

Samaria and the Coastal Plain

Origin of the Samaritans

With the destruction of the northern kingdom (Israel), Sargon of Assyria deports the bulk of the Jewish population in 721 BC. Jeremiah suggests that a substratum of Hebrew stock remained (Jeremiah 41:5) with more added before wild animals infest the land because the intruders do not know “the god of the land” (2 Kings 17:24-41). With Nehemiah’s reforms, half-Jews were cast out of Judea and later formed the basis of the Samaritan people.

Samaritan Religion

The Samaritans believe in one and only one God, accept Moses as the only prophet, accept only the Law (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) as the only Scriptures, worship at Mount Gerizim instead of Jerusalem, believe in the day of Judgment and recompense and hold that Moses will return to restore Israel.

Background to Rise of Tensions between the Jews and the Samaritans

Tensions arise when Nehemiah turns down Sanballat’s offer to help rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and later expels the high priest’s grandson when he marries Sanballat’s daughter. With Nehemiah’s reforms, Jews refuse to intermarry with the Samaritans because of their mixed ancestry. The final breach comes in 200 BC when Ben Shira writes that the Samaritans accept only the books Torah (Law). Finally, John Hyrcanus destroys the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim (109-108 BC).

Philip Converts Samaritans and a Eunuch (Acts 8:4-40)

Considering the racial and religious bigotry, Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan women (John 4) is quite remarkable but provides the basis for why Philip goes to the Samaritans with the gospel. The inclusion of these sinners into the Kingdom of God makes the gospel all the more remarkable (Acts 8:4-25). In the case of the eunuch, his exclusion from congregational worship under Old Testament provision finds reversal under Christ’s law (Acts 8:26-40; cf. Deuteronomy 23:1; Isaiah 56:3-5).

Peter’s Travels (Acts 9:32-43)

Lydda

Peter heals Aeneas who had been bedridden for eight years due to paralysis. When the inhabitants of Lydda and Sharon saw this, many turn to the Lord (Acts 9:32-35).

Joppa

A compassionate woman named Tabitha (or Dorcas) falls ill and dies. The disciples show the garments she made for the poor. Peter arrives too late, however he kneels in prayer then tells Tabitha to arise then presents her alive to the disciples. News of this spreads and Peter stays in Joppa in the home of a tanner named Simon.

As Peter is deep in prayer, the Lord sends Peter a strange vision. A sheet full of animals descends to the ground with all kind of four-footed animals, crawling creatures and birds. A voice instructs Peter to rise, kill and eat. This disturbs Peter greatly because he has carefully followed Jewish dietary restrictions all of his life (see Leviticus 11). He cannot fathom why the Lord would ask him to eat anything unclean. This happens three times. Finally, men sent by Cornelius arrive seeking Peter. The Holy Spirit instructs Peter to go with these men. Reflecting on the vision, Peter invites them inside to lodge for the so they can journey to Caesarea (Maritima) on the morrow.

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