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THE ORIGIN OF THE SAMARITAN COMMUNITY*

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1. THE ORIGIN OF THE SAMARITANS IN CURRENT RESEARCH

In present days, the Samaritans are a group of about 650 people who live in almost equal parts in two communities – one in Kiryat Luza, a newly founded village above Nablus and just beneath the top of their holy mountain, Mount Gerizim, and the other in Holon, a suburb of Tel Aviv.[1] According to their own tradition, they are the „guardians" – the *šmàrèm* (שמרים) – of the original heritage of the people of Israel, which was corrupted and abandoned by the Jews. Rabbinic orthodoxy, on the other hand, regarded and, to some extend, still regards the Samaritans as descendants of a foreign people which replaced the original population of the Northern kingdom of Israel after the Assyrian conquest in 722 BCE. This view goes back to a story in the Hebrew Bible in II Ki 17,24-34, according to which the Assyrian conquerors repopulated this territory with the help of colonists who were neither Jewish by origin nor by religion. In the curse of time, however, the new population adopted a few Jewish elements within their syncretistic cult:[2]

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[1] A very reliable and well-informed description of the current state of affairs of the Samaritans has been published by Pummer, see Pummer 1999.

[2] "The prevailing view [*sc.* in the Rabbinic tradition] regarded the Samaritans as the descendants of those people who were settled in Eretz-Israel by the Assyrian kings, in accordance with the Biblical tradition." (Alon 1977: 354). Besides this main tradition, however, Alon did identify traces of further and diverging views on the Samaritans as well. One of these Jewish traditions regarded the Samaritans as descendants of a mixed people, consisting of both genuine Israelites and Assyrian deportees, the other regarded them as descendants of the Canaanites (Alon 1977: 355-359). The most up-to-date analysis of the different approaches of the Jewish tradition to the Samaritan question can be found in Zsengellér 2002. Some of the oldest Jewish sources about the Samaritans are preserved in the writings of Josephus, who regards them as descendants of Median and Persian deportees (Josephus Ant. XII: 257). Unfortunately, however, Josephus seems to make no clear distinction between "Samaritans" (i.e.,

> **24** The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria in place of the people of Israel; they took possession of Samaria, and settled in its cities. **25** When they first settled there, they did not worship the LORD [...] **27** Then the king of Assyria commanded, "Send there one of the priests whom you carried away from there; let him go and live there, and teach them the law of the god of the land." **28** So one of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and lived in Bethel; he taught them how they should worship the LORD. **29** But every nation still made gods of its own and put them in the shrines of the high places that the people of Samaria had made, every nation in the cities in which they lived; **30** the people of Babylon made Succoth-benoth, the people of Cuth made Nergal, the people of Hamath made Ashima; **31** the Avvites made Nibhaz and Tartak; the Sepharvites burned their children in the fire to Adrammelech and Anammelech, the gods of Sepharvaim. **32** They also worshiped the LORD and appointed from among themselves all sorts of people as priests of the high places, who sacrificed for them in the shrines of the high places. **33** So they worshiped the LORD but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away. **34** To this day they continue to practice their former customs. They do not worship the LORD and they do not follow the statutes or the ordinances or the law or the commandment that the LORD commanded the children of Jacob, whom he named Israel.

Without any doubt, both perspectives – the Samaritan and the Jewish-Rabbinic – are polemic in nature and serve the needs of the respective community. Nevertheless, both positions found their ways into modern scholarly research and still have advocates:

a) The traditional Samaritan approach was followed especially by Moses Gaster, a famous Samaritanologist in the first half of the 20th century.[3] More recently, Étienne Nodet in his "Essai sur les origines du judaïsme: de Josue aux Pharisiens" (1992) advocated the priority of the Samaritan tradition, although he dated the development of this tradition to the Hellenistic area.[4] However, neither of the two scholars based himself on a critical examination of the Samaritan historiographic tradition, a task which was carried out only in 1998 by József Zsengellér.[5]

b) On the other hand, the view that II Ki 17,24-41 is a credible source for the origin of the Samaritans was developed especially by Yeheskel Kaufmann. Kaufmann described the Samaritans as Assyrian colonists who adopted the Israelite religion as the result of a strong process of assimilation.[6]

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the followers of the Gerizim cultus) and "Samarians" (i.e., the inhabitants of Samaria), cf. Egger 1986: 315 and Egger 1991: 113f.

[3] Cf. especially Gaster 1925 and Gaster 1932. More information on Gaster may be found in the entry "Gaster, Moses", Encyclopaedia Judaica ad loc.

[4] An English translation of Nodet's respective views can be found in Nodet 1997: 152. The work of further scholars who basically follow the Samaritan view have been reviewed by Dexinger 1992: 75-77.

[5] Zsengellér 1998. Further endeavours in this direction have been carried out by Ingrid Hjelm (see Hjelm 2000). Her analysis and the results of her work, however, seem unconvincing in many points, especially due to her decision to follow the often heavily ideologically coloured positions of the so-called "Reconstructionist school" and because of her ignorance of Hebrew linguistics, cf. the review of VanderKam 2002.

[6] Cf. Dexinger 1992: 70-73.

As against these two extreme positions, the consensus in current research describes the Samaritans neither as a heterodox Jewish sect nor as the only and true guardians of the original Israelite heritage. Most probably, the Samaritan community preserved many ancient Israelite traditions from both an ethnic and a religious point of view, but they introduced many innovations, too.

Without any doubt, the separation between Samaritans and Jews has been advanced by the debates about the two different central places of worship: Jerusalem versus Mount Gerizim. The latter has been the holy place of the Samaritans until today, as is Jerusalem to the Jews. On the other hand, the forefathers of the Samaritans were not the only group within the post-exilic Israelite-Jewish tradition competing with the pre-eminence of Jerusalem.[7] Rather, their community and their beliefs, including their competition with Jerusalem, formed an integeral part of Second-temple Judaism. However, a strict separation between Samaritans and Jews took place, and we should try to determine since when the Samaritans should be regarded as an independent and well-defined group.

With regard to this question, very diverging positions have been advocated in current research:

1. The irreversible break between Samaritans and Jews took place in early post-exilic times (early 5th century BCE).[8]
2. The break took place under the influence of Alexander's conquest of Palestine (second half of 4th century BCE).[9]
3. The break took place in the Maccabeen era (late 2nd century BCE).[10]
4. The break took place in the 3rd century CE.[11]
5. The break between Samaritans and Jews was not a single and dramatic event, but rather a gradual process.[12]

As to the last suggestion, there is no doubt that the separation between Samaritans and Jews was part of a historical process extending over several centuries. This process, however, cannot be described solely in terms of evolution, as Coggins does, since it implies a fundamental change of the framework which served Jews and Samaritans as a means of defining their identity. Up to a certain point, the forefathers of the Samaritans referred to and were regarded as part of a social, religious and ethnic framework which was common to the whole Second-temple Judaism. From that certain point onwards, however, the Samaritans became an independent group, not just population of Samaria but Samaritans proper, insofar as they defined themselves apart from Judaism in general within the boundaries of their own framework. This fundamental change must be datable, if the available sources do allow it.

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[7] E.g., further Jewish temples were erected in Iraq al-Amir (Transjordan), Elephantine and Leontopolis (Egypt).

[8] See Mor 1989: 2.

[9] See Delcor 1962.

[10] This is the central claim of James Purvis' most influential book "The Samaritan Pentateuch and the origin of the Samaritan sect", see Purvis 1968.

[11] This hypothesis has been elaborated in Crown 1991: 43f.

[12] See Coggins 1975: 163.

The above conclusion corresponds with the general opinion in current research which for the most part prefers a date in the late 2nd century BCE on account of the following arguments:

c) The Samaritan version of the Torah is based on an harmonistic text-type, which exhibits a strong tendency to avoid differences between parallel passages. Manuscripts with similar characteristics are known from Qumran and date to the late 2nd century BCE. Therefore, the Samaritan Torah seems to have separated from the common textual tradition at that period of time.[13] While the Gerizim-followers participated in the general literal culture until the late 2nd century BCE, the Samaritan community did obviously not share the textual developments starting from the 1st century BCE, and the formerly common literal culture disintegrated.

d) Anti-Gerizim polemics is attested to, the latest, for the 3rd century BCE within the framework of the so-called Manasse-tradition.[14] This tradition, however, still speaks of the Gerizim-followers as o`moe, qnoi ("compatriots"). It was only in the late 2nd century BCE that a new tradition emerged which identified the Gerizim-followers with the gentile colonists of II Ki 17 and therefore negated their Jewish identity (cp. Ant. IX).[15] The emergence of this tradition (the so-called Cutheen tradition) shows that Samaritans and Jews were no longer regarded as being part of the same tradition from the point of view of the religious law, the *halakha*.

e) The writings of Josephus Ant. XIII, and the archaeological evidence witness that the sanctuary on Mount Gerizim and the town Sichem beneath it were destroyed by the Judean Johannes Hyrkanos in 129/128 and 108/07 BCE respectively.[16] Obviously, these drastic political and military events are further hints that the break between Samaritans and Jews really took place at that time.

We should therefore conclude that Samaritans and Jews irrevocably separated towards the end of the 2nd century BCE. Due to this early date, the Samaritans are to be considered the oldest distinctive group within the Israelite-Jewish tradition. However, as the separation has had its roots in the past history of the conflict,[17] it has had its history of reception, too, during which the proper Samaritan identity became set and gained its profile.

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[13] Eshel 2003: 227-240.

[14] Cf. Dexinger 1992: 122-127. According to this tradition, recorded in Josephus Ant. XI, the Samarian governor Sanballat erected the temple on Mount Gerizim which was to be led by Manasse, brother of the High priest in Jerusalem and his own son-in-law.

[15] For the date of this tradition see Dexinger 1992: 134.

[16] See Dexinger 1992: 135 and Zsengellér 1998: 164.

[17] This aspect has been especially brought to attention by Ferdinand Dexinger: "Die verschiedenen Vorschläge überblickend wird man jedoch sagen müssen, daß die Datierung der Trennung in die Makkabäer-Zeit eine vielseitige argumentative Absicherung erfahren hat. [...] Allerdings ist zu vermerken, daß durch diesen zeitlichen Ansatz der endgültigen Trennung nicht gleichzeitig die Frage beantwortet wird, woher jene Samaritaner eigentlich stammen, die sich in der Makkabäer-Zeit von Jerusalem lösten." (Dexinger 1992: 82).

2. THE ORAL TRADITION OF THE SAMARITANS

As already mentioned, Samaritan identity was especially shaped by the following points:

1. The veneration of Mount Gerizim as the central place of worship.
2. The establishment of a distinctive version of the Torah.
3. The ethnic and religious (halakhic) removal from the general Israelite-jewish tradition.
4. Political differences and military conflicts under Johannes Hyrkanos.

However, two more points should be added, which tend to be rather neglected in current research:

5. The emergence of Samaritan Hebrew: After the separation, the Samarian dialect spoken by the forefathers of the Samaritans became a group-specific sociolect, distinguishing Samaritans and Jews. Samaritan Hebrew apparently goes back to the Hebrew dialect spoken in Samaria.[18] It has been demonstrated from a language historical point of view, that the interaction of this dialect with its linguistic environment came to an end in the 2nd or 1st century BCE.[19] Obviously, this observation gives strong support to the date of separation favoured by most scholars.
6. In close connection with this process of shaping a distinctive Samaritan linguistic identity, the Samaritan reading tradition of the Torah started to emerge. As it is well known, the Hebrew writing system is generally speaking rather defective. E.g., it leaves out in writing most vowels, and the careful reader has to supplement them in the process of reading. The creation of the Samaritan community in the late 2nd century BCE went along with the emergence of a stabile reading tradition, which means that the written tradition of the Samaritan Torah was supplemented by a firm and fixed oral tradition, connecting the written consonantal framework of the text with a certain way of pronunciation, vocalisation and phrasing.[20] This reading tradition, fixing especially pronunciation, vocalisation and phrasing of the written text, has been transmitted orally over centuries. First endeavours to record it in writing do not appear before the 10th century CE,[21] but – unlike the labour of the Jewish Masoretes – never became fully accepted and remained of rather marginal influence. This situation is well characterised by the fact that the first fully vocalised Samaritan Torah is a very recent product, dating to the year 2000 CE.[22]

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[18] "Das Konsonantengerüst der samaritanischen Tora bezeugt zwar eine sprachhistorisch frühere Stufe, aber denselben Dialekt wie die samaritanische Tora-Lesung." (Schorch 2004: 39, with further observations supporting this claim).

[19] For account on Samaritan Hebrew from the perspective of the history of the Hebrew language see Ben-Hayyim 2000: 335.

[20] See Schorch 2004: 61.

[21] See Ben-Hayyim 2000: 6f.

[22] Tsedaka 2000.

The importance of this oral tradition cannot be overestimated. In some respect, it even exceeds the written manuscriptal tradition as may be observed from the relative freedom the Samaritan scribes posses in leaving out or adding vowel letters – *matres lectionis* – if only the written shape remains in accordance with the orally transmitted reading.[23] Since the emergence of the oral reading tradition, therefore, the transmission of the Torah is not anymore a privilege of the scribes, but of the whole community. Obviously, this implies a fundamental change in terms of sociology of religion.

The analysis of "oral history"-traditions successfully demonstrated the existence of close connections between the emergence of oral traditions and the developments of communities, insofar oral traditions shape and strengthen the group identity:

> "[The] oral tradition [is] not a means of expression of an individual [...], but of a community. [...] The process of orally transmitting [...] implies an expressive element insofar a given [...] community defines, defends or ideologically justifies its identity by means of the controlled tradition of a certain body of thought."[24]

It seems to me that these results do apply to the emergence of a specific Samaritan identity as well. The oral reading tradition has been developed in close connection with the emergence of the Samaritan community. Within this process, the reading tradition had a twofold function: inwards, it became a means of identification for the community, outwards, it marked the boundaries of the Samaritan community in opposition to the remaining Israelite-Jewish tradition and later on especially in opposition to Jewish-Rabbinic tradition.

Until the 2nd century BCE, the relationship between the different streams of the Israelite-Jewish tradition had been dominated by the general acknowledgement of a common ethnic, cultural and religious basis, symbolised by the written Torah.

Contrary to these centripetal and unifying forces of the written Torah, the emerging oral reading tradition of the Samaritans developed centrifugal forces, which brought the Gerizim followers into an entirely new relationship towards the formerly common basis, beginning from the end of the 2nd century BCE. As a consequence, the differences became more important than the shared heritage.

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[23] The consequence of this practice is visible in the inconsistent spelling which is characteristic for Samaritan manuscripts: "The extant manuscripts [*sc.* of the Samaritan Pentateuch] vary considerably in the predilection of various scribes for *scriptio plena* or *defectiva*, with no discernible trend towards one way or the other of expressing vowels. Presumably, the meticulousness with which the pronunciation of the Pentateuch was taught throughout the ages, generation after generation, hindered the development of a corpus of fixed scribal rules [...]." (Tal 2000: 1.35). It should be noted that a certain domination of the oral over the written transmission of the Biblical text is even embodied in the Jewish-masoretic tradition, expressing itself in the distinction between *Ketib* and *Qere*.

[24] "[D]ie mündliche Tradition [ist] kein Ausdrucksmittel des einzelnen [...], sondern der Gruppe. [...] Der Prozeß der mündlichen Tradition als soziales Produkt setzt insofern ein esoterisches Moment voraus, als eine öffentliche oder private Gruppe ihre Identität durch die von ihr kontrollierte Überlieferung eines Gedankengutes definiert, verteidigt oder ideologisch begründet." – Vouga 1997: 200, referring to Vansina 1992.

3. THE EMERGENCE OF "LECTIONAL CULTURES"

The irrevocable separation of the Samaritans from the common basis of Israelite-Jewish tradition is not only important as the origin of the Samaritan community. Rather, it seems to mark the beginning of a larger and very influential process which seized the Israelite-Jewish tradition as a whole and lead to its fundamental transformation. In its course further distinctive communities emerged, each adhering to its own oral reading tradition of the Torah which supplemented and in some respect even superseded the written tradition. As a result, the written transmission of the Torah by a learned scribal elite was no longer the most important means of shaping the community's identity. Instead, this central institution was taken from then on by the *reading* of the Torah, carried out by and in front of the whole congregation. With regard to that central importance of the act of reading, it seems only appropriate to describe the newly emerged communities as "lectional cultures". These lectional cultures were neither purely literal nor oral cultures, in the strict sense of the word. Instead, they combined elements of both types, due to the characteristics of the Hebrew writing system already mentioned: they obviously based themselves on written texts, especially on the Torah, but the reading of these texts always required the setting of an oral tradition, too.

Besides the creation of new communities and the development of reading as the central means to communicate their identity, a further consequence of this process should be mentioned: It has been demonstrated with reference to Hellenistic-Jewish, Qumranic and Rabbinic sources that the way of justifying religious norms fundamentally changed in the course of the 1st century BCE: While it was usual and sufficient to refer to "the tradition of the fathers" only, according to the older way, the explicit quotation of the Biblical text became the new standard:

> "[T]he appeal to the written text of the Torah as an authoritative source for halakhic matters, and as a means by which one is able to discuss halakhic questions, was a revolutionary innovation of first-century BCE Judaism, and it was actually unknown prior to that era."[25]

Prior to the 1st century BCE, therefore, the authority of the Torah has been a rather symbolical one. Later on, however, it was the wording of a certain passage which became the decisive factor. Schremer speaks of a development from "tradition-based observance" to "text-based observance". Obviously, this development requires a certain acquaintance with the text and the mere existence of some manuscripts was not anymore sufficient. Therefore, the institutions of regular and public reading the Torah[26] and of studying and learning it[27] appeared. It is in this context, that the reading traditions of the respective lectional cultures develop.

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[25] Schremer 2001: 123. Similarly (although with a different conclusion) Nodet writes in the preface to the English translation of his "Essai sur les origines du judaïsme": "[T]he rabbinic tradition, in its oldest layers, shows no sign of a biblical foundation, but only of secondary offshoots from the Bible [...] Oral tradition predominates, similar to the ancestral customs characteristic of the Pharisees according to Josephus, and these are anything but a jurisprudence drawn from the Bible." (Nodet 1997: 10).

[26] The oldest certain testimonies for the regular public reading of the Torah appear only in the writings of Philo: "It is not until we reach the first century CE that we have clear statements asserting

Besides the Samaritan tradition, this process left many traces in the available sources. So, for instance, some of the Biblical manuscripts from Qumran attest to the emergence of a reading tradition within the Qumran community.[28] Moreover, the so-called rule of the community shows, that the public and joint reading was regarded a basic *constituens* of the community's identity:

> "And the Many shall be on watch together for a third of each night of the year in order to read the book, explain the regulation, and bless together." (1QS VI,7-8)[29]

As already mentioned, Schremer dates the change from the tradition-based to the text-based observance to the 1st century BCE. On account of the observation that the creation of the Samaritan community is part of that same development I would prefer to predate the change to the late 2nd century BCE. Looking from this perspective, the emergence of the Samaritan community is the first important event of the reading-revolution which seized the Israelite-Jewish tradition in the last two centuries BCE.

In sum, the most important consequences of this development are as follows:

1. A process of differentiation within the Israelite-Jewish tradition starts and leads to the emergence of distinctive groups each creating its independent identity.
2. Text-based observance becomes the central authority instead of tradition based observance.
3. Institutions of reading and studying the Torah emerge.
4. Firm reading traditions of the Torah develop.

In all these developments, the Torah obviously played an important part. The fundamental change in the use of that text, like the establishing of the scriptural proof or the emergence of reading traditions, created a new framework of religious communication: the *lectional culture*. It seems appropriate, therefore, to refer to this process as a media revolution, comparable to other media revolutions like the introduction of book printing with moveable type in Europe in the early modern era.[30] In the course of the ancient media revolution from literal to lectional culture, which took place from the late 2nd to the 1st century BCE, the characteristic authority and

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regular public reading of Scripture. Both Philo and Josephus refer to weekly readings on the Sabbath." (Goodblatt 2001: 16). Cf. Baumgarten 1997: 120f.

[27] Cf. Schremer 2001: 126.

[28] See Schorch 2004: 53.

[29] Translation from Martinez 1994. Jaffe writes with regard to this passage: "[…] textual study is represented as a collective act incumbent upon the entire community. We may assume that individuals could and did study texts on their own – certainly scribes would have done so in the course of their production and transmission of texts. But this passage specifies that the community as a whole should ideally be devoted to continual textual study over and above any private engagement with textual learning." (Jaffee 2001: 34).

[30] A comprehensive analysis of the consequences which the introduction of European book printing had has been carried out and published by Michael Giesecke on the basis of systemic theory in his book "Der Buchdruck in der frühen Neuzeit: Eine historische Fallstudie über die Durchsetzung neuer Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologien" (Giesecke 1998).

permanence of literal elites[31] were combined with the potential of oral traditions for creating social identity.[32] The outcome was a new means of religious and social communication, which has been characteristic for both the Jewish and the Samaritan community until today.

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[31] Cf. Giesecke 1998: 30-32. The biblical view that writing means permanence is reflected in the written form of the tables of the law (see Dohmen 1987: 134-138). Cf. Giesecke 1998: 153.

[32] Cf. Vouga 1997: 200.

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