FOR WE, LIKE YOU, WORSHIP YOUR GOD:

Three Biblical Portrayals of Samaritan Origins

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Rabbinic traditions trace Samaritan origins back to the biblical report of the forced settlement of foreigners in Samaria by the Assyrians towards the end of the 8th century BCE, a report which earned them the opprobrious by-name Kutai. Most historians, however, view the biblical portrayals critically and recognize in them the polemic of the Judaean community in Jerusalem against their rivals in the North. In similar fashion, the claim of the Samaritan community itself to being the true Israel, "who keeps (hšmrym) the truth" and who are lineal descendants of "the tribe of Ephraim and the tribe of Manasseh, sons of Joseph", is given little credibility; it is a claim seen as a late fiction which seeks to legitimize the Samaritan brand of Israelite religion. The present investigation reviews the biblical sources once more, seeking to clarify just how partisan they are in actuality.

The locus classicus on the subject is undisputedly 2 Kgs xvii 24-33. The territory of the kingdom of Israel is here described as having been emptied of its population by the Assyrian conquerors and then resettled by ethnically diverse peoples brought to Samaria by an unnamed "king of Assyria". The new residents of Samaria adopt the cult of the God of Israel under duress, at the same time continuing their native, idolatrous practices. Thus, according to this account, there develops in Beth-el an adulterated Israelite cult, not unlike the one which was prevalent in the northern kingdom in former days.

A second text, Ezra iv 1-5, depicts the community in Samaria about two centuries later, during the early decades of the Persian period. To the returned Judaean exiles who are rebuilding the Temple of the God of Israel in Jerusalem, the residents of Samaria present themselves as observant worshippers of the God of Israel, whom they have been serving ever since their arrival in the land in the days of Esarhaddon. But they are summarily rebuffed in their request to participate in the Temple project, the reason for this rejection left unspecified.

5 The unit 2 Kgs xvii 34-40 is a separate paragraph unrelated to the preceding one; its subject is the continued waywardness of the Israelites in Assyrian exile and not the idolatry of the new Samarians. This view was set out in full by the present writer in "Israel in Exile—The View of a Josianic Historian", JBL 97 (1978), pp. 40-4.

6 Though 2 Kgs xvii 3 mentions Shalmaneser, in the remainder of the paragraph, xvii 4-6, "the king of Assyria" is the subject. Extra-biblical sources confirm that Samaria fell to Shalmaneser V in the winter of 722 (A. K. Grayson, Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles [Locust Valley, N.Y., 1975], p. 73, lines 27-8). But analysis of the Assyrian documentation requires identifying "the king of Assyria" as Sargon II who was the first to exile and then to repopulate Samaria (H. Tadmor, "The Campaigns of Sargon II of Assur: A Chronological-Historical Study", JCS 12 [1958], pp. 33-40).

7 The historical inscriptions of Esarhaddon do not refer to his bringing new exiles to Samaria, though he did campaign extensively in the west. Perhaps the transfer took place during the campaign to Egypt in 671 when punitive measures were meted out against those western vassals who had allied themselves with the Egyptian Tirhaqa; for the fragmentary Assyrian evidence, see D. D. Luckenbill, Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia 2 (Chicago, 1927), par. 584-5. A further biblical intimation of such action during Esarhaddon's reign has been found in Isa. vii 8, in which the future shattering of Samaria as a people is set sixty-five years hence. Calculated from the days of the Syro-Ephraimite war, this would fall during Esarhaddon's western campaigns. S. D. Luzzatto, Il Profeta Isaià, volgarizzato e commentato (Padova, 1867), ad loc. surveys the early calendrical reckonings based on this verse; cf. more recently, O. Kaiser, Das Buch des Propheten Jesaja. Kapitel 1-12 (5th edn, Göttingen, 1981), E. tr. Isaiah 1-12 (2nd edn, London, 1983), ad loc.