

Do Jews Have Dealings With Samaritans?

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Introduction

To some readers the question that is the title for this article may sound superfluous. Most English Bible translations state quite categorically that “Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (John 4:9b). For those who have a high view of Scripture, that should settle the matter. The question is, however, not as straightforward as it first appears. When it is read in the original Greek and within its wider context, it soon becomes apparent that there are at least three problems with John 4:9b:

- First, it always helps to read the entire verse. This is how it reads in the NASB: “Therefore the Samaritan woman said to Him, ‘How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?’ (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)” The problem is this: Was the last part of the verse an editorial comment by John or were these words spoken by the Samaritan woman? As every student of Greek will know, New Testament Greek has several ways of introducing direct speech, but none with which to end it. So we have no way of knowing whether the comment that “Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” simply continues the woman’s reply to Jesus or whether it is a parenthetical comment by the Gospel writer.¹ Most English translations take it as a parenthetical comment and so place it in brackets, but it could just as easily have been the woman voicing her private opinion. So are we dealing with an inspired observation by the

¹ A classic example of this problem can be found in the preceding chapter. Are the words of John 3:16 intended to be understood as an editorial comment or as a continuation of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus? Although all are agreed that Jesus’ reply to Nicodemus begins in v. 10, English translations vary as to where they end the direct speech attributed to Jesus. While most take Jesus’ speech to the end of v.21, there are some notable exceptions. In the RSV Jesus’ words conclude at v. 15, and in the GNB as early as v. 13.

Evangelist or with the Samaritan woman's own thoughts on the subject?

- Secondly, there is also a textual problem here. Not all ancient manuscripts include John 4:9b. In fact, these words are omitted by some very impressive witnesses, such as the original hand of Codex Sinaiticus, the oldest manuscript containing the whole of the New Testament. It is also missing from Codex Bezae, the manuscript presented by the Reformer Theodore Beza to the library at Cambridge University in 1581, and also from a number of Old Latin manuscripts dating from the fourth to the sixth centuries. The United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament is happy to include these words with an 'A' rating, but some of the ancient Christian scribes would not have been as sure. So there is some uncertainty whether these words would have been in the original at all.²
- Then, thirdly, there is also a translation problem. The verb συγχράομαι has two possible dictionary meanings. It can mean "to associate on friendly terms," but it can also mean to "use dishes in common (with someone else)."³ So when it says that "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans," does that mean that they do not associate on friendly terms or does it simply mean that they do not use dishes in common? While most English translations adopt the first option, the choice is certainly not unanimous.⁴ The Good News Bible, for example, translates, "Jews will not use the same dishes that Samaritans use."⁵ The New English Bible is similar, "Jews and Samaritans, it should be noted, do not use vessels in common." The commentator C.

² Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed., Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1994, 177, makes an interesting comment, "Although some have thought . . . that the words are an early marginal gloss that eventually got into the text of most witnesses, such comments are typical of the evangelist. The omission, if not accidental, may reflect scribal opinion that the statement is not literally exact and therefore should be deleted."

³ Barclay M. Newman, Jr., *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*, Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1993, 169.

⁴ Cf. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991, 218: "although the verb *sunchrasthai* can mean 'to associate with' . . . it more commonly means 'to use together with', the object being understood from the context."

⁵ Cf. NIV footnote: "Or *do not use dishes Samaritans have used.*"

K. Barrett has argued that this is not a statement about general relations between Jews and Samaritans. Rather, Samaritan women were considered by the Jews to be ritually unclean. He writes, “One could never be certain that a Samaritan woman was not in a state of uncleanness, and therefore the only safe practice was to assume that she was. This uncleanness would necessarily be conveyed to the vessel she held, especially if she had drunk from it.”⁶ Hence the principle that Jews do not use vessels together with Samaritans. It is a principle that Jesus manifestly ignores. He has no time for such ritual niceties. In asking the woman for a drink, he is prepared to drink from the container that she uses – a practice that more scrupulous Jews would strenuously avoid. He is breaking down barriers, which is what John 4:1-42 is all about.

So the question before us is still a valid one: “Do Jews have dealings with Samaritans?” It is a question that the New Testament leaves wide open, John 4:9 notwithstanding. If the saying was in the original manuscript, it may just be recording the woman’s own personal opinion. And it may not mean what we have often thought it to mean. It may simply be a reference to the common use of vessels, which makes good sense in the context. So the question before us is still open. It is a question with a long history. It is also a complex question and therefore deserving of careful consideration.

A. History

1. The Old Testament

The Old Testament has many references to Samaria,⁷ but only one to the Samaritans. 2 Kings 17 records the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to the king of Assyria. He invaded the whole land and went up to its capital city of Samaria and besieged it for three years. At the end of that time he captured the city and carried Israel away into exile to Assyria (vv. 5-6). But the

⁶ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed.; London: SPCK, 1978, 232.

⁷ According to K. Haacker, Samaria “designates originally the capital city of the northern kingdom founded by Omri in 876 B.C. It later came to designate the area of the northern kingdom as an administrative unit of several successive empires”, *NIDNTT* 3: 449.

deportation did not go only one way. The king of Assyria also imported peoples from the Mesopotamia and Aram into the land of Israel. He “brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim and settled them in the towns of Samaria to replace the Israelites. They took over Samaria and lived in its towns” (v. 24). When these people began to settle in Israel, they did not fear the Lord. So he sent lions among them which killed some of them. These new settlers then complained to the king of Assyria that they did not know the customs of the god of the land. So the king sent one of the priests of Samaria whom he had exiled to return and teach the people how they should fear the Lord. The result of this effort proved to be a rather syncretistic mix of pagan religions with the worship of Yahweh. Verse 29, which has the only specific reference to the Samaritans in the Old Testament, makes this abundantly clear: “Each national group made its own gods in the several towns where they settled, and set them up in shrines the people of Samaria (literally ‘the Samaritans’⁸) had made at the high places.” Then the whole situation is summed up in v. 33, “They worshipped the LORD, but they also served their own gods in accordance with the customs of the nations from which they had been brought.”

The question now needs to be asked whether this is where the historical origins of the Samaritans are to be sought. Are the Samaritans of the New Testament the descendants of the Israelite survivors of the Assyrian invasion of 722 B.C. and the people who were imported from other lands? In other words, were they a race of half-breeds, a mixture of Israelites and Gentiles? And was their religion a syncretistic religion that was a mix of Judaism and paganism? Is this where 2 Kings 17 should lead us? The entry on the Samaritans in the *Dictionary of New Testament Background* gives an unequivocal answer to these questions: “The account in 2 Kings 17 should be discounted in discussions of Samaritan origins . . . Despite earlier mistaken

⁸ שמרנים and Σαμαρείται are both hapaxlegomena in the MT and LXX respectively. These words “denote the inhabitants of Samaria, both the city and the territory. In the NT they apply only to the latter”, *NIDNTT* 3: 450. In the NT Σαμάρεια (‘Samaria’) is found 11x, in Luke 17:11; John 4:3, 4, 5, 7; Acts 1:8; 8:1, 5, 9, 14; 9:31; 15:3; while Σαμαρείτης/Σαμαρείτις (‘Samaritan/Samaritan woman’) are also found 11x, in Matt 10:5; Luke 9:52; 10:33; 17:16; John 4:9, 39, 40; 8:48; Acts 8:25. This article will consider all twenty-two references.

suggestions, it is now clear that nothing of later Samaritan religion and practice owes anything to the proposed pagan influence of 2 Kings 17.”⁹

Even though the origin and early history of the Samaritans is vague and problematic, this seems like a rather hard and dogmatic line to take. Is 2 Kings 17 really irrelevant to our understanding of the Samaritans in New Testament times? A more moderate suggestion is made by the Jewish scholar, Menachem Mor, who contributed the first chapter of the landmark study on the Samaritans edited by Alan Crown in 1989. Crown was the head of the Semitic Studies department at Sydney University for many years. He was regarded as a world authority on the Samaritans and co-opted a group of experts to put together an authoritative volume on their long and complex history. Menachem Mor wrote on Samaritan history during the Persian, Hellenistic and Hasmonaean Periods. Of the three theories of Samaritan origins that he mentions he seems to favour the third: “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.”¹⁰

It is therefore probably wise not to be too dismissive of the background provided by 2 Kings 17. Historically the Samaritans of Jesus’ day cannot be divorced from the inhabitants of the northern kingdom of Israel that fell to the

⁹ Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000, 1058. Gerard S. Sloyan, “The Samaritans in the New Testament,” *Horizons* 10, 1983: 10-11, sees 2 Kings 17 as a polemical, and therefore a coloured and untrustworthy, account of the origin of Samaritan religion: “The target is the Jewish population of the north which apostasized after the division of the kingdom and thus opened a door to every sort of syncretistic abuse . . . The very proximity of a heathen worship derived from Assyria-Babylonia to Yahwist worship in Shechem, Shiloh and Samaria may have been enough for the south to declare the latter syncretistic, hence to visit every verbal opprobrium upon it.”

¹⁰ 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: “The most well-supported theory about their origin suggests they are descended from those inhabitants of Israel who escaped deportation by Sargon, the king of Assyria. These descendants either, on one reading, preserved the pure religion of Israel, or ‘polluted’ it by intermarrying with the many foreigners who came to live in the land.”

Assyrians in 722BC. If the Samaritans are linked to these people who lived in the land prior to the Assyrian invasion and to the mixed race that inhabited the land after that time it helps to explain several New Testament passages where the Samaritans are mentioned.

The fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722BC was followed by the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah in 586BC. The northern kingdom had fallen to Assyria and the southern kingdom to Babylon, and both for the same reason – they had disobeyed the laws of the Lord and worshipped other gods. Yet there was a major difference between the two. The deportation of Judah to Babylon was followed by a return to the land. When Babylon fell to the Persians in 539BC, the new regime allowed the Jews to return home. Some of them did, first under the leadership of Zerubbabel and later under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. When these exiles returned home, they were confronted by a challenging existential problem – how were they to relate to those who lived in the territory to which the ten lost tribes never returned? How were the returned exiles of the southern kingdom to relate to the inhabitants of what had been the northern kingdom? In other words, how were the Jews to relate to the Samaritans? Throughout the Persian period this seems to have been a burning question. Was Judean Jewry to hold a separatist ideology or a universalist ideology?¹¹ From the books of Ezra and Nehemiah there can be little question as to where the Jewish leaders stood on this issue. Nehemiah refused to have any contact with the Samaritan leader Sanballat. Both Ezra and Nehemiah vehemently opposed intermarriage with the Samaritans. When the Samaritans offered to help Nehemiah rebuild the walls of Jerusalem they were met with a curt “no thank you.” The Jews who returned from the exile were to have no dealings with the Samaritans.

2. The Inter-testamental Period

In spite of Samaritan opposition the Jews managed to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. They had also succeeded in rebuilding the temple by 515BC. But where did that leave the Samaritans? Excluded from temple worship in Jerusalem they had no choice but to build a temple of their own. This was difficult to do in the days of the Persian Empire as official royal approval had

¹¹ Mor, “History,” 3.

been given only to the temple in Jerusalem. The Persian policy seems to have been to forbid temple building.¹² But then in 332BC the Samaritans saw their window of opportunity. The Persian Empire was beginning to crumble in the face of the onslaught by Alexander the Great. In the power vacuum that emerged the Samaritans had a chance to do what up till now had been impossible. Hastily, in nine months, they built their temple on Mount Gerizim before the period of uncertainty ended. They had to take advantage of the brief time-span between the rise of the Macedonians in the East and the complete collapse of the Persians. The temple was finished nearly at the same time as Alexander conquered Gaza. So the Samaritans had made the most of their opportunity. But it created a problem. There were now two temples in the land of Israel.¹³

For the next two centuries these two rival temples existed side by side – one in Jerusalem and one on Mount Gerizim. While both the Jews and the Samaritans endured the occupation of the successors of Alexander the Great both temples remained intact, even though they were defiled by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (2 Macc 6:2-3). Eventually, however, the Jews threw off the Greek yoke as a result of the Maccabean revolt in the middle of the second century BC. For a time the Jews were able to regain their independence and their Hasmonean kingdom reached almost the same extent as the kingdom of David and Solomon nearly a millennium earlier. Their influence reached its peak with the reign of John Hyrcanus who ruled from 134 to 104BC. While the territorial expansion was at its height Samaria fell to the Jews¹⁴ and there were hopes that the Samaritans would be Judaized, but this never happened. Even though they were circumcised, John treated them like pagans and

¹² Mor, “History,” 6.

¹³ Sloyan, “Samaritans,” 8, comments: “The construction of a Samaritan temple on Gerizim was roughly contemporaneous with the establishing of a Greek colony in Samaria and the rebuilding and the resettlement of Shechem. The coming together of these events may have been decisive for the split that was to eventuate.”

¹⁴ Bruce Hall, “From John Hyrcanus to Baba Rabbah,” in Alan D. Crown, ed., *The Samaritans*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1989, 33, writes: “Hyrcanus’ destruction of the city of Samaria – a city which at the time was at least predominantly Gentile and pagan – is commonly dated in, or shortly before, 107 B. C., and . . . the final destruction of Shechem probably occurred at approximately the same time.”

destroyed their temple on Mount Gerizim in 128BC.¹⁵ The main distinction that separated the two groups was the temple in Jerusalem and the Samaritan belief in the holiness of Mount Gerizim. As it said in one of the Jewish tractates, “When shall we take them back? When they renounce Mount Gerizim, and confess Jerusalem and the Resurrection of the Dead.”¹⁶ Because of the rivalry between the two temples and because the Samaritan temple attracted some northern Jews living far from Jerusalem, John Hyrcanus demolished the competing temple.¹⁷ Although there might have been some political motives, as John had some old scores to settle with the Samaritans, the main sticking point was the temple at Mount Gerizim. The holiness of Mount Gerizim, more than any other factor, was the main point of contention between the Samaritans and the Jews. As Menachem Mor concludes his chapter:

Historically, the Samaritans were rejected by the Jews solely for religious reasons. At the time of John Hyrcanus, political strife augmented the religious dispute. John’s reign reflected the Hasmonaean desire to destroy the Samaritan sect. These events convinced the Samaritans that there was no way for them to join Judaism. During this time they began to legitimize their separate identity as a sect outside Judaism.¹⁸

At a more popular level the disdain the Jews felt for the Samaritans in the second century BC can be seen in the Apocryphal book of Sirach or Ecclesiasticus: “Two nations my soul detests, and the third is not even a people: Those who live in Seir, and the Philistines, and the foolish people who live in Shechem” (Sir 50:25-26). From this it would appear that the Jews

¹⁵ See Josephus, *Antiquities* 13:254-58; *Jewish War* 2:62-63. Although Josephus gives the impression that this event happened early in Hyrcanus’ reign, Hall expresses some uncertainty: “We do not know at what point in his career Hyrcanus destroyed the Samaritan temple which stood on Mount Gerizim, and recent writers on the subject have expressed divergent views” (“From John Hyrcanus to Baba Rabbah,” 33).

¹⁶ *Kutim*, 28.

¹⁷ Mor, “History,” 17.

¹⁸ Mor, “History,” 18; cf. Sloyan, “Samaritans,” 15: “. . . the initial clear distinction between Jews and Samaritans as professors of two distinct patterns of religion can be dated securely only beginning in 128 and the destruction of Shechem in 109. These events led to the reflection in the south that the Samaritans had to be destroyed because they did not profess authentic Yahwist faith.”

of the day had an even lower opinion of the Samaritans than they did of the Edomites or the Philistines.

3. The New Testament Period

In the lead up to the New Testament period we find Herod the Great wanting to do the Samaritans a favour. In 25BC he builds a temple for them, but it is in their capital city Samaria. So they refuse to use it and continue worshipping on Mount Gerizim. At this time, somewhat surprisingly, they still also seem to be welcome in the temple at Jerusalem, but it was a privilege that the Samaritans were to abuse. As Josephus writes in his *Antiquities*:

As the Jews were celebrating the feast of unleavened bread, which we call the Passover, it was customary for the priests to open the temple gates just after midnight. When, therefore, these gates were first opened, some of the Samaritans came privately to Jerusalem, and threw about dead men's bodies in the cloisters; on account of which the Jews excluded them out of the temple, which they had not used to do at such festivals; and on other accounts also they watched the temple more carefully than they had formerly done.¹⁹

Josephus tells us that this was during the rule of the Roman procurator Coponius, who was the first governor after Archelaus had been banished by Augustus in AD 6. So this event happened somewhere between 6 and 9AD (which was around the time that Jesus visited the temple at the age of twelve). So once again the relations between Jews and Samaritans had reached a low ebb. Later in the first century matters were going to get decidedly worse. In AD 51 some Galilean pilgrims were going south to Jerusalem for a festival. They were roughly handled in a Samaritan village and at least one of them was killed. Matters escalated to such an extent that the case was brought before Emperor Claudius in Rome. He decided in favour of the Jews and against the Samaritans. As a result three of their leaders received the death sentence.²⁰

¹⁹ *Antiquities* 18:29-30.

²⁰ F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, New York: Doubleday, 1969, 342-43.

All this background material should set the stage for the ministry of Jesus and the apostles to the Samaritans. In the first century the rifts between the Jews and the Samaritans ran deep, and sometimes tensions between the two groups could run high.²¹ There was mutual suspicion and for good reason. It all had a long history going back some 500 years. It all had deep religious roots. Where is the right place to worship God? One group dogmatically insisted it was Jerusalem. The other group equally dogmatically insisted that it was Mount Gerizim.²² The differences between the two seem irreconcilable. How do Jesus and the apostles deal with this situation? How do they minister in this context of hostility and mistrust?

B. The New Testament Data

1. Matthew

In Matthew there is just one passing reference to the Samaritans. In the opening paragraph of Matthew 10 Jesus has appointed the twelve disciples. Then in v. 5 he sends them out with these instructions: "*Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶ Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.⁷ As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' ⁸ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give."*

In the Gospels this is the first reference to the Samaritans and it sounds very negative. It seems as if Jesus is adopting some of the anti-Samaritan prejudices of his fellow-Jews. He is lumping the Samaritans with the Gentiles.²³ He is giving his disciples a very particularistic mission. They are to go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. The nearness of the kingdom is a message they are now to take only to Israel. They are to heal the Jewish sick, raise the Jewish dead, to cleanse Jewish lepers. The instructions sound very narrow and discriminatory. Why does Jesus seem so prejudiced

²¹ Cf. Durber, "Political Reading," 73: "It is hard to find an explanation adequate to the deep hatred and irreparable breach which developed between the two communities. It certainly developed before the Jews accepted the prophets and the writings as canonical."

²² See Hall, "From John Hyrcanus to Baba Rabbah," 37.

²³ "The parallelism with 'the Gentiles' (*ethnē*) and the juxtaposition with 'the house of Israel' show unmistakably that the Samaritans are here not recognized as Israelites", *NIDNTT* 3: 454.

when he is giving these instructions to his disciples? Isn't the kingdom meant for all? Aren't kingdom blessings to be dispensed as widely as possible? Or is Jesus just another Jewish rabbi, a patriot who is particularistic to the core?

These are important questions that can best be answered in two ways:

- (a) If we read Jesus' words carefully, we will notice that he says, "*Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans.*" In other words, he is instructing them not to go out of their way to reach Gentiles nor to make Samaritans their target audience.²⁴ They are not to deliberately focus on Gentiles and Samaritans. The context is Galilee, and thus in practice they are restricted to Galilee. In a mixed society like Galilee they would inevitably encounter non-Jews. The same was true of Jesus. He had already healed the servant of a Gentile centurion (8:13) and he was later to heal the daughter of a Canaanite woman (15:21-28), but even in that case he does so by way of concession. He reminds the woman, "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*" (15:24). But why is this? Why is Jesus' ministry so particularistic in its focus?
- (b) When Jesus sends out his disciples they are, strictly speaking, still ministering in the age of the old covenant. This is still the age of particularism. The disciples' mission foreshadows what will soon happen, but that time has not yet come. As Alfred Plummer has said, "It is through the Jews that the kingdom is to be opened to the whole world. If they are neglected, the revelation will be stopped at its source."²⁵ At this point, the focus is still primarily on the Jews, but this stage will soon pass. "Jesus here was merely speaking of a temporary restriction that later would be done away with."²⁶ At the end of Matthew's Gospel Jesus can say, "*Go and make disciples of all nations*" (28:19). Through his death and resurrection a new covenant

²⁴ Thus Richard T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007, 381-82: "The geographical terms used here . . . indicate a restriction on the area to be visited rather than a total ban on contact with Samaritans and Gentiles as such."

²⁵ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956, 216.

²⁶ Herman N. Ridderbos, *Matthew*, trans. Ray Togtman; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987, 197.

has been inaugurated, and his kingdom will be a dominion where all the peoples of the earth will be blessed. Then Jesus' disciples will go in the way of the Gentiles and enter cities of the Samaritans, but in Matthew 10 that time has not yet come.

2. Luke-Acts

There are no references to the Samaritans at all in Mark, but there is considerable material in Luke-Acts. To appreciate these references we need to have some sense of the shape of Luke-Acts. On the assumption that Luke-Acts is one work in two volumes, the author tells one story and not two.²⁷ This story is in the shape of an hour glass. The top part is Luke and the bottom part is Acts. In the middle you have that narrow section through which the sand of salvation-history must pass. That is Jerusalem, the centre of Luke's story. It is there that all the crucial redemptive-historical events take place, i.e. the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension and Pentecost. All of these events take place in Jerusalem, the middle of the hour glass.

The top part of the hour glass has three main parts, as there are three major sections to Luke's Gospel:

- (a) Galilee (4:14-9:50)
- (b) Journey (Luke 9:51-19:27)
- (c) Jerusalem (Luke 19:28-24:53)

The bottom part of the hour glass, the book of Acts, is defined by Acts 1:8 where Jesus tells his disciples where they will be his witnesses:

- (a) Jerusalem (Acts 1:12-8:1)
- (b) Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1-9:43)²⁸

²⁷ The unity of Luke-Acts has become a debatable issue in recent New Testament scholarship. For a more detailed discussion on this question see Stephen Voorwinde, "Luke-Acts: One Story in Two Parts," *Vox Reformata* 75, 2010: 4-32.

²⁸ "The fact that 'Samaria' in Acts 1:8 is attached to 'Judea' without repetition of the preposition and article makes the phrase 'in all Judea and Samaria [*en pasē tē Ioudaia kai Samareia*]' appear to be a single compound concept and not the designation of two consecutive stages in the history of the mission. This corresponds to the common

(c) The ends of the earth, i.e. the Gentile mission (Acts 10:1-28:31)

The three major sections in Luke are roughly parallel to the three major sections in Acts, but it is of course an inverted parallel. Jesus' ministry in Galilee parallels the apostles' mission to the Gentiles. The Journey section in Luke parallels the Judea and Samaria section in Acts,²⁹ while the Jerusalem sections in both books belong together and form one continuous story for more than twelve chapters from Luke 19:28 to Acts 8:1, where the core events of the narrative take place. Hence, the narrative of Luke's Gospel moves towards Jerusalem, while the narrative of Acts moves away from Jerusalem and into the Gentile world.

The shape of the story has particular relevance to the references to Samaria and the Samaritans in Luke-Acts. All except one are found in the (b) section of each book. This makes for a beautiful symmetry and balance in Luke's presentation.

2.1 Luke 9:51-56

This brief passage is quite remarkable. It is found at a major point of transition in Luke's Gospel. This is where the journey section begins: "*Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem*" (v.51). The language suggests that he is facing something rather unpleasant. The very first encounter he has on the journey is indeed unpleasant for Jesus. He is rejected by a Samaritan village. They did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. Here again was the old sticking point between Jews and Samaritans. Their

administration of Judea and Samaria by a Roman procurator from A.D. 6", *NIDNTT* 3: 456. A similar grammatical construction appears in Acts 9:31, with its reference to "the church throughout all Judea, Galilee and Samaria" (NASB).

²⁹ Although the parallels with Acts 8-9 are significant, it would be overstating the case to suggest that Luke's "Journey Section" or "Travel Document" should be renamed "The Samaritan Ministry." This is the suggestion made by Morton S. Enslin, "The Samaritan Ministry and Mission," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 1980: 29-38. Although all the references to Samaria and Samaritans are confined to this part of Luke's Gospel, they are not so dominant that this section should be named after them. Far more prominent are the references to Jerusalem as Jesus' intended destination (Luke 9:51, 53; 10:30; 13:4, 22, 33, 34; 17:11; 18:31; 19:11, 28).

rejection is a sign of things to come,³⁰ but it is also a reminder of something that has happened already. The Journey section starts with a rejection, but so does the Galilee section. It begins with Jesus' visit to the synagogue at Nazareth. The upshot of that visit was Jesus' rejection by his own home town. Now the same is happening in Samaria.³¹ Jesus is rejected equally by Jews and Samaritans. Luke is giving a very evenhanded account of events. He treats Jew and Samaritan equally. There is not the slightest trace of prejudice, bias or racism.

While that may be said of Luke, it can hardly be said of the disciples James and John. They are living up to their nickname Boanerges or "sons of thunder," the name that Jesus had given them when he first called them (Mark 3:17). True to form, they think they know how to deal with these inhospitable Samaritans. So they ask Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" (v.54). But Jesus rebukes them and they all go to another village.

Curious as it may seem, James and John had some plausible biblical precedent for their request. As Joel Green has pointed out, "The affinity between the Elijah-story and the Samaritan rejection of Jesus may have been obvious to the disciples, so that their proposed action against the Samaritans would seem to have had scriptural sanction."³² Earlier in Luke 9 James and John had been privileged to witness the Transfiguration, and on the Mount of Transfiguration they had met Moses and Elijah. So here they seem to be taking Elijah as their paradigm. He had told fire to come down from heaven to consume an army captain and his fifty men (2 Kings 1:10), and he had done it not just once but twice (2 Kings 1:12). In each case the one who had sent the captain and his men was Ahaziah, the king of Samaria (2 Kings 1:1-

³⁰ John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*; WBC 35B, Dallas: Word, 1993, 533, writes: "The rejection that awaits him is prefigured in the inhospitality of the village of the Samaritans (cf. 4:16-30), while his meekness in the face of rejection in Jerusalem has its own anticipation in Jesus' response here."

³¹ This parallel has long been recognized. See Morton S. Enslin, "Luke and the Samaritans," *HTR* 36, 1943: 282: "This rejection in a Gentile village is a conscious and deliberate parallel to the rejection at Nazareth which was arbitrarily placed at the head of the 'Galilean ministry.' This possibility is heightened by the obvious reflection of an Elijah story in both initial sections."

³² Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997, 407.

9). Elijah had known how to deal with Samaritans and now James and John are proposing to Jesus that they deal with this Samaritan village in exactly the same way. Their suggestion even seems to have sound biblical precedent. But Jesus will have none of it. His approach is completely different, as the next passage will amply demonstrate.

2.2 Luke 10:25-37

The parable of the Good Samaritan provides a remarkable window into Jesus' character. In Luke 9 the Samaritans reject him. In Luke 10 he makes a Samaritan the hero of what is arguably his most famous parable. Because this parable is so well known, it is often assumed that it is also well understood. The assumption is that it is all about love and neighbourliness. The priest and the Levite today are religious people who talk about religion and practice the rituals, but show no compassion for the down-trodden. The Samaritan in the story can then become anyone one's audience doesn't particularly like, be it a Muslim terrorist, a gay activist or a heroin addict. The story has shock value, which then allows for some trenchant application, "Even bad people can do good things. So, go out and be a Good Samaritan." It's a story about the second great commandment, "Love your neighbour as yourself."³³

Now that interpretation isn't wrong. On the surface the parable is about love for the neighbour. After all, Jesus is answering the question, "Who is my neighbour?" (v.29); but there's so much more to it than that. Jesus is here dealing with an expert in the law (v.25), that is the law of the scribes that has been encrusted over the Old Testament law of Moses. Given his background, the expert in the law would probably not have been critical of the priest and Levite passing by on the other side of the road.³⁴ He would probably have applauded them for doing the right thing.³⁵ That was the very course of action

³³ Nolland, *Luke*, 588, suggests that vv. 29-37 take up "the neighbor part of the double command to love of God and neighbor. More implicitly, the following pericope [about Mary and Martha] (vv 38-42) will take up the God part of this double commandment."

³⁴ For this interpretation I am indebted to the insights of John de Hoog, my Old Testament colleague at the Reformed Theological College; cf. Green, *Luke*, 427: "... within the socio-historical context suggested by the narrative, the identification of this lawyer and the temple staff of the parable may be more immediate than normally thought."

³⁵ Cf. Green, *Luke*, 430-31: "They participated in and were legitimated by the world of the temple, with its circumspect boundaries between clean and unclean, including clean and

that would have been suggested by the scribal traditions of the day. A priest could not defile himself by touching a dead body.³⁶ He could not even approach within four cubits to see if the man was dead, because if the man was dead the priest would not only have defiled himself, he would also have to tear his priestly robes, an act that would conflict with the law about not destroying valuable things.³⁷ The Levite would have had similar problems.³⁸ He could not touch the body either. Thus both the priest and the Levite would have been required by their law, the law which this lawyer represents and loves, to do precisely what they did.

Now comes the shocking twist in the story. Here comes a Samaritan! He is the only character in Jesus' story who can help the injured man. He can do so because he is a Samaritan and therefore not bound by the legal system of first-century Judaism. The insiders, the priests and the Levites, can do nothing. They are prisoners of their own legal system. But this hated outsider, this Samaritan, is not bound in this way. He can act and, most pointedly, he can fulfil the command to love your neighbour as yourself. He is not bound by the petty details of legalism, so he can obey the second great commandment.

So Jesus has the lawyer on the rack. In the hands of Jesus the parable of the Good Samaritan is a weapon of war,³⁹ but it is wielded with exquisite grace.

unclean people . . . Within their world, their association with the temple commends them as persons of exemplary piety whose actions would have been regarded as self-evidently righteous. They are accustomed to being evaluated on the basis of their ancestry, not on the basis of their performance (cf. 3:7-9). Accordingly, their failure to assist the anonymous man would have been laudable in the eyes of many."

³⁶ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980, 44, claims that the priest "is the prisoner of his own legal/theological system . . . the written law listed five sources of defilement. Contact with a corpse was at the top of the list. The oral law added four more. Contact with a non-Jew was the first of this additional list . . . Thus this poor priest was in critical danger of contracting ritual impurity in its most severe form from the point of view of both the oral and the written law."

³⁷ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 45.

³⁸ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 46-47.

³⁹ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed.; trans. S. H. Hooke; New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1963, 21, claims this is true of many of Jesus' parables: ". . . they were preponderantly concerned with a situation of conflict. They correct, reprove, attack. For the greater part, though not exclusively, the parables are weapons of warfare. Everyone of them calls for immediate response."

The expert in the law came to test Jesus, but now Jesus is testing him and the whole legal system that he represents. The point of the story is that the lawyer would have done the same as the priest and the Levite. He is trapped in his own system of rules and regulations. So Jesus chooses a Samaritan as the hero of the story because he stands outside that system. He can obey the law of God, while this observant Jew cannot. Then, when he has finished the story, Jesus drives his point home by telling the expert in the law to be just like the Samaritan. His application of the parable is painful in the extreme.

But why did Jesus especially choose a Samaritan to be the hero of the story? For his purposes wouldn't a Greek or a Roman or an Arab have worked equally well? If all that the main character had to do was stand outside the legal system of Judaism, then why specifically choose a Samaritan to be the hero?

In Luke 9 we read that Jesus rebuked James and John for wanting to call fire down from heaven to destroy a Samaritan village, but we are never told how Jesus rebuked them or what the content of the rebuke was all about. Perhaps Luke has deliberately left that to this parable. Jesus' story has a sting in the tail not only for the expert in the law but also for James and John. In their request James and John thought they had the advantage of biblical precedent. In the way they had wanted to treat the Samaritans they had drawn their inspiration from the prophet Elijah. But there was another way of looking at the Samaritans that was just as scriptural.

In a little known passage in 2 Chronicles 28, an account with which Jesus may have expected his disciples to be familiar, King Ahaz of Judah was heavily defeated by the king of Israel from Samaria. The Israelites took a large number of captives, and also a great deal of plunder, which they carried back to Samaria (v.8). The returning army, however, was intercepted by the prophet Oded, who sternly rebuked them for taking their fellow countrymen as prisoners of war. As a result of his intervention the prisoners of war were returned home and the account ends on a very positive note (vv.14-15):

So the soldiers gave up the prisoners and plunder in the presence of the officials and all the assembly. The men designated by name took the prisoners, and from the plunder they clothed all who were naked.

They provided them with clothes and sandals, food and drink, and healing balm. All those who were weak they put on donkeys. So they took them back to their fellow countrymen at Jericho, the City of Palms, and returned to Samaria.

So perhaps the parable of the Good Samaritan is not as original as many may have thought. It has some striking verbal connections to this account of the restoration of the Judean captives to Jericho by the men of Samaria.⁴⁰ In this parable Jesus may therefore be doing more than challenging a lawyer's understanding of the law. He may also be challenging his disciples' attitudes to the Samaritans and thereby preparing them for their future mission.

2.3 Luke 17:11-19

At the beginning of the account of the healing of the ten lepers Luke reminds us that Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem. This is still the Journey section, but Jesus does not seem to have made much progress since chapter 9. He is still travelling along the border between Samaria and Galilee. Outside a village Jesus is greeted by the pathetic sight of ten lepers desperately wanting to be healed (cf. Lev 13:45-46). He tells them to show themselves to the priests. But which priests? The priests in Jerusalem or the priests at Mount Gerizim?⁴¹ His instruction puts these lepers in a potential dilemma, especially the Samaritan. Does he go with his peers to Jerusalem or does he go to Mount Gerizim? He does neither. He sees that he has been healed, not in a purely physical sense but in the spiritual sense of understanding the significance of the healing. He came back to Jesus praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him.⁴² In Luke's Gospel all of these actions are expressions of worship (Luke 2:20; 5:12, 25-26; 7:16-17; 13:13; 18:11, 43; 22:17, 19; 23:47).⁴³ This man sees what none of the other lepers has seen: ". . . the proper place to worship God is in the presence of Jesus of

⁴⁰ See Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, London: Tyndale, 1962, 115.

⁴¹ Cf. Green, *Luke*, 621.

⁴² Cf. Green, *Luke*, 624: "Unlike the other lepers, this one perceives that he has been the recipient of divine benefaction – and that at the hand of Jesus. Of his three actions – praising God, falling at Jesus' feet and thanking Jesus – the first is expected within the Lukan narrative, the second two quite extraordinary."

⁴³ Dennis Hamm, "What the Samaritan Sees: The Narrative Christology of Luke 17:11-19," *CBQ* 56, 1994:283-84.

Nazareth.”⁴⁴ In his worship Jesus recognises a genuine expression of faith and so he says, “Rise and go; your faith has saved you” (v. 17; cf. Luke 7:50; 8:48; 18:42). Salvation has come to a Samaritan.

Although there has been little in the way of geographical progress in Luke’s journey section so far, there has certainly been progress in the narrative. At first the Samaritans reject Jesus. Then Jesus makes a Samaritan the hero of his most famous parable. Finally a Samaritan has the faith to see Jesus for who he really is and comes back to worship him. The stage is being set for the ministry of the apostles in the book of Acts. The soil is being prepared for their mission to the Samaritans. This healed leper is a paradigm that many Samaritans will later follow (Acts 8:1-25; cf. John 4:1-42).

Nevertheless, even in Jesus’ high words of commendation for this healed leper there is a sharp edge that should not be missed: “Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this *foreigner*?” (v.18). The Greek word is ἀλλογενής (*allogenēs*) and it is found only here in the New Testament.⁴⁵ But it is also found in another significant location. It is “the very word used on the famous inscriptions on the balustrade around the temple in Jerusalem marking the line between the court of the Gentiles and the sacred area accessible only to Jews.”⁴⁶ A foreigner could proceed beyond a certain point only on pain of death. So even in Luke’s Gospel, where Jesus’ attitude to the Samaritans seems to be so accommodating, he still calls this man a foreigner.⁴⁷ He associates him with Gentiles who are excluded from the temple. This man is saved but he is still a foreigner. Nothing in Luke contradicts what Jesus said in Matthew where he linked the Samaritans with the Gentiles. That link proves to be strategic for the book of Acts.

⁴⁴ Hamm, “Samaritan,” 284.

⁴⁵ By way of contrast, there are numerous occurrences of this word in the LXX, especially in the mixed marriage texts in Ezra 8-9.

⁴⁶ Hamm, “Samaritan,” 284.

⁴⁷ The term is a strong one in the light of the claim made by Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, 536: “The Samaritans developed their own form of the Pentateuch (the extent of their canon), their own liturgy, and their own religious literature. The Samaritans were, however, never considered by the Jews simply as non-Jews: their affiliation to the congregation of Israel was never denied, only considered doubtful!”

2.4 Acts 8:1-25

This passage comes at a turning point in Acts. In Luke the Journey section had begun in Samaria (Luke 9:51-56). This second major division in Acts also begins in Samaria. But there is a marked contrast. In Luke a Samaritan village rejects Jesus. In Acts a Samaritan city receives the gospel. This is the first time the gospel goes outside Jerusalem. The catalyst for the first recorded evangelistic efforts outside Jerusalem is not a well-developed strategy on the church's part, but rather the persecution that immediately followed Stephen's martyrdom: *"And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles"* (v.2). As it turned out, the persecution had a positive effect in that *"those who had been scattered went about preaching the word"* (v.4). Thus the next stage of Jesus' worldwide evangelization program (Acts 1:8) was launched.

The one instance that is singled out for attention is the evangelistic activity of Philip (v.5ff.) who was one of the Seven (Acts 6:5). He went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them (v.5). His preaching was accompanied by miraculous activity (vv.6, 7, 13) reminiscent of the apostolic miracles that accompanied the event of Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2:44) and even of the miracles performed by Jesus himself (Acts 2:22; cf. Matt 4:24). In fact, Philip's ministry had all the hallmarks of an extension of Pentecost to the Samaritans.

Philip's preaching and miracles met with an enthusiastic response. There was great joy in the city of Samaria and many believed (vv.8-13). The order of events now becomes highly significant and appears somewhat puzzling:

- Because of Philip's miracles and exorcisms the Samaritans believed (v.12). This is also said of Simon Magus (v.13).
- When the apostles in Jerusalem heard this, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. Only then did the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit (v.17), for he had not yet fallen on any of them even though they had already been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (v.16). In the light of Luke's two-volume work it is noteworthy that John is one of the two

apostles who witness the Holy Spirit falling on the Samaritans. In Luke 9 he was one of the two apostles who had wanted fire to come down from heaven. He had wanted the fire of judgment to come on the Samaritans. What they received was the Spirit of blessing. Maybe this was Jesus' final answer to John's original request.

The time lapse between faith and baptism on the one hand (vv.12, 13) and the receiving of the Holy Spirit (v.17) on the other seems highly unusual. Did the Samaritans receive some kind of "second blessing" experience? Was this the baptism of the Holy Spirit which some understand in the sense of a special experience subsequent to conversion? If not, then how can it be explained? The question is not an easy one, and answers fall along two major lines.

Firstly, the suggestion has been made that there was something defective about the Samaritans' belief. In v.12 they believed Philip, and in v.13 it says that Simon Magus himself believed, presumably in the same sense as in v.12. Hence Luke appears to be saying that the Samaritans gave heed to what Philip said, in the sense of an intellectual assent rather than in terms of a personal commitment to Christ. We are therefore left with the impression that what the Samaritans experienced was not yet saving faith, but rather a faith in the spectacular and the miraculous.

This view, however, does not do justice to the full content of v.12. The verse says more than that they simply "believed Philip". Rather it says that "*they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ*" (ἐπίστευσαν τῷ Φιλίππῳ εὐαγγελιζομένῳ περὶ τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοῦ ὀνόματος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). There is every indication that the Samaritans' faith was genuine, and therefore it followed that "they were being baptized, men and women alike." Earlier in Acts baptism was administered only to those who had repented and received the word (Acts 2:38, 41). Hence Philip must have been reasonably satisfied that this was also true of the Samaritans.

Secondly, there must be a better answer to the delayed reception of the Holy Spirit than a defective faith on the part of the Samaritans. A more convincing

explanation lies in the context of the Gospel program as a whole. The church has now just embarked on the second stage of Jesus' global missionary enterprise. Up to this point the preaching of the gospel in Acts has been confined to Jerusalem. With this new development the Holy Spirit does not fall on the Samaritans until Peter and John had laid hands on them (vv.17, 18). These were the very apostles who had been so prominent in the early chapters for the evangelization of the Jews in Jerusalem. Hence the separation between the Samaritans' believing and their receiving the Spirit was intentional. A special sign was needed and that for two reasons:

- (a) The Samaritans who had for so long been used to being despised by the people in Jerusalem needed to be assured that they were fully incorporated into the new community of the people of God.
- (b) The apostles themselves, as leaders of the Jewish church, needed to experience first-hand that God was moving toward the Gentile world. Up till now they clearly did not have this vision. They had to see for themselves the descent of the Spirit on those racially despised Samaritans. As Anthony Hoekema has observed, "The Samaritan church was thus placed on full equality with the Jerusalem church, since the Samaritans were also given the special gifts of the Spirit . . . We could thus call what happened in Samaria a kind of extension of Pentecost, made necessary because the church was now expanding into what was previously hostile territory."⁴⁸

The way in which the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit should therefore be regarded as exceptional. The conversion of the Samaritans was the first recorded movement of the gospel beyond Jerusalem.⁴⁹ To receive the Holy Spirit after believing and being baptized is clearly unusual. As George Ladd explains, ". . . the normal pattern is that the baptism of the Spirit occurs at

⁴⁸ Anthony A. Hoekema, *What about Tongue Speaking?*, Exeter: Paternoster, 1966, 71.

⁴⁹ Cf. John Stott, *The Message of Acts: To the Ends of the Earth*, Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990, 157: "The most natural explanation of the delayed gift of the Spirit is that this was the first occasion on which the gospel had been proclaimed not only outside Jerusalem but inside Samaria. This is clearly the importance of the occasion in Luke's unfolding story, since the Samaritans were a kind of half-way house between Jews and Gentiles."

the moment of saving faith, which in New Testament times was practically simultaneous with water baptism, incorporating believers into the church."⁵⁰

At the beginning of Acts the Samaritans have been included in the Great Commission that Jesus gave to the apostles: “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*” (Acts 1:8). The Samaritans belong to the second phase of the Great Commission. As each phase opens it is accompanied by the coming of the Holy Spirit. Hence in Jerusalem in Acts 2 we have the Jewish Pentecost. In Samaria in Acts 8 we have the Samaritan Pentecost, and in the house of Cornelius in Acts 10 we have the Gentile Pentecost. It is easy to see that the Samaritans play a pivotal role in the Gospel moving out to the Gentiles. They are a stepping stone to the Gentile world. But at the same time as Luke stresses their role in the evangelization of the world, he also stresses their status as the people of God. As recipients of the Holy Spirit, the believers in Samaria are not in the least inferior to the believers in Jerusalem. Moreover, in chapter 10 the believers in Caesarea are not in the least inferior to the believers in Jerusalem and Samaria. The Jewish, Samaritan and Gentile churches are one. All are baptized in the Holy Spirit and all stand on an equal footing.

Luke, therefore, presents his material in a remarkable way. There is such beauty, intricacy and symmetry to his presentation. In his Gospel all the references to the Samaritans are in the Journey section. Although a Samaritan may be the hero of Jesus’ best known story and even though a Samaritan leper may be healed, a Samaritan village rejects Jesus and he refers to a Samaritan as a foreigner. But a great reversal is about to take place. This is what we find in Acts. As was the case with Luke’s Gospel, Acts also has a threefold structure. It begins in Jerusalem, moves into Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth. Again the references to the Samaritans are in this second section, but there is a crucial difference. Where the Samaritans rejected Jesus, they now receive the Gospel. Where once they were foreigners, they are now received as full members of Christ’s church.

⁵⁰ George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed.; Donald A. Hagner, ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993, 384.

So Luke-Acts has a very neat pattern, but there is one small exception. In Acts 15, after the first missionary journey to the Gentiles, the church at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to resolve the issue of Gentile circumcision. In v.3 it says, “*The church sent them on their way, and as they travelled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made the brothers very glad.*” This is a significant comment. Like the Jews, the Samaritans practiced circumcision, but for the Samaritans Gentile circumcision was not an issue. As F. F. Bruce has observed, “As the churches of Phoenicia and Samaria were themselves the fruit of the Hellenistic mission which followed the death of Stephen (Chs.8:5ff.; 11:19), their outlook was naturally more liberal than that which prevailed at Jerusalem, and they rejoiced at what they heard.”⁵¹ They were very glad to hear how the Gentiles had been converted. On this positive note the church in Samaria disappears from the pages of the New Testament. It also seems to have disappeared from the pages of history. Samaritan Christians appear to have assimilated so readily into the wider church that little is known about them.⁵²

3. John

Of the four Gospels, John devotes more space to the Samaritans than any other. He takes up almost an entire chapter to record an event that is unique to his Gospel, namely Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman. Why does John do this? Why does he devote almost a whole chapter to Samaria? If John is indeed the author of the Fourth Gospel (or at the very least the apostle “behind” this Gospel), he can be expected to have a strong interest in the Samaritans. He was one of the two apostles who originally had wanted fire to come down from heaven on a Samaritan village (Luke 9:54). He was also one of the two who had seen the Holy Spirit come down upon the Samaritans

⁵¹ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, 305.

⁵² Reinhard Pummer, “New Evidence for Samaritan Christianity?”, *CBQ* 41, 1979: 98-117, considered the historical and archaeological evidence for Samaritan Christianity after the New Testament period and found it to be very scant indeed. His sober assessments of the situation may still be valid today: “As it stands now, we have certainly no knowledge of the further development of the thinking of this group after the NT period” (102). Furthermore, “from Justin Martyr and Byzantine sources we learn of Samaritans who converted to Christianity; but virtually nothing beyond that is known about them” (116).

(Acts 8:14-17). In his own thinking he had had to do a 180° turn when it came to the Samaritans. There are two passages in John that give us some inkling as to how this may have happened.

3.1 John 4:1-42

As a comprehensive treatment of this passage is beyond the scope of this article, the focus will be on three main areas:

(a) The location of worship (vv. 19-24)

Jesus has just told the Samaritan woman that she has had five husbands and that the man she is now living with is her de facto. He seems to have clairvoyant insight into her messy past. From this the woman comes to a very reasonable conclusion, “*Sir, I see you are a prophet*” (v.19). As every student of New Testament Greek will know, her statement (προφήτης εἶ σύ) is ambiguous. She could equally well be saying, “*Sir, I know that you are the Prophet.*” If that is what she means, then she could be reflecting on the promise in Deut 18:15, where Moses says, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.” Because the Samaritans had only the five books of Moses as their canon (the Samaritan Pentateuch), this is the closest they came to having messianic expectations. They believed in a coming Prophet like Moses. So perhaps the woman is thinking of Jesus as the eschatological Prophet. But even if she isn’t, in conversing with a prophet, she sees an opportunity to raise a thorny theological question: Where should people worship, in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim?⁵³

Whether or not she is trying to change the topic from her messed up personal life to something less threatening, she nevertheless has put her finger on the most painful point of contention between Jews and Samaritans. The question has a long history. Names such as Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah and John

⁵³ Because the Samaritans held that only the Pentateuch was authoritative, it was there that they sought justification for their view. As Carson (*John*, 222) explains, “They noted that Shechem, overlooked by Mount Gerizim, was the first place Abraham built an altar once he entered the promised land (Gn. 12:6-7). It was on Mount Gerizim that the blessings were to be shouted to the covenant community, once they had entered the promised land (Dt. 11:29-30; 27:2-7, 12; cf. Jos. 8:33).”

Hyrchanus readily come to mind. So do events like the scattering of corpses in the cloisters of the Jerusalem temple or the cold shoulder that Jesus received from the Samaritan villagers because he was on his way to Jerusalem. This is a very loaded question. It was not just of academic interest. It was the bone of contention that separated her people from his. Since he has obvious credentials as a prophet, he could be expected to have an expert opinion on the subject.

It would be tempting to think that Jesus gives a very tactful and politically correct answer: “God is everywhere, so why does it matter where you worship him? Jerusalem, Mount Gerizim - it’s up to you.” But Jesus’ answer is nowhere near as post-modern as that. He roundly tells the woman that Samaritans do not know what they worship. “They stand outside the stream of God’s revelation, so that what they worship cannot possibly be characterized by truth and knowledge.”⁵⁴ By contrast, salvation is of the Jews. Jesus could hardly have been more exclusive and particularistic. Furthermore, he tells the woman that her question will soon be irrelevant anyway: “*A time is coming and now is when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth*” (v.23). Holy sites will be a thing of the past. Both Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim will soon be obsolete as definitive places of worship. Little is to be gained from prolonged debates over Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim. Both sites are about to be bypassed by those who truly worship the Father.⁵⁵ As David Stanley has pointed out, “The supreme moment in the whole salvation-history is about to occur, and there will no longer be any point in the Jewish-Samaritan controversy. Religion will cease to be linked to a holy place. In a certain sense, the hour has already become reality with the Incarnation; the foundations of the New Temple (John 2:13ff.) are, with His coming, already laid.”⁵⁶

Jesus is now the true temple (John 2:19-22) and true worship can take place only in and through him. In his own person Jesus transcends the age-old debate between Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim. The great point of contention between the Jews and the Samaritans has finally been removed.

⁵⁴ Carson, *John*, 223.

⁵⁵ Carson, *John*, 223.

⁵⁶ David M. Stanley, “Samaritan Interlude,” *Worship* 34, 1960: 140.

(b) The Identity of Jesus (vv.25-26)

It is interesting that here the woman uses the term “Messiah.” It is a specifically Jewish title and she may have used it out of deference to Jesus, knowing he was a Jew.⁵⁷ The Samaritans expected what they called the Taheb, meaning the “Restorer” or possibly “the one who returns.”⁵⁸ But even though she uses the term “Messiah” she explains his function largely in terms of the Taheb: “When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” This was a typically Samaritan belief based on the promise of the ultimate prophet in Deut 18:15-18. In John’s Gospel that is exactly what Jesus does. He explains the Father (John 1:18). Jesus can therefore truly say, “*I who speak to you am he*” (v.26).

In all the Gospels this is a unique revelation. Never again does Jesus volunteer this kind of information. Only at the end of the Synoptics, when he is being questioned by the high priest, does Jesus claim to be the Christ (Matt 26:63-64; Mark 14:61-62; Luke 22:66-71). In Jewish circles “Messiah” is too politically loaded a term to use. It was political dynamite. In Samaria it was a far safer title to use. Even so, this Samaritan woman with her shady moral past is uniquely privileged. Only to her does Jesus offer to identify himself as the expected Messiah. No Jew, no Gentile, only this Samaritan woman was directly given this very specific piece of revelation: “*I who speak to you am the Messiah.*” Of all the human beings to be chosen for this privilege, she was a highly unlikely choice.

⁵⁷ “The woman’s testimony to belief in the coming messiah (v.25) relates to the Jewish expectation of salvation, endorsed by Jesus in v. 22. The idea of a messiah is lacking in Samaritan texts right up to the 16th cent. A.D.; to Samaritan ears it was probably too closely tied to the ideal of the Davidic king”, *NIDNTT* 3: 462.

⁵⁸ Carson, *John*, 226. The root of the word Taheb (תָּהֵב) was שָׁב, a verb meaning ‘turn back, return’ (BDB). See Ferdinand Dexinger, “Samaritan Eschatology,” in Alan D. Crown, ed., *The Samaritans*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1989, 268. As Dexinger further explains on pp. 275-76, “The expectation of an eschatological prophet with reference to Deuteronomy 18:18 is not specifically a Samaritan idea but a common Jewish one dating back to the second century B.C. The Taheb is identical with the eschatologically conceived ‘Prophet like Moses’ of Deuteronomy 18:18 and has preserved the basic traits of this figure. In the specifically Samaritan expansion of this text in Exodus 20 the ‘Prophet like Moses’ appears closely associated with Gerizim. The designation of the ‘Prophet like Moses’ as ‘Taheb’ which stems from the Aramaic speaking period assumes that this prophet is a ‘Returning One.’”

(c) The role of faith (vv.39-42)

The great emphasis in this little paragraph is on faith. Three times it says that the Samaritans believed. They believed in Jesus as the Messiah and as the promised Taheb, but they also add a confession of their own: “*We know that this man really is the Saviour of the world*” (v.42). He is not just the Jewish Messiah or the Samaritan Taheb. They have caught something of the universal implications of his teaching. He has come not just for Jews, nor even just for Jews and Samaritans; he is “the Saviour of the world.” It is a title that John makes his own. In the New Testament it is found again only in 1 John 4:14.

3.2 John 8:48-49

Although in the Synoptics Jesus had been charged by his opponents for being in league with the devil (Matt 11:34; 12:24-37; Mark 3:22-30; Luke 9:15-26), the accusation, “You are a Samaritan and demon-possessed” (v.48), is distinctive not only because it would seem to surpass the others in its negativity, but also because it connects demon-possession with being a Samaritan. What had Jesus said that would make his adversaries feel justified in calling him a Samaritan and accusing him of being demon-possessed? What had caused this double charge to be leveled against him? James Purvis has answered this question at two levels:

The most obvious answer to [this] question is that Jesus had said that the Jews were “not of God” (viii 47), and were not Abraham’s children (viii 39), (hence the Samaritan charge), and that he had previously said that he was a spiritual being whose genesis was “not of this world” (viii 23) (hence the charge of demon-possession). He also affirmed that there would come a time when men would know who he really was – “then you will know that I am he” (viii 28) – a statement which could easily be interpreted as an affirmation of divinity.”⁵⁹

The charge is significant in the light of what is said about Simon Magus in Acts 8. It is reported that he was a sorcerer who boasted that he was someone

⁵⁹ James D. Purvis, “The Fourth Gospel and the Samaritans”, *JSNT* 17, 1975: 195.

great and who amazed all the people of Samaria (v.9). Those who fell under his spell declared, “This man is the divine Power known as the Great Power” (v.10). Although the events of Acts were not contemporaneous with Jesus’ ministry, it is not difficult to suppose that Simon Magus had already been enjoying considerable influence among the Samaritans well before the events of Acts 8 and that his reputation would have been known in Jerusalem. There is also evidence to suggest that there were others like him, who claimed divinity for themselves.⁶⁰ If this is indeed the background to the accusation made by Jesus’ opponents, then their charge is more readily understandable. As Purvis further explains:

The charges of his being demon-possessed and also being a Samaritan were not necessarily two distinct and unrelated charges. Jesus was making a claim for himself which was also being made by some prophets of Samaria, who were probably thought (by the Jews) to be demon-possessed. It is interesting to note in this connection that Patristic sources relate the claims of the false prophets of Samaria to the work of demons.⁶¹

If Jesus’ adversaries are indeed making a single charge, this makes Jesus’ reply all the more explicable. He responds by saying that he is not demon-possessed. The Jews had accused him of being demon-possessed not because they believed all Samaritans to be demon-possessed, but they did think it of those Samaritans who made the kinds of claims for themselves that Jesus was making for himself. Once he has dealt with the weightier charge of being demon-possessed, the accusation that he is a Samaritan becomes irrelevant. So he says nothing about not being a Samaritan. He simply ignores the charge. He doesn’t allow this debate to degenerate into a verbal slanging match about race. By saying nothing he is careful not to denigrate those who have expressed such obvious faith in him as their Messiah (John 4:39-42).

⁶⁰ Purvis, “Fourth Gospel,” 195, mentions Dositheus whose name is found in the *Recognitions of Clement* 2:10-11.

⁶¹ Purvis, “Fourth Gospel,” 195.

Conclusion

“Do Jews have dealings with Samaritans?” remains a fascinating question for our understanding of the New Testament period. During this time the relationship between the two groups can perhaps best be described as ambivalent. As Robert Maccini explains:

Jewish attitudes toward Samaritans were not invariably antagonistic, even though the first century was ‘one of the periods of embittered relationships between Jews and Samaritans’ [Jeremias]. Also, Samaritan-Jewish hostilities were internecine, and neither group placed the other in the same class as Gentiles despite their mutual cultic exclusions. Samaritan, Jewish and Christian writings show that in fact the two groups did intermingle. Therefore, in Jn 4.9b . . . the statement should not be taken as categorical but as characteristic of Samaritan-Jewish antagonism.⁶²

Maccini further points out that Jews did dine with Samaritans, even counting them among the quorum for saying the Common Grace and allowing them to deliver the Benediction. On the other hand, the temple tax was not accepted from Samaritans, and eating the bread of Samaritans was compared to eating the flesh of swine.⁶³ Jewish-Samaritan relations in the time of Jesus were therefore riddled with complexities and ambiguities. To an extent this is reflected in his own ministry. One Samaritan village rejects him, while another invites him to stay for two days. A healed Samaritan leper who believes and is saved is nevertheless referred to as “this foreigner.” On the other hand, Jesus is happy to ask for a drink from a Samaritan woman while his disciples enter her town to buy food. In principle Jesus removes all ambiguities in John 4 by transcending the age-old Jewish-Samaritan debate over the right place to worship and declaring it to be null and void. In Acts 8 this principle is translated into reality when, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Samaritan church is put on a par with the church in Jerusalem. In the context of the early church in Acts, Jews did indeed have dealings with Samaritans. This new association is testimony to the

⁶² Robert G. Maccini, “A Reassessment of the Woman at the Well in John 4 in Light of the Samaritan Context”, *JSNT* 53, 1994: 44.

⁶³ Maccini, “Reassessment,” 44-45. See Mishna *Shebiith* 8:10.

transforming power of the gospel and the sanctifying work of the Spirit. Outsiders become insiders. What Paul was to say in another context was also true of the relationship between Jews and Samaritans. Christ *“himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility”* (Eph 2:14-17). What Paul says here about Jews and Gentiles in the early church was already true of Jews and Samaritans, as seen in the remarkable events recorded in Acts 8. The reconciliation that occurred between these rival groups should still serve as a paradigm for gospel work today.