Many Bible readers will think that chapter 17 of the second book of Kings refers to the origin of the Samaritans. According to the Authorized Version we read about “the Samaritans” in verse 29, and a number of translations reveal the same understanding of the Hebrew שמהרנים. On closer inspection, however, it turns out that 2 Kgs 17:29 does not refer to the Samaritans, but to the “people of Samaria,” whose relation to the Samaritans is not immediately clear.

The understanding of 2 Kgs 17 as dealing with the Samaritans has its earliest attestation in the works of Josephus. He offers a story where he describes them as “Chouthaios,” a group which was brought by the Assyrian king Salmanasser from “Chouthas” in Persia into Samaria after the occupation and subsequent depopulation of that area, Ant. 9.278 f., 288–291. This version takes us back to the eighth century B.C.E., and it has led scholars and lay people to believe that the Samaritans were deportees from the East, brought into Samaria in this early period; in Samaria they remained through the ages, and perhaps they mixed with the local population—a situation which most likely resulted in syncretism. The story resembles 2 Kgs 17 and this has led to reading the chapter as referring to the origin of the Samaritans.

1 See e.g.: “The Jews despised the Samaritans because they were heretical descendants of the mixed population in the North: Israelites who had survived the Assyrian destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. and intermarried with the pagan peoples from Mesopotamia who had settled there (cf. 2 Kgs 17:24–41). The Jews, who considered the Samaritans spurious worshippers of Yahweh, detested them even more than pagans.” A. A. Di Lella and P. W. Skehen, The Wisdom of Ben Sira: a New Translation with Notes, Introduction and Commentary (AB 39; Garden City, N.Y.: Double-day, 1987), 558; “… according to [2 Kgs 17:24–34] the Samaritans were not related to the Israelites, but were people brought to Samaria by the Assyrians in the eighth century B.C.E.[…] In the Talmud they are indeed named ‘Kutim,’ that is, men from Kutah, a region in Assyria (cf. 2 Kgs 17:24).” E. Tov, Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible (2. rev. ed., Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2001), 82 f.; “The Samaritans were a ‘mixed race’ contaminated by foreign blood and false worship.” The Hodder and Stoughton Illustrated Bible Dictionary (Nashville: Nelson; Dunton Green: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986), s.v. “Samaritans”; and “… dem Charakter des Volkes … Aus der Vermischung assyrisch-babylonischer, medisch-persischer, syrisch-phönikischer und israelitischer Bestandtheile...
Josephus adds to this account a narrative about a priest who was forced to leave Jerusalem and move to Samaria because of his exogamous marriage. In this involuntary exodus he was followed by other Jerusalemites who were in a similar situation in regard to their marriages. This migration to Samaria led to the building of the temple on Mount Gerizim at the time of Alexander the Great, and thus provided the “Chouthaioi” with their sanctuary, *Ant.* 11.302 ff., 306–312. This description of events would explain the existence of the temple and provide a rationale for connections between the Samaritans and the population in Jerusalem. It is perhaps less generally known than the former account, but scholars often refer to it.

To these reports from Josephus one may add the Samaritans’ own story of their origin. It is found in the Samaritan chronicles *Kitab al-Tarikh* and the *Arabic Book of Joshua*. These documents were created in the late Middle Ages, in 1355 and 1362/3 respectively, and they provide us with an origin story which assumes that the Samaritans represent the true Israel from the time of Jacob, whereas the Jews split off from this true Israel by following the aberrant priest Eli. This version of their origin is standard among the Samaritans themselves, and a limited number of scholars have relied on the main elements in this story in the quest for their origin.

On the one hand, therefore, we are provided with several narratives about the origin of the Samaritans. These narratives could be a natural point to start a search for their origin. One might take one or more of these stories, adjust for possible unhistorical idiosyncrasies, and locate the result in a larger historical framework. In chapter 3 I will survey some attempts made in this direction. On the other hand, these stories might complicate the matter, as they cannot at the outset be acquitted of the suspicion of having their own agenda and therefore blur the question.