

Why the Hatred Between the Jews and Samaritans?

Imagine the hatred between Serbs and Muslims in modern Bosnia, the enmity between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland or the feuding between street gangs in Los Angeles or New York, and you have some idea of the feeling and its causes between Jews and Samaritans in the time of Jesus. Both politics and religion were involved.

According to the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible* (McGraw Hill) by Louis F. Hartman, C.S.S.R., feelings of ill will probably went back before the separation of the northern and southern Jewish kingdoms. Even then there was a lack of unity between the tribes of Jacob.

After the separation of Judah and Israel in the ninth century, King Omri of the Northern Kingdom bought the hill of Samaria from Shemer (1 Kings 16:24). He built there the city of Samaria which became his capital. It was strong defensively and controlled the valley through which the main road ran between Jerusalem and Galilee.

In 722 BCE, the city fell to the Assyrians and became the headquarters of the Assyrian province of Samaria. Assyria conquered Israel and took most of its people into captivity. The invaders then brought in Gentile colonists "from Babylon, Cuthah, Ava, Hamath, and from Sepharvaim" (2 Kings 17:24) to resettle the land. The foreigners brought with them their pagan idols, which the remaining Jews began to worship alongside the God of Israel (2 Kings 17:29-41). Intermarriages also took place (Ezra 9:1-10:44; Neh 13:23-28). While many of the inhabitants of the city and the surrounding area of Samaria were led off into captivity, some farmers and others were left behind. They intermarried with new settlers from Mesopotamia and Syria.

Though the Samaritans were condemned by the Jews, Hartman says they probably had as much pure Jewish blood as the Jews who later returned from the Babylonian exile. The story of both Israel's and Samaria's failures in keeping to the way of Yahweh is partly told in Chapter 17 of the Second Book of Kings. There, too, the sacred author tells how the king of Assyria sent a priest from among the exiles to teach the Samaritans how to worship God after an attack by lions was attributed to their failure to worship the God of the land. Second Kings recounts how worship of Yahweh was mixed with the worship of strange gods.

When Cyrus permitted the Jews to return from the Babylonian exile, the Samaritans were ready to welcome them back. The exiles, however, despised the Samaritans as renegades. When the Samaritans wanted to join in rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem, their assistance was rejected. You will find this in the Book of Ezra, Chapter Four.

With the rejection came political hostility and opposition. The Samaritans tried to undermine the Jews with their Persian rulers and slowed the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple. Nehemiah tells us (Nehemiah 13:28-29) that a grandson of the high priest, Eliashib, had married a daughter of Sanballat, the governor of the province of Samaria.

For defiling the priesthood by marrying a non-Jewish woman, Nehemiah drove Eliashib

from Jerusalem – though Sanballat was a worshiper of Yahweh. According to the historian Josephus, Sanballat then had a temple built on Mount Garizim in which his son-in-law Eliashib could function. Apparently this is when the full break between Jews and Samaritans took place.

Meanwhile, the Samaritans who had resisted paganism developed their own version of worship, using only the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy – and rejecting all other books of the Old Testament. Tensions increased when the Samaritans built their own Temple for worship on Mt. Gerizim, and stated that their mountain was the dwelling place of the Lord, not the Temple in Jerusalem. With that, any hope of reconciliation between the two peoples was lost.

According to John McKenzie in his *Dictionary of the Bible*, the Samaritans later allied themselves with the Seleucids in the Maccabean wars and in 128 BCE the Jews destroyed the Samaritan temple and ravaged the territory. Around the time of Jesus' birth, a band of Samaritans profaned the Temple in Jerusalem by scattering the bones of dead people in the sanctuary. In our own era which has witnessed the vandalism of synagogues and the burning of black churches, we should be able to understand the anger and hate such acts would incite.

The fact that there was such dislike and hostility between Jews and Samaritans is what gives the use of the Samaritan in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) such force! The Samaritan is the one who is able to rise above the bigotry and prejudices of centuries and show mercy and compassion for the injured Jew after the Jew's own countrymen pass him by!

It is with those centuries of opposition and incidents behind their peoples that we can understand the surprise of the Samaritan woman (John 4:9) when Jesus rises above the social and religious restrictions not just of a man talking to a woman, but also of a Jew talking to a Samaritan.

By the first century and most likely long before, both Jewish and Samaritan priests taught their people that it was sinful to have any contact with the other. Jews were to avoid the impure land of the Samaritans and Samaritans were not to speak to Jews. In addition, Samaritans and the Jews fed their mutual hatred with insult and injury.

Insult:

- Jews called the Samaritans a 'herd', not a nation.
- A widely used Jewish proverb stated that "a piece of bread given by a Samaritan is more unclean than swine's flesh."
- Sometime early in the first century, Samaritans threw human bones into the Temple in Jerusalem on the day of Passover. This heinous act, according to the Jews, defiled the sanctuary making it impossible to celebrate the most important feast of the year.
- The worst insult that a Jew could use was to call someone a Samaritan, such as in John 8:48 when the hostile Pharisees answered Jesus by saying, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and are possessed?"

Injury:

- In 128 BCE, the leader of Judaea, John Hyrcanus, completely destroyed the Samaritan capital. The Samaritans rebuilt it a hundred years later and continued their blasphemous sacrifices.
- Samaritans were known to lie in wait for Jews traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem for the feast days. Sometimes these attacks escalated into death, and in at least one instance Rome intervened. As a result, Galileans (except for Jesus) used the longer route on the other side of the Jordan.
- The ruling Roman legions could hardly distinguish Jews from Samaritans, but that didn't keep the two groups from using Rome against each other. Some Samaritan men would enlist in the Roman auxiliary troops for a chance to legally harass their Jewish neighbors. Both groups are said to have bribed Roman soldiers to persecute the other.

Keeping this long-running feud in mind, Jesus' contact with the Samaritan woman at the well was not only surprising, it was shocking. And his parable of the 'Good Samaritan' was not a gentle story, but a stinging insult to the Pharisees.

Jews and Samaritans

The Samaritans emerged in the historical record during the second century BCE and share a heritage with the Jews. They followed the same laws from the Torah governing Sabbath observance, diet, purity, and circumcision, but they worshiped in different temples. During the Hasmonean expansion of Judean territory, Samaria was annexed, and in about 107 BCE, John Hyrcanus ravaged the capital at Shechem and destroyed the temple on Mount Gerizim. The Jews barred the Samaritans from worshiping in Jerusalem (Josephus, *J.W.* 2.232-44; *Ant.* 18.29-30; 20.118-36). The Samaritans hoped for the reconstruction of their temple at the coming of a prophet messiah (the *Taheb*, the "Restorer"), whom many scholars identify as Moses or the fulfillment of Deut. 18:18. The Mishnah's reference to the Samaritans probably reflect the views of Jesus's contemporaries: "Rabbi Eliezer used to say, "He that eats of the bread of Samaritans is as one who eats the flesh of swine" (*m. Seb.* 8.10); "the daughters of Cutheans [Samaritans] are menstruants from their cradle" (*m. Nid.* 4.1).

Brant, Jo-Ann A. *John*. Paideia Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011, pg. 83.

Jews and Samaritans

A gulf separates Jews and Samaritans. The alienation has its roots in the fact that large numbers of the Samaritans (the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel) were deported after the Assyrian conquest of 721 BCE. Moreover, according to 2 Kgs 17:24-41, they were replaced by foreigners. Judeans (= "the Jews" Greek *Ioudaioi* can be translated either 'Judeans or 'Jews") were deported after the Babylonian conquest of 586. The Jews returned from exile in 537 BCE although many remained in Babylonia. The returned Jews regarded the Samaritans who had presumably intermingled with foreigners, as corrupt and apostate. Yet the Samaritans understood themselves to be worshiper of the same God although they recognized only the Pentateuch as Scripture. After the return of the Jews from exile, the Samaritans attempted to assist them the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple but were rebuffed so they opposed and for a time delayed the reconstruction of the temple (Ezra 4). Later, the Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim, the site of which would have been clearly visible to Jesus and the woman as they conversed (John 4:20). (The Samaritan temple itself had been destroyed by John Hyrcanus in 128 BCE)

Smith, Moody D. *John*. Abingdon New Testament Commentaries. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999, pg. 112.

Jews and Samaritans

The Samaritans are the descendants of two groups (a) the remnant of the native Israelites who were not deported at the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE; (b) foreign colonists brought in from Babylonia and Media by the Assyrian conquerors of Samaria (2 Kings xvii 24 ff. gives an anti-Samaritan account of this). There was theological opposition between these northerners and the Jews of the South because of the Samaritan refusal to worship at Jerusalem. This was aggravated by the fact that after the Babylonian exile the Samaritans had put obstacles in the way of the Jewish restoration of Jerusalem, and that in the 2nd century BCE the Samaritans had helped the Syrian monarchs in their wars against the Jews. In 128 BCE the Jewish high priest burned the Samaritan temple on Gerizim.

Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans suggests that the background is the general assumption that Samaritans were ritually impure. A Jewish regulation of A.D. 65-66 warned that one could never count on the ritual purity of Samaritan women since they were menstruants from their cradle – see Lev xv 19. Probably this regulation was simply canonizing an earlier attitude toward Samaritan women.

Brown, Raymond E. *The Gospel According to John I-XII*. The Anchor Bible Series, vol 29. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company Inc, 1966, pg. 170