowls as Samaritans.

Jesus said to her:

'If only you knew what God gives and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would ask him, and he would give you life-giving water.'

John 4:10



Samaria

Samaria lay between Jesus' home country of Galilee and Judea, where the worship of God was focused on the Temple. Many Jews would take a long detour to avoid travelling through it.



Hills of Samaria.

Social and Political Groupings

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Whereas many people do not adopt a particular “party line” either in religion or politics, others become members of a pressure group or a political party and become involved in it. This was true of life in Bible times—of the period when the Jews returned from exile in Babylon and rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem and of the time in which Jesus lived. In order to understand the New Testament groupings, we have to look back to the events that took place after the fall of Jerusalem and the Exile in 586 BC.

The Samaritans

The Samaritans took their name from the city of Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel from the time of the kings Omri and Ahab (1 Kings 16:24). The city of Samaria was destroyed by the Assyrians in 721 BC, and about twenty-seven thousand people of the ruling classes and those who were useful artisans were deported to Assyria and dispersed (2 Kings 17:24). As part of Assyrian policy, leadership of the city was taken over by other subject peoples, so that lack of communication with the local working

Jews at
Jerusalem's
Western Wall.



A Samaritan man at prayer during the sacrifice at Mount Gerizim.

people combined with the new rulers' gratitude to the Assyrians for placing them in charge would result in a stable, peaceful situation.

Things did not go well—wild animals increased in the country at an alarming rate, killing many people. The newcomers believed these attacks to mean that they were not worshipping the God of Samaria in the right way. One of the priests in exile was sent back to teach the Jewish faith, and he set up a religious sanctuary at Bethel. As a result, a syncretistic religion was formed between the worship of Yahweh and the worship of the local gods from the original homes of the new rulers of Samaria (2 Kings 17:25–34).

Some of the people from the Northern Kingdom who had not been taken into exile worshipped at Jerusalem, where they were welcomed (2 Chronicles 35:17), and when the city of Jerusalem was itself destroyed

The head of a Samaritan family selects the lamb he will use for ritual slaughter in the Passover ceremony.



by the Babylonians this link was still maintained (Jeremiah 41:5). When the Persian Empire succeeded the Babylonian, and the Jews were allowed to rebuild their religion—their Temple and eventually the walls of Jerusalem—there was a mixed reception from the Samaritans. There were Samaritans who wanted to join in with the work so that the worship of Yahweh could be renewed (Ezra 4:2), but they were strongly rebuffed by the returned exiles, who regarded the Samaritans as impure because of the syncretistic nature of their religion (Ezra 4:3). Other Samaritans were alarmed that Jerusalem was being rebuilt, for Jerusalem had always rivalled Samaria. These Samaritans did everything they could to hinder the rebuilding of the city (Nehemiah 4:1–2).

All the old antipathy between North



Mount Gerizim (left) and Mount Ebal (right), north of ancient Samaria. The Samaritans built a temple on Mount Gerizim.

and South came to the fore. Those feelings had a long pedigree, going back to the time when the twelve tribes had originally occupied the hill country of Canaan after the Exodus. The tribes in the north had been separated from those in the south by a line of Canaanite fortresses, and when David became king, it was to be king of two united kingdoms rather than of one kingdom (see p. 243). When the kingdom of David and subsequently of Solomon was divided during the period of their successors, the division followed the old historic line. The Samaritans were regarded not only as political enemies but as unclean people whose presence would defile the newly returned exiles (see Nehemiah 13:23–30).

At a subsequent time, there seems to have been a group of Samaritans who,

having been prevented from worshipping Yahweh in Jerusalem, and wishing to dissociate themselves from the continual infighting, withdrew to set up a place of worship of their own at Shechem (see John 4:19–20), centred on Mount Gerizim, which had been of great importance in the history and religion of the Jewish people (Deuteronomy 11:29; Joshua 8:33). A temple was built on Mount Gerizim, and a distinctive faith gradually developed. The Samaritans accepted the five books of Moses in their own language as their authority (the Samaritan Pentateuch), and this position was reflected in their creed: There is one God; Moses was his prophet and will one day be returning as the *Tabeb* ("restorer," sometimes called "Messiah"; see John 4:25); there will be a Day of Judgment; and Mount

Remains of the Hellenistic theatre at Sepphoris, near Jesus' home town of Nazareth. Sepphoris is not mentioned in the Gospels, possibly because, as a Hellenistic town, it would be regarded as "unclean" by the Jews.



Gerizim is the place appointed by God for sacrifice. The last element was the tenth commandment, in the Decalogue of the Samaritan Pentateuch (John 4:20).

At least some Samaritans held to a traditional belief that Moses had hidden sacred vessels on the mountain, for in AD 36 a Samaritan gathered a crowd on the mountain with the promise that he would show them the vessels. The whole group was massacred by Pontius Pilate.

Because of the difference in creed, there was strong religious distrust between those who worshipped on Mount Gerizim and those who worshipped at the restored Temple in Jerusalem. In 128 BC, one of the Jewish Hasmonean rulers (John Hyrcanus) captured Shechem and destroyed the temple, and somewhere between AD 6 and 9 a group of Samaritans defiled the Temple in Jerusalem by scattering bones there during Passover.

There are explicit and implicit refer-

ences to the hostility of Jews and Samaritans in the New Testament (John 4:9, 33). Jesus went out of his way to indicate the good in Samaritans (Luke 10:33), which he had experienced (Luke 17:16), but he followed Jewish tradition and did not normally pass through Samaria when travelling from Galilee to Judaea. The normal route for Jews who did not wish to defile themselves was to cross the River Jordan at Beth Shan (to the north) and Jericho (in the south) travelling on the eastern side of the river (Luke 18:31, 35). Many Samaritans became Christians (Acts 8:25).

Hellenists and Hasidim

The Hellenists and Hasidim became distinct during the period of Greek culture when the Greeks controlled the country. After Alexander the Great had conquered the East, there was always likely to be strong Greek influence in Israel. The settlement of Greek soldiers, the use of Greek as an expressive

There are many points of connection between the beliefs found at Qumrân and ideas circulating among the earliest Christians. John the Baptist's ministry took place in the Judean desert and involved cleansing through water as well as reflecting the same sort of ascetic lifestyle that is commended in the Scrolls. Scepticism about the temple can also be found in the preaching of Stephen,³² while the sort of fascination with the little-known priest-kings Melchizedek that is found in Hebrews³³ was also foundational at Qumrân. Then there is the importance of meals, not to mention the self-consciousness of being part of a distinctive community, and the common use of certain terminologies to describe life in and out of the community ('light and darkness', 'flesh and spirit' and so on). But in all these cases, the Christian belief in Jesus gave a distinctive understanding, and the most that can be said is that Essenism offers a glimpse of sectarian Judaism that illustrates some of the ways in which the earliest Christians sought to contextualize their message within the wider cultural situation of the day.

Zealots

These people were probably not a unified or coordinated movement, but the term is still a useful way to refer to those individuals and groups who became most involved in direct action against the Romans. Josephus reports that

'these men agree in everything with the opinions of the Pharisees, but they have an insatiable passion for

liberty; and they are convinced that God alone is to be their only master and Lord... no fear can compel them to give this title to anyone else.'

(ANTIQUITIES 18.1.6)

He identified their founder as Judas, a Galilean who led a revolt in AD 6, about the same time as Archelaus was removed from office by the Romans (*The Jewish War* 2.8.1), though there is some doubt over how widely the term 'Zealot' might have been used before the time of the final Jewish War of AD 66–70. At least one of Jesus' disciples, a man called Simon, is identified as a Zealot,³⁴ though Matthew³⁵ and Mark³⁶ describe him as a 'Cananaean', which seems to be a parallel word. It is also often thought that Judas Iscariot was a Zealot because one branch of these revolutionaries was known as the *sicarii*, or 'knife-men', a word that sounds a bit like 'Iscariot'.³⁷ But more typical Zealots seem to have been people like Barabbas, whom the crowd chose to liberate in preference to Jesus,³⁸ or the unnamed rabble-rouser with whom Paul was once confused.³⁹

Samaritans

Like many other aspects of the religious life of the time, the origins and identity of those people who appear in the New Testament as 'Samaritans' are not very clear. For a long time it was supposed that they must have been the descendants of the original inhabitants of Samaria, the city that, in the period of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, had been the capital of the north and which was destroyed by the Assyrians in 721 BC. On this understanding the

34. Luke 6:15

35. Matthew 10:4

36. Mark 3:18

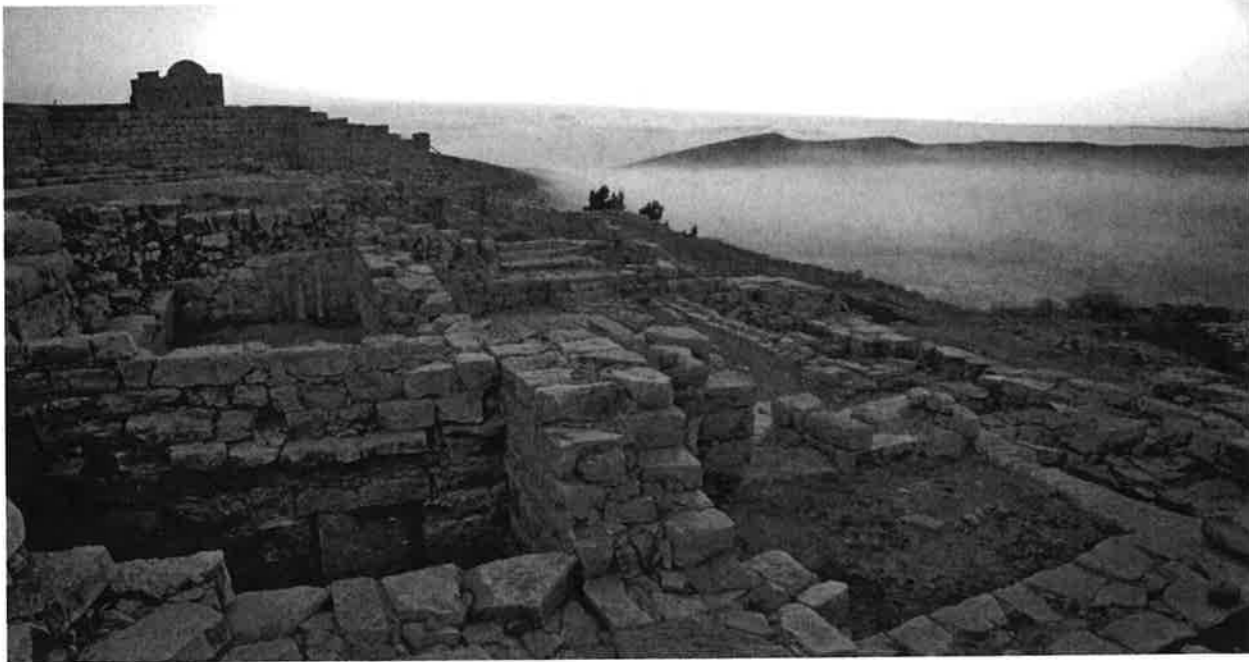
37. Mark 3:19

38. Mark 15:6–15

39. Acts 21:37–39

32. Acts 7:41–53

33. Hebrews 5:6–10;
6:20; 7:1–19

An archaeological
site on Mount
Gerizim.

Samaritans would have been the remnant of the population of Israel that escaped exile in Assyria and who were later viewed with suspicion as religious renegades by Ezra and Nehemiah. But nothing that is reported of those people corresponds with what is known of the Samaritans of the New Testament period. Far from being open to influences from other religious traditions (as Ezra and Nehemiah found), these people appear to have been very conservative, sharing with traditional Judaism a strong commitment to belief in only one God, along with Sabbath observance, circumcision and rigid adherence to the food laws. They regarded only the first five books of the scriptures as authoritative (and had their own version of them). And they also had their own expectation of a messianic-type figure, the *ta'eb* or 'one who returns' to restore all things. The one thing that distinguished them is highlighted in Jesus' exchange with a Samaritan woman: the question whether God might be

worshipped on Mt Gerizim (in Samaritan territory) as well as in Jerusalem, and whether their priesthood or the Jerusalem one was the more authentic.

It is impossible to say where the Samaritans of New Testament times came from, but they were certainly a religious sect rather than an ethnic grouping. Probably they emerged, along with many others, in the turbulent times following the Maccabean revolt. Their distinctive beliefs can certainly all be found within groups that would be regarded as somehow in the mainstream of Judaism of the time: like the Sadducees, they paid special attention to the Torah, like the Pharisees they expected a Messiah figure, and like the Essenes of Qumrân they questioned the legitimacy of Jerusalem and its temple.

Hellenistic influences

In spite of its distinctive Jewish culture, Palestine was still part of the Hellenistic world, as it had been

ever since Alexander the Great extended his empire into the eastern Mediterranean. But it is not easy to get an accurate picture of the extent to which Greek and Roman attitudes and values had been embraced within the culture, as many of our written sources come either from those who were opposed to external interference in the affairs of Palestine or from others (such as Josephus) who wanted to commend themselves to the Romans and so tended to paint a rosy picture of their achievements in the land. Yet in Jerusalem itself, there were synagogues that could be distinguished from one another by reference to the degree to which they identified with a Hellenistic outlook,⁴⁰ and many of the tensions in the early church arose out of the fact that even among the first followers of Jesus some were more reluctant to compromise with the culture of the empire than others.

One thing that all the sources are agreed on is that Galilee, the place where Jesus grew up, was more open to Hellenistic influences than most other parts of the country. The strictest religious people generally regarded the inhabitants of Galilee as being too relaxed in their dealings with non-Jewish culture and spoke of the area in disparaging terms as 'Galilee of the Gentiles'. Making an accurate assessment of the size of ancient populations is fraught with difficulty, but it is generally reckoned that Galilee had more non-Jewish than Jewish residents. It was certainly a great contrast to the southern province of Judea, whose people could more easily isolate their lifestyle from external influences – something that would have been much more difficult in Galilee, if

only because of its physical location. For it was criss-crossed by major trading routes going between east and west that ensured it could never be completely isolated from the wider life of the empire. Growing up here in Nazareth, Jesus would never have been far away from people who were not Jewish, and it is quite likely that he (and no doubt many of his first disciples) would have been familiar with, if not fluent in, the Greek language, which was the international language of commerce and government used everywhere throughout the Roman empire. Peter certainly must have been, as he spent much of the rest of his life travelling and preaching in the wider empire, where the language most used at home in Palestine (Aramaic) would have been quite unknown.⁴¹ This impression of Galilee as a place that was more open to Hellenistic culture is also supported by the fact that it became the location for two of the most prestigious building projects to be completed in the first century, both of them cities constructed along Greek and Roman lines: Sepphoris and Tiberias. They, along with the Roman garrison city of Caesarea, are worth a closer look.

Sepphoris

Sepphoris is of particular interest in relation to the world of the Bible because it was located only a very short distance from Nazareth itself – maybe 4 miles to the north, and therefore just a little more

40. Acts 6:1; 9:29
41. 1 Corinthians 9:5

Galilee and northern Samaria during the time of Jesus. Sepphoris, Tiberias and Caesarea were centres of Roman rule and Hellenistic influence.

