

The Background of the New Testament Essay
John 4:1–26 (Jesus and the Samaritan woman)

by

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September 09, 2021

I. THE REFLECTION OF FIRST CENTURY ETHNIC DIVISIONS

The existence of ethnicity, tribalism, and nationalism challenged the first-century church, both internally and externally. Ethnicity and racism are familiar, determined, and supported within human beings. Notwithstanding, ethnic identification and their associations subsist whether the ethnic groups are competing or not. The primary hurdle for the New Testament Church was overcoming the ethnic hostility between Jews, Gentiles, and Samaritans. These socio-historical influences provided the backdrop for many interactions between Jesus, his disciples, and eventually the early church with these societies.¹

Understanding these traditions will provide the critical lens to interpret those biblical passages relating to the socio-historical influences in light of these ethnic hurdles.

Deep-seated ethnic divisions and hostilities amongst the Jews, Gentiles, and Samaritans in the New Testament were deeply rooted in the events of the Old Testament. During the Assyrian invasion of Israel, occurring in 722 BC, the captives of the ten northern tribes were forcibly relocated to Assyria. As a result, foreigners propagated the city of Samaria, intermarrying with the surviving Jews (2 Kings 17:24). Assyrian resources claim that Sargon II reorganized the area. Some Arab tribes were transported to Samaria within five years during Babylon being under Assyrian reign. Cuthah is identified with Tell Ibrahim, located twenty miles northeast of Babylon. Assyrian policy during its reign was to resettle any captive territories with population diversity.²

There are questions related to the Samaritan association reported in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Are they descendants of the Israelite survivors of the northern kingdom citizens who were partially exiled Assyria during the invasion of 722 BC and

¹ Humphreys Frackson Zgambo. (2017). "An investigation into the socio-historical influences overcoming ethnicity in the early New Testament Church." *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, 3(2), 607-625. <https://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2017.v3n2.a28>

² John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 404.

foreigners from other lands? Are these Samaritans a mixed-race of Israelites and Gentiles? What about their religion? Is it Judaism, paganism, or a combination of both? These controversial inquiries are steeped in the traditional view of 2 Kings 17, however, without a more in-depth study of the history of the region, one's perspective can be somewhat biased. Some scholars have even questioned whether this group are the Samaritans of the New Testament.

In a 1989 landmark study edited by Alan Crown, world authority on the Samaritans, and former head of the Semitic studies department, Sidney University, directs a group of experts on Samaritan history in a landmark investigation. Jewish scholar Menachem Mor, provides the study's first chapter. Mor's research provides relevant ground-breaking information that addresses the origin and early history of the Samaritans. "The Assyrian exile of the ten tribes was not total, and significant numbers of the Israelite population were left behind. Simultaneously, the Assyrians brought a group of exiles to the regions of what had been the Israelite northern kingdom. These diverse populations living together side-by-side intermingled, forming a new people who were eventually called Cuthaeans or Samaritans."³

Following Israel's northern kingdom's fall is the southern kingdom, Judah's fall to Babylon in 586 BC. Both kingdoms fell due to idolatry, yet a significant difference exists between the two. The relocation of Judah's inhabitants to Babylon later resulted in a return to their native land after Babylon's defeat by the Persians in 539 BC. Some exiled Jews returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel, while others returned under the leadership of both Ezra and Nehemiah. With this expansion, ethnic and racial implications would lead to socio-historical fallout by mixing two diverse cultures- the exilic southern kingdom and the former

³ Menachem Mor, "Samaritan History: The Persian, Hellenistic and Hasmonaean Period," in Alan D. Crown, ed., *The Samaritans*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1989, 2; cf. Susan Durber, "Political Reading: Jesus and the Samaritans – Reading in Today's Context," PT 4, 2002: 72.

northern kingdom of ethnically and racially diverse foreigners.⁴ A question follows this sudden and new development. How would these exilic Jews relate to their Samaritan counterparts? What would be the Judean ideological perspective? Reading the accounts of Ezra and Nehemiah answers these questions resulting in Nehemiah's refusal to engage Israel's three Samaritan enemies, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, who attempted to stop rebuilding the Jerusalem wall (Neh. 2:10; 4:1). "When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites." The Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans.

Both Ezra and Nehemiah opposed the interracial and intercultural marriage of Jews with Gentiles and Samaritans. Those dwelling in the land during the northern kingdoms' exile clashed with the returning Judeans. This assumption was the basis of intermarriage proclaimed in both books of Ezra and Nehemiah, where the acts threatened the Jewish community's survival (Ezra 9; Neh 13). Ezra's perspective proposed that the foreigners within Samaria were associated with "abominations and uncleanness"; therefore, intermarriage posed a threat to the stability and prosperity of Israel's nation.⁵ "Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, the people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites" (Ezra 9:1).

II. HISTORICAL VIEW SAMARITAN RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

The biblical storyline about Israel states that this nation was under the curse of the covenant, leading to their final days as an independent nation (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy)

⁴ Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 404.

⁵ Stephen Voorwinde, "Do Jews Have Dealings with Samaritans?", *Vox Reformata* (2011): 30.

27-28). Their continued sins against Yahweh eventually carried them into the Assyrian exile. The narrator of 2 Kings 17 reflects that Israel's suffering was not political but religious. Israel “sinned against the LORD their God” (17:7); they followed the pagan nations’ exemplar (17:8); they built high places, erected Asherim, and worshipped idols (17:9-12). Following their exile, the land was inhabited by Israel’s natives and foreigners from other nation-states, resulting in the north being compromised by syncretism (17:24-41). During Israel’s imploding, Judah, under the reign of Hezekiah, returned to Yahweh and prospered while being delivered from her enemies, the Philistines and Assyria (18:19-37; 19:35-37) until their eventual exile under the reign of Hezekiah’s son, Manasseh, where idol worship was restored (21:1-7). Following these major events, religion within the former Israel became a mixed bag of Judaism, Samaritanism, and pagan rituals.⁶

Several theories evolve from the Assyrian exile of Israel’s northern kingdom as to Samaritan religious origins. There was a split between the Jews and the Samaritans, and with it was the long-term autonomous evolution of the two societies. The Samaritans locate the division at the time of Eli in the twelfth century BC. On the other hand, the Jews determined that it began in the eighth century B.C. Hence, to accurately treat a Samaritan as a religious person, one needs to believe in more than just associations based on his, her, their, etc. name and geography.⁷

The allegedly Samaritan schism, or removal from the majority of Judaism, was a process stretching beyond numerous centuries and constituting a chain of situations that ultimately produced the divorce between the two communities. Historians have managed to elect one situation and suggest that it created the development of the Samaritan sect. They

⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 187-88

⁷ R. J. Coggins, *Samaritans and Jews: The origins of Samaritanism Reconsidered, Growing Points in Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 7.

disagree with the component of Samaritanism which outlines key differences from Judaism. For instance, the Samaritans maintain that worship at Mt. Gerizim has perpetually survived as the decisive issue. The Jews consider Assyrian Gentile intermarriage of the northern Israelites and syncretistic theology's expansion as heresy's foundation. Some attribute it to the post-Pentateuchal scriptures' denial as the critical incident or the construction of the Mt. Gerizim temple.⁸

Almost all contemporary scholars favor minimizing the Old Testament's eyewitness to the origin of the Samaritan people and religion, believing that these "Jewish" chronicles are excessively biased, to be sure. It is best to avoid this method, even so, considering that the announcements of Jesus Christ confirm his further acknowledgment of the suspiciousness of their ancestors and the delay of their religious claims. When foreign immigrants from Syria and Mesopotamia started to settle Samaria, a crisis emerged, according to 2 Kgs 17:25-33. On the authority of the biblical narrative, the origin of the Samaritan religion was syncretistic, having emerged from the amalgamation of Assyrian pagan cultism with the religion of Northern Israel originating in the foreign lands of the new settlers. Initially, these new citizens continued to worship their gods, but they intermingled the native Israelites of Samaria and the religion of Northern Israel in phases. They quickly learned the traditions of Judaism and soon adopted the worship of Yahweh from the Israelite priests while continuing to worship their old gods.

III. HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE PASSAGE

Given the four Gospels of the New Testament, the apostle John dedicates added expanse to the Samaritans in his gospel. A whole chapter is essential to report a unique event

⁸ James D. Purvis, *The Samaritan Pentateuch and the Origin of the Samaritan Sect*, *Harvard Semitic Monographs* (New York, NY: Harvard University Press, 2014), 4-5.

to the Gospel of John, particularly Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman. What is John's purpose for orchestrating this? What is the weight of Samaria in John's understanding? The apostle likely has a strong interest in the Samaritans.

Along with his brother James, John desired fire to come down from heaven as a judgment on a Samaritan village (Luke 9:54). According to Acts 8:14-17, John was also one of the two who had witnessed the Holy Spirit's presence on the Samaritans. Perhaps, John confronted his biases by providing that Jesus' Sycarian detour is a lesson of humility. John provides two instances in light of the event's unfolding.

The context of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman is packed with Old Testament history. The text's backdrop is Jacob's Well, with Mt. Gerizim (John regards "this mountain" in 4:20-21) in the clear view. Mount Gerizim was the background of the blessings in Deuteronomy in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:12), near Mount Ebal, where Moses ordered an altar to be erected (Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:12). 27:4-6). John's hints to Jacob's Well and Mt. Gerizim situate Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman in the structure of "holy geography," which Jesus excels. He is more honorable than Jacob, and he alone makes the possibility of divine worship that rises above physical buildings or places (4:23-24).

A temple constructed on Mt. Gerizim about 400 BC was the focus of worship for the Samaritans. It was besieged by Jews in 128 BC, and it was destroyed by those who claimed that proper worship must be carried out in Jerusalem. The Samaritan Bible only includes the Pentateuch, while the Jewish canon further includes Nevi'im and Kethuvim. Some dispute that the temple's presence on Mt. Gerizim should not have resulted in an irreparable breach between the Jews and Samaritans. Its presence was deemed insignificant, recognizing the "Jewish temples at Elephantine in Upper Egypt in the fifth century B.C., at Leontopolis in

Lower Egypt in the second century B.C., and the temple at Araq El-Emir Transjordan.”⁹ Even so, the Gerizim temple threatened the Jerusalem temple’s legitimacy as the Deuteronomic “true” place of worship because it typified a notable political division and endangered the devotion of Yahweh-worshippers of the north. The Jews understood that the prophets and Deuteronomy named Jerusalem as the proper place of sacrifice in Palestine.

John’s implication in 4:9 of dichotomy between relatives, is the obvious result of their contempt for one another “For Jews do not associate with Samaritans,” and presents the enduring history of tense relationships connecting Samaritans and Jews. Jews in Jesus’ day ordinarily would intentionally avoid association with Samaritans, particularly Samaritan women, notwithstanding the fact that there would have been a gamut of behavior depending on his, her, their, etc. region, status, education, and additional factors.

More often than not, the extent of the phrase “do not associate” in 4:9 is seemingly larger than simply the sharing of cups, bowls, and utensils. A small number of Jews like to eat with Samaritans, but many people do not like it because they feared ritual defilement. Samaritans’ uncleanness was associated by what they lay upon, sat on, or rode upon, as well as by their saliva and urine. Samaritan women, like their Gentile counterparts, were deemed ritually unclean continually. Aside from these ethnic sensitivities, men and women generally would not discuss theological matters. All of these ethnic biases placed Jesus’ dealings with the Samaritan woman in proper context and emphasizes Jesus’ boldness to confront the culture’s social barriers in the pursuit of his mission.¹⁰

Jesus’ dialog with the Samaritan woman reveals that she has had five husbands and that she is currently living with is not her husband. Providing these details exposes the past life of a promiscuous woman. Here, an important observation from the woman presents that

⁹ Wayne A. Brindle, “The Origin and History of the Samaritans”, *Grace Theological Journal* 5.1 (1984): 71.

¹⁰ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 438.

she has insight— “Sir, I see you are a prophet” (4:19). Though the statement is ambiguous, its implication could be Deuteronomic, reflecting Moses’ statement in Deut. 18:15, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.” Considering the Samaritan Pentateuch, the messianic expectation of an eschatological prophet could be the Samaritan woman’s thought or perhaps an opportunity for a theological inquiry. What is the true place of worship? Jerusalem or Mt. Gerizim? Here, one could conclude that Jesus would give a politically correct answer to one who is obviously steeped in her religious tradition. Perhaps a tactful answer could be “God is everywhere.” However, Jesus’ answer is beyond any postmodern attempt to avoid conflict— this response is certainly not political correctness, but the reality is as a Samaritan, “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.” Jesus’ proclamation is the exclusivity of Jewish worship, however “A time is coming and now is when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth” (4:23)— All worship will be centered on Jesus as the Son of God. Obsolescence is imminent for worship in both Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim as with other distinct places of worship. Thus, long debates over Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim have run their course.

Perhaps, John’s Samaritan emphasis is their faith— they believed. “We know that this is truly the Savior of the world” (4:42). Within this context, Jesus’ encounter with the woman resulted in her belief and others of the Samaritan community (4:39, 41). They believe in the Messiah and the promised Taheb Jesus. They discovered the nature and wide-ranging impact of his teachings. Jesus has come not simply for Jews, neither merely for Jews and Samaritans— he is “the Savior of the world.” This title is entirely Johannine and unique to 1 John 4:14.

“Since the Jews were prone to misunderstand Jesus, he did not directly proclaim that he was the Messiah. Indeed, he announced himself as the Messiah only to a Samaritan woman

(4:25-26), for there was no potential in Samaria for a political movement that would crown Jesus as the Messiah.”¹¹

¹¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty*, 508-09.

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