THE DAY OF ATONEMENT OF THE SAMARITANS

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INTRODUCTION

Those who have more information about the Samaritans than Jesus’ parable of the “good Samaritan,” know that this religious group still offers the Pesah sacrifice on Mount Gerizim. Generally, this is the only detail known of the Samaritans’ religious practices among biblical scholars. In the liturgical corpus published by Cowley, more than one third of the 800 pages of liturgical texts deal with Yom Kippur. It is much more than that of Pesah. Consequently, as in Judaism, also in Samaritanism, the Day of Atonement is the most venerated festival, sometimes called the “chief of the Festivals” (Dexinger 1993, 65).1 Despite this theologically demonstrated and in several writings displayed consideration, the Samaritan Day of Atonement festival seems to be one of the least treated and therefore the most enigmatic Samaritan feast2 as it is noticed: ‘Not many outside the community have witnessed the Day of Fasting or even partook of it!’ (Sassoni and Sassoni 2004, 23).

HISTORICAL QUESTIONS

Samaritans are frequently referred to as more or less the descendants of the northern Israelites. From this point of view, for which I have argued elsewhere (Zsengellér 1998), the northern traditions of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament are of special interest. One of the core elements of

1 Following the LXX reading, the Biblical text of שַׁבָּתָם (Lev 16:31) can be interpreted as the “Shabbat of the Shabbats.” In the 1st century BCE Philo of Alexandria (De specialibus legibus 2.193–194) also maintained this day as the ‘highest holiday’ (ἐορτὸν τὴν μεγίστην), as it is clear from the name of tractate Υόμα (יומא—“the day”). (Stökl 2003, 16–17). John Macdonald characterized it as “The most outstanding event in the Samaritan calendar” (Macdonald 1964, 267).

2 In most of the scholarly publications there are very short sketches of the Samaritan Day of Atonement. Some of them only mention its existence before Sukkoth (Pummer 1987).
the northern traditions is the so called *Ur-Deuteronomium* (Welch 1924; Alt 1978). Interestingly enough chapters 12–26 of Deuteronomy, which are supposed to be more or less the content of this ancient document, refer to the three main pilgrim festivals but do not mention the holyday complex of Rosh-Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Samaritans, however, regard the whole Pentateuch as Scripture and therefore this festal time of the year described and prescribed in Leviticus belongs to their basic religious traditions as well. Before turning to the theology and liturgy of the Samaritan Day of Atonement the historical traditions of the feast need to be studied.

Yom Kippur is a festival originally based on Leviticus 16 and 23:27–32 and Num 29:7–11. In all textual units there are prescriptions of making sacrifices (animal and fire offerings). Leviticus 16 explicitly refers to the Tent of Meeting, as the place of the sacrifice to be performed by the high priest. There are some theoretical problems with this description. Where can this liturgy take place by the Samaritans/true Israelites and the Judahites respectively? Who can perform this liturgy in the one or the other communities or religions?

For the second question we can give a short and adequate answer. The foundation texts of this feast define the high priest as the leader of the liturgy. Consequently the high priests of both communities could perform the sacrifices. In this case it does not matter when and how the two religious communities were established or separated from each other. As in several cases of the First and Second Temple period, there were different high priestly families, so the prescription of the Law could be fulfilled by any of them.4

3 A fresh discussion of the reasons for the northern provenance of this part of Deuteronomy see Schorch, 2011, who maintains that the book’s focus on Mount Gerizim gives a certain explanation for its place of origin.

4 The historical reconstruction of the Israelite high priesthood is very problematic (Cody 1969), especially that of the Zadokites (Hunt 2006). Deborah Rooke points at the cultic role of the high priests presented by the Priestly writer and emphasises his main ‘responsibility for community sin and atonement’ (Rooke 2000, 35). VanderKam distillates the sources and gives a nuanced chain of the high priests in Jerusalem from the Joshua of Zechariah and Haggai until Phannias son of Samuel the last named high priest before the first Jewish War. Yom Kippur is connected directly to a high priest in the case of Matthias son of Theophilus (5–4 BCE) referred to by Josephus *Ant* 17.165–167. (VanderKam 2004, 410). On the Samaritan side the chains of the high priests play a prominent role in the historical literature. The *Tulida* (Florentin 1999) and the *Shalshalah* (Gaster 1909) are labeled as chronicles though they are genealogies of high priests with some insertion of short historical remarks.