CHAPTER 2

An Accidental People: A Survey of Samaritan History

One of the most salient and intriguing features of the ethnic and cultural identity of the modern Samaritan community is its remarkable fluidity and adaptability, the causes of which are identified in the present chapter, within the framework of a broad historical overview. The main factors examined here are the following: the long-term geopolitical developments that have forced the Samaritans—in the past as well as today—to adapt not only their language and general way of life, but also their political allegiance and social situation to ever changing external challenges and demands; the violent reduction of the Samaritans from a large people to a minute minority; and the evolution of postexilic and rabbinic Judaism, in which the social and religious exclusion of the Northern Israelites played a crucial role in the forging of early Jewish identity. The latter process, as I shall suggest, might have triggered the formation of the Samaritans as a distinct people in the first place by enforcing a distinction that has left ample space for the perpetual redefinition and contradictory manifestations of ethnicity that seem characteristic of the Samaritans.

Foundations of a Great Tradition: The Samaritans in Antiquity

The Jewish Invention of the Samaritans

Any outline of a history of the Samaritans has to begin with a dual question: What is the origin of the Samaritans, and why are they separate from the Jews? To the Samaritans themselves, the answer is obvious, as Magnar Kartveit curtly states: “The Samaritans do not have to explain their origin, as they envisage themselves as descendants of the original Israel.”¹ Due to a schism, deliberately initiated by a treacherous priest and his followers, the Jews disrupted the primal Israelite unity and became a distinct group. Thus it is written in the Samaritan chronicles. Judaism also has a clear answer to the question: according to the Bible (2 Kings 17, Ezra, Nehemiah), rabbinical texts, Flavius Josephus, and other sources,² the Samaritans are Kūtīm, descendants of people settled

¹ Kartveit 2009, p. 22.
² For surveys of all available ancient Jewish texts dealing with the Samaritans, see Anderson and Giles 2002, pp. 24–34 (in brief); the introduction to Pummer 2009, pp. 1–66; and chapter 5 of Kartveit 2009, pp. 109–202 (both in detail).
by the Assyrians in the Land of Israel, thus not Israelites in the first place. Although they have adopted some Israelite customs in a questionable process of conversion, they remain foreigners. From this point of view, the notion of a schism is unnecessary.

Obviously, these are two diametrically opposed positions. Each employs ascriptions, assumptions, even accusations, so that Samaritan and Jewish sources together form a battle zone of polemics concerning who is the rightful Israel. In this body of writings, Jewish texts carry more weight—for reasons of historical impact, but also for sheer quantity—so that the Jewish explanation of Samaritan identity has traditionally prevailed (familiarity with the Samaritan chronicles is limited to the narrow circles of the community). In the twentieth century, other nonpolemical or external information on the early history of the Samaritans has increasingly become available, such as papyri, inscriptions, and other archaeological evidence. Still, however, most scholars take as their point of departure what Jewish tradition has to say about the Samaritans, precisely because of the bias that pervades these texts. The Jewish narrative, however, offers an important lead to Samaritan ontology, locating as it does their origins within the complex context of Jewish ethnogenesis. Emphasizing the vital points of exile, return, and temple, the Jewish sources demonstrate the interest of ancient Judaism in drawing a clear boundary between the religious realms of Jerusalem and Samaria.

The following summary of Samaritan origins reflects the modern scholarly consensus, grounded in a critical reading of biblical and postbiblical traditions: Judaism emerged from the religiously and ethnically diverse landscape of the ancient Near East as a distinct, localized, community of descent and religious practice in the period of Persian dominion over the territories of the former kingdoms of Israel (538–323 BCE). In terms of historical process, the formation of Judaism was linked to the return of the exiles from Babylonia. By “exiles” we mean the descendants of those inhabitants of the former southern

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3 The papyri found in the 1960s in Wadi Daliyeh near Jericho are taken to contain firsthand information about religious and economic life in the province of Samaria in the fourth century BCE. See Anderson and Giles 2002, pp. 25–26; Pummer 2009, pp. 144–148 and passim; Kartveit 2009, pp. 60–63. The Dead Sea Scrolls, unearthed in the 1940s and 1950s in Qumran, contain palaeographic clues to the emergence of the Samaritan Pentateuch around the turn of the era; see Pummer 2009, pp. 18–23; Kartveit 2009, pp. 263–273 and passim.

4 Pummer 2009, pp. 16–18; Kartveit 2009, pp. 201–257. In 1979, inscriptions from the second century BCE that refer to a Samaritan temple cult were found on the Greek island of Delos.

5 Excavations in search of the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim (see below) began in 1982 and were finished in 2012. The findings are published in Magen et al. 2004, 2008. The inscriptions of Sargon II were unearthed in the nineteenth century. Their impact on the historiography of the Samaritans will be discussed later in this chapter.