

Article

Samaritans in the New Testament †

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Abstract: Four New Testament writings mention Samaritans and Samaria—Luke–Acts, John, and Matthew. We must consider that all Samaritan texts in the New Testament are based on a historically correct knowledge of the cult of YHWH worshippers in Samaria oriented towards the Gerizim. If the YHWH admirers in Samaria are to be understood as one of the two independent “Israel” denominations that existed in the Palestinian heartland during the post-exilic period, consequently, in John, Matthew, and Luke–Acts, attention is paid to their understanding of the ecclesiological significance of “Israel” and to Christological aspects. Moreover, the authors of the Gospels reflect a semantically young phenomenon, when Σαμαριῖται is understood beyond the ethnonym as a term for a group religiously distinct from Judaism. At the time of Paul, the term “Samaritan” had not yet been established to refer to the religiously defined group. This means that care must be taken when interpreting the term “Israel” and “Israelites” in all Jewish or Jewish-Christian texts written before 70 A.D. This also applies to Paul: when Paul speaks of “Israel”, “Israelites”, and “circumcision”, he could have consciously used inclusive terminology that, in principle, included the (later named) “Samaritans” in the diaspora.

Keywords: Luke–Acts; Gospel of Matthew; Gospel of John; Pauline letters; 2Kings; Septuagint; inscriptions (Greek); Josephus; Israel/Israelites; historical Jesus; Mount Gerizim; post-exilic period; Pentateuch; Moses; Jerusalem; diaspora; Delos; Ben Sira

1. Which Texts Are Relevant?

1.1. *The Classical New Testament Samaritan Texts and Historical and Hermeneutical Questions Connected with Them*

Although the Greek terms Σαμαριῖτης, Σαμαριῖτις, and Σαμαριῖται are only found in a few New Testament writings, they are sometimes associated with very prominent narratives. The most famous is certainly the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30–37, but the story of Jesus and a woman at the well in John 4 is also one of the most famous Samaritan texts of the New Testament. In the Gospel of Luke, besides Luke 10:25–37, there are two other texts in which one Σαμαριῖτης or several Σαμαριῖται appear: Luke 9:51–56 (the inhabitants of a Samaritan village refuse to give hospitality to Jesus on his way to Jerusalem) and Luke 17:11–19 (the story of the grateful Samaritan leper). In addition, for the author of the Third Gospel’s understanding of the Samaritans, the notes and a narrative about the post-Easter Samaritan mission in Acts must be considered: Acts 1:8; 8:1; 4–25; 9:31; 15:3. In the Gospel of John, besides the narrative in John 4:4–42, there is another note in John 8:48: Here, Jesus is accused by

his opponents of being a Samaritan and possessed by a demon.¹ The Gospel of Matthew mentions the Samaritans only once: at the beginning of the of the missionary discourse Jesus instructs the disciples in Matt 10:5–6 “Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”²

In sum, four New Testament writings (but three authors) mention Samaritans and Samaria. The author of Luke–Acts offers by far the most texts and documents. For each of the three

people. Matthew, Luke and John, it is necessary to consider separately, in the Diaspora, and what the

has of the Samaritans and in what sense he speaks of them. Is it in a general, political-geographical

sense about the population of the region Samaria, or is it about Samaritans in the sense of a primarily

largely invisible in the early sources in the Diaspora, because their significant

orientation to the place of worship, not

of the latter is true in what way are the Samaritans religiously defined in the

and the socially classified more. If their religious questions come into play, especially in the Diaspora, and that the

made tangible due to a real knowledge of the religious situation in Samaria or participation in liturgical

mediated images, for example, *Ἰσραήλ* in the Masoretic text as well as in the Septuagint of

with Josephus in Ant. 1.27.282–288, 291. In addition, the question about the Jesus tradition arises in the

in the name of the Jesus tradition, to what degree can we start from contacts between the historical Jew

and Samaritans? *Ἰσραήλ* in the New Testament and in the Septuagint of the Old Testament “Israel” and “Israelites” in the

of themselves. However, the respective context in all texts may show more or less clearly that all three authors

Pauline texts may be concerned with more than the inhabitants of Samaria in geographical-political terms. The persons

mentioned in the Pauline texts are not only Samaritans, but also Jews and Christians. The persons

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its own YHWH sanctuary and its own claim to be “Israel”.⁷ If one summarizes the previous results in the shortest form, both Yahwisms existed from the Persian time up to the 2nd century B.C., side by side, in a relationship that was not shattered⁸ by deep conflicts, as had been the previous assumption, but which had found a compromise document in the common Pentateuch. The post-exilic Jewish biblical and non-biblical literature shows that the coexistence of both groups was increasingly burdened by conflicts only from 200 B.C. onwards. Since the Hasmonaean period, tensions increased, and the YHWH admirers in the region of Samaria were transformed from “Israelites” to “foreigners”.⁹ After the Hasmonaean attacks on Samaria and the associated destruction of the city and the sanctuary on Mount Gerizim, i.e., at the end of the 2nd century B.C., group-specific peculiarities developed and grew in both Israelite groupings, and border demarcations increasingly took hold.¹⁰ Thus, in Old Testament studies, there is currently a gradually growing sensitivity to the fact that, from a historical perspective, the Samaritans of the biblical era must have been more important than their biblical presentation would have us believe.¹¹ We must therefore distinguish between the biblical and historical view of the history of Israel and recognize the divergence within it.¹²

The YHWH worshippers in Samaria, who came from old Israelite traditions that were continuously cultivated, cannot have been a marginal religious phenomenon in New Testament times in terms of their number and importance¹³, even though their sanctuary on Mount Gerizim and the large temple city surrounding it had been permanently destroyed at the end of the 2nd century B.C. and could never be rebuilt. If the YHWH admirers in Samaria are now to be understood as a specific expression “within a comprehensive spectrum of Jewish-Israelite religiosity”¹⁴ and as one of the two independent “Israel” denominations that existed in the Palestinian heartland during the post-exilic period,¹⁵ a new perspective will also emerge for the New Testament Samaritan texts.¹⁶ From the hermeneutic perspective, the fact that the authors of the three Gospels mentioned knew, used, and quoted all the scriptures of the Old Testament must be considered. The majority of these writings are Judaic and Jerusalem-oriented or pro-Judaic, and their later layers and texts (even though in coded form)¹⁷ are marked by sharp criticism of the Samaritan YHWH admirers and anti-Samaritan (foreigner) polemics. The fundamental orientation towards Jerusalem is thus also to be found in the three Gospels, as their authors are deeply rooted in Jewish-Christian traditions.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it is not clear whether and to what extent they also participated in the anti-Samaritan polemics of some writings and texts.

Consequently, in John, Matthew, and, above all, Luke–Acts, equal attention is paid to the reception of Old Testament texts as to their concepts of Israel. Certain Old Testament texts can be seen as the origin of a specific concept of “Israel” in the Gospels, as they can be seen as the origin of a specific Christology. Only from the Israel understanding of a writer can the Samaritan texts possibly be adequately opened up. The Gospel of Luke in particular, but also the Gospel of John, reveals that at the end of the 1st century A.D., at least in the Jewish-Christian area, despite a Jerusalem-focused perspective and some

⁷ See (Böhm 2012, pp. 182–88). (Hensel 2016, p. 413): “Mit Beginn der persischen Zeit und in einer gewissen Fortsetzung des Nebeneinanders von Süd- und Nordreich zu staatlicher Zeit [existierten] zwei selbständige (von einigen Berührungspunkten abgesehen), unterschiedlich konturierte, (mehrheitlich) monotheistische Jahwismen im palästinischen Kernland.” This suggests not only the size of the sanctuary on the Gerizim, but also the prosperity of the Samaria region in post-exilic times.

⁸ (Hensel 2016, p. 413).

⁹ Cf. (Hensel 2016, pp. 257–389) to Sir 50:25–26; Jos Ant 11,297–347; 12,257–264; Esr, Neh, Chr, 2 Kgs 17:24–41.

¹⁰ (Hensel 2016, p. 415).

¹¹ See (Schmid 2012, p. 31).

¹² See *ibid.*

¹³ See (Hensel 2016, p. 5) for the post-exilic period: “Die Zahl der JHWH-Verehrer im Norden war vermutlich um einiges höher als jene der Judäer.”

¹⁴ (Weingart 2014, p. 332).

¹⁵ (Hensel 2016, p. 413).

¹⁶ (Böhm 2012, pp. 198–202).

¹⁷ (Hensel 2016, p. 413).

¹⁸ This is now also true, with increasing consensus, for the author of Luke–Acts: cf. (Wolter 2008, pp. 9–10; Rusam 2008, pp. 194–95, 235).

Gal 2:9 (ἡμεῖς εἰς τὰ ἔθνη, αὐτοὶ δὲ εἰς τὴν περιτομήν/"we to the Gentiles, but they to circumcision") is possibly granted an extended dimension.

2. The Classical Samaritan Texts of the New Testament in the Context of the Particular Israel Concepts and Christologies

2.1. Matthew (Matt 10:5–6)

In Matthew, Jesus is the Son of God, Davidic Messiah, and shepherd of Israel, who makes a clear point of seeking out the lost sheep of God's people.⁵⁵ Matthew restricts the earthly work of Jesus strictly and emphatically to Israel,⁵⁶ but also connects it from the beginning to the end of the Gospel and the fulfillment of the hope of salvation for all nations.⁵⁷

The logion in Matt 10:5–6, consisting of two prohibitions (v 5) and one commandment (v 6), could already have originated from pre-Matthean tradition⁵⁸ but was most likely formulated by the author and set at the beginning of the missionary discourse.⁵⁹ What he is looking to formulate here is important to him, in any case; it is about setting the scope of the disciple mission: like Jesus himself, the disciples before Easter should also turn exclusively to Israel.⁶⁰ The structure of the verse gives space to different interpretations with regard to Σαμαρῖται. If a synonymous parallelism is intended in Matt 10:5b, Matthew equates the Samaritans with the nations of the Gentiles. However, if a synthetic parallelism is meant, Matthew sees the Samaritans as existing between the nations of the Gentiles and the lost sheep of the House of Israel. There are two further possible interpretations: The Samaritans are among the sheep of the house of Israel but not among those who are lost.⁶¹ Or—and this is more likely—Matthew reflects the impression of the time of Jesus that the Samaritans would not have been open to a Davidic Messiah as shepherd of Israel and that it was not yet the right time for the Samaria mission.⁶² The Samaritans had no theological reference to Jewish prophecy and to the Zion and Davidic traditions, but were fixated only on the writings of Moses in the special form of the Samaritan Pentateuch. It justified for them not only the cultic priority of the Gerizim, but also an eschatology focused on Moses.⁶³

Under this assumption, Matt 10:5 could provide a historically accurate knowledge of the Samaritans that was not influenced by literary polemics. This thesis is supported by the use of tense in Matt 10:5–6. The two prohibitions use aorist forms (ἀπέλθητε and εἰσέλθητε), while the commandment to go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel is formulated in the imperative present tense.⁶⁴ Consequently, the instructions for the twelve disciples are to be understood as something unique from the beginning, which in the context of the Gospel of Matthew, is related to the current state of Jesus' messianic ministry, while the sending of the disciples to the house of Israel becomes a permanent task for them.⁶⁵ Under this assumption, Matthew would have been thinking of limiting the pre-Easter mission to Galilee. The prohibitions would then either have to be related to purely geographically determined areas in the vicinity of the Galilee region⁶⁶ or that Matthew was actually (also) reflecting that the Samaritan

⁵⁵ See (Konradt 2015, p. 5).

⁵⁶ (Konradt 2015, p. 5).

⁵⁷ (Konradt 2015, pp. 5–6).

⁵⁸ (Lindemann 1993, p. 56).

⁵⁹ (Konradt 2015, p. 162). Konradt continues: "Doch auch dann, wenn diese Verse dem mt Sondergut (bzw. Q^{Mt}) entstammen sollten, wird hier ein besonderes Anliegen des Evangelisten sichtbar."

⁶⁰ (Konradt 2015, p. 162).

⁶¹ From the context of the Gospel of Matthew, however, it is not a question here of the opposite of "lost" and "not lost", but of the contrast between shepherds and sheep. See (Konradt 2007, pp. 33–41).

⁶² This interpretation would have a narrated analogy in Luke 9:51–56.

⁶³ See footnote 81.

⁶⁴ (Konradt 2007, p. 91).

⁶⁵ (Konradt 2007, p. 91).

⁶⁶ See (Konradt 2015, p. 162; Konradt 2007, pp. 84–85).

considerations, some Pauline texts may be read with different eyes. When Paul speaks of "Israel / Israelites" and "circumcision", he could have consciously—as a precaution or out of real knowledge—used inclusive terminology that, in principle, included the "Samaritans" in the Diaspora, even if they de facto did not exist locally. Even if in the Pauline epistles it sometimes sounds as if the world for Paul basically consisted only of "Jews" and "Gentiles" (i.e., "Greeks")⁴⁸, Phil 3:1b–11 and 2 Cor 11:16–33 in particular could show that this was schematically not the case.

Paul knew very well where it was necessary to differentiate.⁴⁹ A critical look at these passages shows that they can be read inclusively with the category "Judaean" also in the Samaritan and Samaria texts and determines the category "Judaean" only in Luke 9:51–56, not in Luke 9:52. In this framework,

however, from the intertextual perspective of the texts of detailed texts, Luke's Samaritan mission and the relationship between Jew and Samaritan in the 1st century A.D. "Israel" or "Israelites", "those

under the law", "Hebrews", "Samaritans" of the Gospel of Luke (Lk 9:51–56, 10:25–37, 11:17–19) are special with "Jews" and "Judaean" from the origin, a different perspective. They may actually be the so-called Luke's travelogue (Luke 9:51–19:27), which takes place between the ministry of Jesus in Galilee (Luke 4:14–9:50) and Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem from Luke 19:28 onwards. Until Luke 9:50, the Son of God and Messiah of Israel

healed and preached in Galilee.⁷⁷ In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus first makes his way to a Samaritan village on his journey to Jerusalem: Καὶ ἀπέστειλεν ἄγγελόν του πρὸς πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ, καὶ πορευθέντες εὐρέθησαν εἰς κώμην Σαμαρείων ὡς ἐστὶν ἀσβότα (Luke 9:52). The first station in the travelogue

shows that, for Luke, the Samaritans belong fundamentally to the messianic mission of Jesus to gather and reconstitute the people of Israel. However, the Samaritans reject the request for accommodation in Luke 9:53. According to the narrative, the request is not rejected because they are

not Jewish travelers,⁷⁸ but instead because of his orientation towards Jerusalem, ἵνα ἐδῆξαν αὐτόν, ἵνα ἔλθῃ εἰς τὴν πόλιν ἧν πορεύονται ἵνα ἱεροδοξώσιν (Lk 9:54). For the Samaritans, Jesus not only moves

to the wrong place of worship,⁷⁹ but—and this is related also to the wrong location of eschatological hopes, because the gathering of Israel initiated by Jesus takes place under the aegis of Jerusalem, it is

rejected at the narrative level. From this point of view, and to my knowledge, this has so far never been considered—the request for accommodation in Samaria

at the narrative level was, as I see it, strategic and well prepared. In the story of the Transfiguration in Luke 9:35, Jesus on the mountain

is identified with the prophet-like Moses by the allusion to Deut 18:15: ὡς ἐλάλησεν ὁ κύριος ἐν τῇ νεφέλῃ.⁸⁰ With this, he fulfills the decisive eschatological expectation of the Samaritans, who were

waiting for the Pentateuch. It is not only in the story of the transfiguration that Luke's Jesus is identified with the prophet-like Moses, but also in the story of the Samaritan mission (Lk 9:31).⁸⁴

Philip's birth is characterized more harshly than the man who appointed him; (23) and at the same time, the Samaritan mission is depicted using Moses motifs. Even though Moses redivivus is a broader Jewish hope,

Luke's allusion to Deut 18:15 in Luke 9:31 may have been in preparation for the journey through the Samaritan Pentateuch, the fulfillment of a (decisive) hope, which for the Samaritans

was the only acceptable one from the eschatological hopes, but with no connection to the Samaritan Pentateuch. At the narrative level, it is not clear if Luke's Samaritan mission is related to the Samaritan Pentateuch, but it is clear that the Samaritan Pentateuch is not the only eschatological hope of the Samaritans.

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became less important for a part of the faithful in Christ, to whom also the Samaritan missionary Philip belonged.⁸⁶ The emergence of a Samaritan Christianity might thus have significantly benefited from the fact that, in parts of the early Christian preaching, the Jerusalem temple and any other man-made structure are critically evaluated as a place for the worship of God.⁸⁷ Luke suggests that the post-Easter gathering of the people of God in Samaria became possible because the missionaries on behalf of the Risen Lord (Act 1:8) changed direction, away from Jerusalem towards the Samaritans. At this point, the Samaritans show an open attitude on the narrative level and receive the message.⁸⁸

Back again to Luke 9:51–56: what happens after the rejection of Jesus in the narrative in Luke 9:53–56 is indicative of the general helplessness in dealing with the religious conflict between the two groups, which had smoldered beneath the surface, and with regard to cultic matters, had grown since Hasmonaean times. The disciples were incensed by the Samaritan's rejection of Jesus and invoke the name God through Elijah's words in 2 Kings 1:10–14 to remedy their comparably weaker position on foreign soil, to stage a miracle of punishment through his power (Luke 9:54). In so doing, the intent to cause physical harm to the Samaritans is part of the plan from the outset: fire is to consume them and their village.

However, their focus on the Pentateuch meant that the Samaritans did not recognize the prophetic sign as such and therefore did not acknowledge it.⁸⁹ Jesus can also not offer any meaningful solution in terms of further discussions with the Samaritan villagers: the Gospel simply states, "The Lord turned around and rebuked them" (Luke 9:55).⁹⁰ Thus, the disciples are forced to rethink the actual will of God and possibly also the special conditions in a Samaritan village.⁹¹ Escalation of the conflict was prevented. However, given the villagers' rejection, Jesus also failed, and leaves them in peace.⁹² At the end of the short story, it says: "Jesus and the disciples went to another village" (Luke 9:56).⁹³

Luke 9:51–56 was, to a certain extent, a repetition of what happened in Nazareth in Galilee⁹⁴: the Savior of Israel, the fulfillment of all promises, experiences rejection and conflict within the central regions of Palestine where the people of God live.⁹⁵ The same can be said for Jerusalem, i.e., also in Judea⁹⁶. Whether the other village to which Jesus and the disciples moved was also intended to be a Samaritan village is unknown.⁹⁷ Even if it were a Samaritan village, there is no record of such visit.

The request to stay with Samaritans, quite apart from the primarily theological significance of this stop for Luke, shows that, despite the difficult common history, there was a community of convenience, as neighbors perhaps, between Jews and Samaritans. Galilean pilgrims could apparently travel to Jerusalem through Samaria.⁹⁸ This short story could be a reflex of a memory that the historical Jesus, with his message and understanding of his own mission, could not gain a foothold with the Samaritans.⁹⁹ That Jesus would be unable to complete his mission, to bring together all people of the God of Israel, oriented towards Jerusalem, even seems historically plausible.¹⁰⁰

⁸⁶ Act 6:13; 7:48–50. Cf. (Böhm 2002, p. 116).

⁸⁷ (Böhm 2017, p. 359).

⁸⁸ Act 8:14: δέδεκται ἡ Σαμάρεια τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ.

⁸⁹ One can at least consider whether the disciples also needed such a rebuke.

⁹⁰ Lk 9:55: στραφείς δὲ ἐπετίμησεν αὐτοῖς.

⁹¹ See (Bovon 1996, pp. 27–28): "Der Heilsplan Gottes verwirklicht sich aber nicht durch Gewalt, (...) sondern durch Schwachheit, d.h. im Annehmen von Scheitern, von Leiden, von Begrenztheit."

⁹² (Böhm 2002, pp. 117–18).

⁹³ Lk 9:56: καὶ ἐπορεύθησαν εἰς ἑτέραν κώμην.

⁹⁴ Lk 4:16–30.

⁹⁵ The preparations of the disciples in Luke 9:51 do not only concern accommodation, but also the coming and proclamation of Jesus.

⁹⁶ Lk 19:47. Cf. (Bovon 1996, p. 25): "Symmetrisch zur Verwerfung Jesu in Nazaret (Lk 4,29–30) nimmt das Ereignis in Samarien das fatale Ende der Reise nach Jerusalem vorweg."

⁹⁷ Cf. (Bovon 1996, p. 28). For another perspective see (Frey 2012, p. 211).

⁹⁸ Cf. Jos Vit 268–270.317ff; Joh 4:4. Cf. (Frey 2012, p. 221).

⁹⁹ Cf. (Bovon 1996, p. 24): "Die Erzählung (...) hat also einen archaischen Kern; sie ist mehr als eine nachösterliche Projektion ins Leben Jesu."

¹⁰⁰ (Böhm 2017, p. 358).

In the second text of the Gospel of John, in John 8:48, Jewish opponents of Jesus accuse him of being one of these crazy Samaritans,¹²⁵ because he questions their claim to salvation traditions and thus their relationship to God. This identification insinuates an existing theological affinity between Jesus and the Samaritans and reveals the dissent between Jews and Samaritans, shaped by polemics, with regard to the traditions of the fathers. As in John 4:4–42, the dissent in John’s mind is overcome in John 8:58 by Jesus’ claim not to be subject to temporal limits, to have existed before the ancient forefathers, and to be the place of divine revelation in history.¹²⁶ In this respect, in John’s mind, all the fundamental separations between the people of God are unified in Jesus in John’s mind.

We must therefore consider that all Samaritan texts in the New Testament are based on a historically correct knowledge of the cult of YHWH worshippers in Samaria oriented towards the Gerizim. Viewing all texts in the context of its own Israel ideas and Christology, the Samaritans occasionally appear implicitly stronger and are more often considered in the representations of the Gospels than would be first thought.

However, further and more in-depth studies beyond the observations presented above are necessary, among other things, on the juxtaposition of prophets’ expectation according to Deut 18:15, 18 and the Messiah concept. They will probably not provide any conclusive evidence for a conscious (background) inclusion of significant Samaritan theologoumena, but it might be worth playing through such possibilities in principle to question their plausibility.

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¹²⁵ According to the view of Hartwig Thyen John 8,48 is to be understood as a Hendiadyn which could be paraphrased as: “Aren’t we right to say you’re one of those crazy Samaritans?” (Thyen 2005, p. 447).

¹²⁶ (Schnelle 2000, p. 163).

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