
Samaritans and the God of Spirit and Truth

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Third Sunday in Lent – Year A**

*God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.
(John 4:24)*

The word, “Samaritan” has not always meant “Good,” though we often hear those two words joined together. In Jesus’ time, in first century Judea, down in the South, the word “Samaritan” did not connote anyone good, or well-regarded, at all.

Samaria, where the Samaritans lived, was not Judea, where the pure-bred Jews of the first century lived. So, I propose again this morning to present a little history lesson. I entreat you to be like a kind traveler today, going out of your way to hear me out; today, I present a short historical summary of the Samaritans.

The first thing to say is this: The modern state of Israel dates back only to the year 1948. When the Bible mentions “Israel,” it is not referring to the modern state of “Israel” at all. Even in the Bible, what we now consider “Israel” was rarely united. In fact, the only era in which Israel was truly united was during the reign of King David. That is why David is so highly regarded in scripture; he was a uniting king.

For most of the other biblical history before Christ, there were two different kingdoms described. The Southern Kingdom, where Jerusalem was, was called Judah (or Judea). The Northern Kingdom was called Israel. Right: the kingdom called Israel did not include Jerusalem! It was in the south, in Judah, where the capital was Jerusalem.

In the north, the capital of Israel was originally a place called Shechem. Later, however, the capital of the Northern Kingdom was Samaria. Alas, this Northern Kingdom was overthrown, in 722 BC, by the Assyrians. When the Assyrians took over, they exiled many of the Hebrews; and it is generally assumed that the remaining Hebrews inter-married with many of the Assyrians.

Here begins the saga of the Samarians, or Samaritans. Of course, accounts differ here. Yes, our present Bible (2 Kings 17) considers the people of Samaria to be of mixed ethnic and religious background, as a result of this tragic Assyrian invasion. They were pagans and half-breeds.

However, there is a competing history, another strain of Samaritan history that claims otherwise. These Samaritans claim that they actually successfully survived the invasion of the Assyrians, and that they are purely descended from the original tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. Furthermore, they hold that the word “Samaria,” is actually derived from the Hebrew word for “keep” and “observe.” Thus, they say, these real Samaritans are those who truly kept the original Torah; they observe the real Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew scripture.

Indeed, it was in this Northern Kingdom that many of the Jews’ ancient holy sites existed – sites like Bethel, Gilgal, Beersheba, Shechem, and Shiloh, names with which we are probably familiar. These places we read about in our present day Bible were all holy places of the Northern Kingdom, not the Southern Kingdom. In particular, they were *not* Jerusalem.

The Southern Kingdom, where Jerusalem was, was not overthrown by Assyria in 722 BC. It continued to exist for 150 years, until 587 BC. It was then that they were overthrown, by the Babylonians. It was then that their temple, the great Jerusalem temple was destroyed.

Essentially, then, there is an old rivalry between the holy places of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, and the holy places of the Southern Kingdom, Judah, where Jerusalem is. What we read about in our scriptures today is most definitely written from the perspective of the Southern Kingdom, Judah, where Jerusalem is. Of course, this is also the kingdom from which the Messiah is to come, Jesus himself. (That's why Jesus is said to have been born in Bethlehem, down in the Southern Kingdom, where David was born.)

Get it?

Shechem, one of the earliest Hebrew holy places, became the capital of Samaria. And just southwest of Shechem was a special mountain, Mount Gerizim. Mount Gerizim is the holy mountain of the Samaritans, the mount of blessing. It is where the blessings were pronounced in the Book of Joshua. It where the Samaritans kept the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. It was, and is, a truly holy mountain.

But! Not according to the first-century Jews of Jerusalem! The Jerusalem Jews considered themselves more purely bred. They claimed not to have inter-married, nor worshipped foreign gods. The Jerusalem Jews, in the south, did not trust the Samaritans, of the north. The people of Jerusalem thought that the Samaritans no longer followed the correct traditions; they had been tainted. And the Jerusalem Jews had their own mountain, Mount Zion, where the temple was built!

This background is the power behind Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, the man who was an outcast. Jesus shocked his Judean listeners when he suggested that a Samaritan could actually prove to be more of a good neighbor than a good Judean Jew.

And, Jesus is doing the same thing in today's gospel, from the Gospel of John. Travelling to Galilee, Jesus decides to go through Samaria. And it is in this ancient holy place, where Jacob's well was, that he engages in this fascinating discussion with a Samaritan woman. At Jacob's ancient well, seeking a drink, Jesus offers a description of living water.

This historical context explains why the Samaritan woman says what she says about this mountain. "Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain," she says, "but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem" (John 4.20). It was Mount Gerizim in Samaria versus the Temple Mount in Jerusalem! First Church of Atlanta versus Second Church of Atlanta!

It is in this context that Jesus makes his grand pronouncement. "Woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ...The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.... God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4.21-24).

I know that each of us takes pride in our identity. It is a healthy thing to be proud of our ethnic identity and our cultural identity. We take pride in our national identity, and certainly in our religious identity. Humanity takes such pride everywhere, no matter where we are from or how old our family is.

Even the various sub-communities and national identities in the Bible take pride in themselves. God takes pride in them, too! But the genius of the Bible, and certainly the genius of Jesus – the genius of Jesus—is that he knows how to claim the superiority of God even at the expense of his own identity, his own national and cultural and religious identity. The living water of Jesus does not insist on purity! Jesus is not a purity insister! Jesus is not a "My way or the highway" absolutist.

To drink the living water of Jesus is to be converted to a God who is greater than our smaller identities, as helpful and necessary as they have been. God is beyond those smaller identities! "God is spirit and truth." Our God is God of both the Jews and the Samaritans.

In fact, God is the Spirit beyond both Samaritans and Jews. Beyond Jews and Gentiles. Beyond Christians and Jews. Beyond Roman Catholics and Protestants. Beyond Christians and Muslims. Beyond First Church of Atlanta and Second Church of Atlanta. Beyond pure bred and half bred (in fact, there is no such thing as pure bred, anywhere!) Beyond race and religion. Beyond any identity politics, special as it may be.

God is the spirit of truth that is beyond each of those holy places, and higher than each of those holy mountains. Indeed, God *is* spirit and truth. Living water! So it is that we love living water; we seek to worship God in spirit and truth.

AMEN.

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