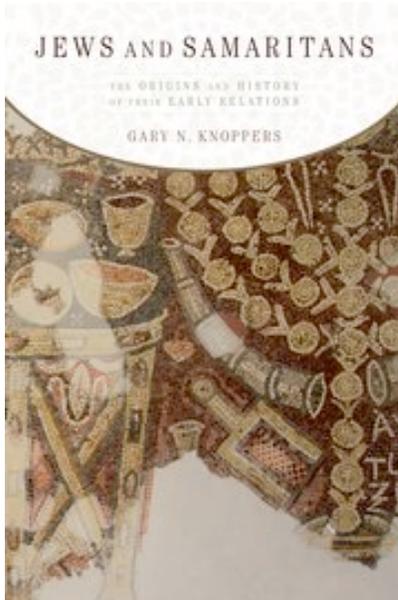


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Gary A. Knoppers

Jews and Samaritans: The Origins and History of Their Early Relations

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Jürgen Zangenberg
Leiden University
Leiden, the Netherlands

Discussing the Samaritans is beneficial in many respects. It not only makes us aware of the multiformity of the textual history of the Hebrew Bible; it also widens our perspective on the diversity of ancient Judaism, and, above all, it demonstrates the different options people had to adopt and transmit old Israelite traditions in various social and historical contexts. The study of ancient Samaritanism shows that there was no monopoly of claiming preexilic biblical traditions and no necessities in how the different strands developed, but a good deal of competition, chaos, and creativity as well as mutual influences. The existence of the Samaritans proves that the “Jewish option” was not the only way to continue preexilic traditions. The Samaritans urge us academically to step out of the Jerusalem-centeredness of the vast majority of our (Jewish as well as Christian) sources and consider the whole picture: biblical reception history is no straight line and should never be written in the singular.

Gary N. Knoppers, well known for his many substantial contributions to the study of ancient Samaritanism and postexilic Judaism, has now drawn together the latest developments in textual, archaeological, and historical research and presents us with a magnificent study on how Israelites became “Samaritans” and “Jews,” how they “separated” and still remained “together in their otherness” for many centuries. Apart

from offering a broad array of innovative exegetical and historical discussions about core texts and traditions, Knoppers teaches us that group-formation and identity-definition cannot work without first *presupposing* the otherness of the perceived other and then by setting this otherness into effect by acting *as if* the other *was* different. Nomenclature, of course, plays an important role in this process, not only when identity formation unfolds but also when it is described by biblical texts or scholars. In that respect, the “parting of the ways” between Samaritans and Jews (to use an already quite worn-out concept of understanding early Christian–Jewish relations) had no beginning and has no end; it “happened” on the way.

Knoppers structures his argument in eight, sometimes more thematic but usually more chronologically oriented, chapters starting from the fall of Israelite Samaria and ending with the Roman period. The short introduction, “Samaritans, Jews and the Contested Legacy of Classical Israel” (1–17), marks common pitfalls and sets out the agenda. Knoppers intends no less than to offer “a new understanding of the history, identity, and relationship of Samaritans and Jews” (17). He targets traditional (mis)conceptions such as the myth of the “ten lost tribes,” and critically examines the assumption of “long-held antagonisms between Jews and Samaritans.” According to Knoppers, the sources instead reveal “important continuities and convergences between Judeans and Samaritans in the ancient world” (17).

Starting in chapter 2 with a reevaluation of the region of Samaria after the Assyrian conquest and the fate of the Israelite inhabitants (“The Fall of the Northern Kingdom and the Ten Lost Tribes: A Re-evaluation,” 18–44), Knoppers incorporates the latest results of archaeological and textual research (including on Assyrian sources). Instead of assuming a complete cultural transformation by a massive population exchange, he emphasizes that “of those who survived and remained in the land, the majority were Israelites” (9). The ten lost tribes, Knoppers concludes, were never entirely lost. These historical considerations are backed up by a renewed, careful analysis of key passages from the Hebrew Bible commenting on the situation in the north and on southern attempts to interfere with northern affairs (ch. 3: “God and Country: The Revival of Israelite Religion in Postexilic Samaria,” 45–70). Rather than a monolith, Knoppers detects multiple layers with different tendencies, such as in the key passage 1 Kgs 17:24–41: both emphasizing the northerners’ total discontinuity as foreigners *and* at the same time conceding their continuity with former Israelites as descendants of Jacob, this text lies at the foundation of much of the ambiguity that characterized the “southern” (Judaean) approach toward Samaritans for generations to come. In addition, although the Deuteronomistic account of the “Josianic reform” in 2 Kgs 23:15–20 criticizes the northerners, it nevertheless presumes that they are “fundamentally Israelite in character” (10).

Knoppers sees this picture confirmed and continued in the Chronistic History, which creatively rewrites Samuel-Kings (ch. 4: “The Fall of the Northern Kingdom as a New Beginning in Northern-Israelite-Southern Israelite Relations,” 71–101). Here, too, northerners are—despite all differences—seen as familiar with ancestral traditions and social structures (even prophetic and royal ones!) and as maintaining contacts with their southern neighbors. There can therefore be no doubt, says Knoppers, that at least some of the southern circles behind the Chronicler acknowledged the Yahwistic character of the inhabitants of Samaria.

Chapter 5 proceeds to the Neo-Babylonian period and corrects the popular misconception that Samaria was only a backdrop of Yehud (“A Distinction without a Difference? Samaritan and Judaeon Cultures during the Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods,” 102–34). To the contrary, recent archaeological work only demonstrates the considerable size and importance of the city of Samaria as political center of inland-Palestine but also documents its multicultural character. Substantial excavations on Mount Gerizim have further revealed that “the Jerusalem Temple had a Yahwistic rival to the north significantly earlier than most scholars had assumed” (11). Both arguments certainly have a point. There can be no doubt that the region of Samaria had Yahwistic inhabitants, but they were not the only ones, as the evidence from the city of Samaria shows: there were all sorts of indigenous, Semitic, and foreign pagans, too. The question is how much continuity there was between Knoppers’s Yahwistic “Samaritans” and later “Samaritans.”

In chapter 6 Knoppers focuses on the tensions and conflicts between northerners and southerners in Ezra-Nehemiah. Both these books are (again!) clear about the common Yahwistic ground on which both groups stand *and* at the same time on the different consequences they draw from it (“Ethnicity, Communal Identity, and Imperial Authority: Contextualizing the Conflicts Between Samaria and Judah in Ezra-Nehemiah,” 135–68). It is beyond doubt that the Judahites had in the meantime gone through an intellectual and religious development that the northerners did not share. It is quite plausible that the “Judah alone” perspective of Ezra-Nehemiah implies a transformation in itself and consequently moved the Jerusalemites away from the old Israelite basis and therefore contributed to a process of mutual alienation with the northerners—even if the innovations were mostly internal and confined to Judahite debates about the boundaries of their own identity, even if not every southerner might have cared about them in practical life (e.g., restrictions on marriage), and even if the Babylonian and Persian overlords paid little attention to what might have seemed like internal quabbles between the elites from Shamerin and Yehud. In any case, the feeling that “Israel” is a single entity increasingly turned into competition about which party might legitimately claim this

epithet, but the contest between Samaritans and Jerusalemites was not the only one (see Elephantine!), and it did not result in an outright schism.

The situation dramatically changed under the Hasmoneans in the Maccabean period when John Hyrcanus expanded the borders of former Yehud and occupied Samaria, the Galilee, Perea, and Idumaea during the last two decades of the second century BCE and destroyed the city of Samaria, Shechem, and the sanctuary on Mount Gerizim, which had considerably been enlarged less than a century ago (173–74). Against this background, chapter 7 examines the significance of the fact that—apart from a few late “sectarian” insertions—Samaritans and Jews essentially use the same Pentateuch (“The Torah and ‘the Place(s) for Yhwh’s Name’: Samaritan-Judaeon Relations in the Hellenistic and Maccabean Times,” 169–216). Knoppers’s argument here is indeed stimulating but not unproblematic. Knoppers takes the fact that Jews and Samaritans essentially share the same Pentateuch recension (one of several circulating in Jerusalem during the second century BCE; see, e.g., 177–78) as an indication that the Pentateuch enjoyed a common northern and southern prehistory *before* it was changed by the Samaritans in an attempt of self-assertion over against the Hasmonean aggression. While I agree with the latter statement to a certain extent, I see little indication that the northerners did have much share in the development of the Pentateuch (not to speak about the rest of the biblical literature). They certainly were Yahwistic and also kept old Israelite traditions that connected them with their southern counterparts, but I feel more inclined to see the Pentateuch as the product of postexilic, distinctly *southern* scribal traditions related to the same “radical” returnees from Babylon who promoted the Yehud-alone ideology in Ezra-Nehemiah. The fact that the Samaritans have the Pentateuch is indeed evidence of the diversity within southern priestly circles and of their continuous contacts with the northern Yahwistic elite. In my opinion, it was exactly this “infusion” of the Pentateuch into the north sometime during the late third/early second century BCE that turned the Yahwistic Samaritans there into “real” proto-Samaritans, that is, the forebears of today’s “Samaritan Israelites.” Perhaps Josephus was not too far off the mark when he related the anecdote about the “schism” within the Jerusalem priesthood and the emigration of one faction to Mount Gerizim (Josephus, *Ant.* 11.306–312).

However one might interpret this enigmatic passage, even this development would not have been possible without continuous contacts and exchange—a point that Knoppers asserts. Even during the difficult early Roman period, when mutual hatred and violence characterized relations between Samaria and Jews, Knoppers sees “signs of occasional interaction, communications and respect” (13) that led to many parallel developments in liturgy, theology, eschatology, and material culture (ch. 8: “An Absolute Breach?” 217–39). An extensive bibliography (241–94) and indexes (Jewish scriptures, authors, and subjects) conclude this important and stimulating study.

Gary N. Knoppers's book offers a refreshingly new perspective on the origins of both Jews and Samari(t)ans. It is to be recommended to everyone interested in the history and culture of ancient Palestine.