DID JOHN WRITE HIS GOSPEL PARTLY TO WIN SAMARITAN CONVERTS?

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Within the last ten years several works have appeared which indicate the importance of Samaritan studies for certain books of the NT, especially the gospel of John. In 1958 John Bowman raised the question of whether the writer of John was “trying to make a bridge between Samaritans and Jews in Christ” 1). He presents considerable evidence in support of this thesis.

In 1967 there appeared a significant appendix on the subject in a volume of The Anchor Bible 2). The authors of that appendix maintain that Acts vii 2-50 confirms the native tradition that Stephen was a Samaritan, “for it depends on the Samaritan Pentateuch and reflects Samaritan views of Old Testament history” 3). They call attention to parallel usage in John.

That year also Wayne A. Meeks published a book which, in my opinion, is an important contribution to Johannine studies. Meeks investigates the christological motifs of prophet and king in John and draws two general conclusions with respect to the gospel traditions and their provenance. “First, the Johannine traditions were shaped, at least in part, by interaction between a Christian community and a hostile Jewish community whose piety accorded very great importance to Moses and the Sinai theophany, probably understood as Moses’ ascent to heaven and his enthronement there. Second, it is clear that the Johannine church had drawn members from that Jewish group as well as from the Samaritan circles which held very similar beliefs, and it has been demonstrated to a high degree of probability that the depiction of Jesus as prophet

3) Ibid. 285.
and king in the Fourth Gospel owes much to traditions which the church inherited from the Moses piety 1).

For a number of years in my study of the fourth gospel I have been collecting evidence which seems to give at least some probability of Samaritan influence on the writer. Recently I have written on the subject 2). I have suggested the following main reasons for suspecting probable Samaritan influence on John in support of the thesis of Bowman: (1) the geographical locations Aenon (iii 23), Salim (iii 23), Sychar (iv 5), and especially Ephraim (xi 54), probably in Samaria, would have special appeal to prospective Samaritan converts. The use of the name Ephraim, rarely occurring in the OT and revived only in John in the NT, is a "clue to the writer’s effort to show that Jesus is the fulfilment of Israel’s hope for a people united, not only the Jews of Judah, but also the Samaritans, who claimed descent from the northern tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh"; (2) additional evidence for believing that the use of the word τόπος, "standard Samaritan usage" (Spiro) for a religious shrine, in Jn iv 20 and xi 48 shows Samaritan influence; (3) John downgrades both Moses and Abraham, especially Moses, precisely to appeal to prospective Samaritan converts, because for John Jesus had assimilated the legends and functions of Moses; and (4) the writer of John, although revealing Samaritan terminology in the use of the expressions "our father" and "our fathers" (iv 12, 20, vi 31, viii 39, 53), makes Jesus declare his independence from both the fathers and the law by reporting his words as "your fathers" (vi 49), "your father" (viii 38, 41, 56), and "your law" (viii 17; x 34), again to appeal not only to Jews but to Samaritans as well.

It is the purpose of this article to suggest further evidence for probable Samaritan influence on the writer of the fourth gospel in such a way as to aid in his efforts to win converts to Christianity among Samaritans as well as Jews. It is granted that the presentation is somewhat speculative. Yet all investigations which bear on such complicated subjects as the background and provenance of John’s gospel are bound to be speculative to some extent. Then again, the speculation of one man may lead to some more positive proof by another.

Bowman notes that although the Samaritans did not expect a