

Between the Testaments Samaria, Synagogues and Greek Empire

The Samaritans:

During our prior study we briefly and with some selectiveness covered an overview of the Babylonian and Persian Empires, a bit of their history and their relationship with Jerusalem and the Jewish people.

The Jews had been returned to Jerusalem and Judea but as we saw in our study of Haggai and Zechariah they faced a multitude of problems. One of those was the enmity of their neighbors the Samaritans. In our reading of the New Testament it would almost appear that the ill will the Jews had toward the Samaritans is one-sided. But as we study the minor prophets and other sources related to this period of time we see a somewhat different picture.

The name Samaria first appears in the Bible as the name of the capital of the Northern Kingdom. Omri and Ahab had built fancy palaces there and it was obviously their chief city. Then in 722/721 B.C. the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians. A large number of their citizens were carried away into Assyrian captivity and scattered throughout the Assyrian Empire. Conversely groups of people from Babylonia, Syria and Elam were settled in Samaria:

II Kings 17:24 “AND THE KING OF ASSYRIA BROUGHT *men* FROM BABYLON, AND FROM CUTHAH, AND FROM AVA, AND FROM HAMATH, AND FROM SEPHARVAIM, AND PLACED *them* IN THE CITIES OF SAMARIA INSTEAD OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL: AND THEY POSSESSED SAMARIA, AND DWELT IN THE CITIES THEREOF.”

After the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews to Babylon the ethnic makeup of the region changed somewhat. During the time that the Jews were gone the Samaritans and their neighbors were able to occupy former Judean territory, develop and establish themselves. Those poor Jews that Babylon deemed unworthy of being deported and exploited obviously made peace with their new neighbors.

Consequently when the first settlers returned from Babylon to re-establish themselves in Judean territory they encountered the people of Samaria and conflict was sure to arise. First the Samaritans tried to cooperate with the Jews and assimilate them into their culture, but that didn't work:

Ezra 4:1-2 “NOW WHEN THE ADVERSARIES OF JUDAH AND BENJAMIN HEARD THAT THE CHILDREN OF THE CAPTIVITY BUILDED THE TEMPLE UNTO THE LORD GOD OF ISRAEL; ²THEN THEY CAME TO ZERUBBABEL, AND TO THE CHIEF OF THE FATHERS, AND SAID UNTO THEM, LET US BUILD WITH YOU: FOR WE SEEK YOUR GOD, AS YE *do*; AND WE DO SACRIFICE UNTO HIM SINCE THE DAYS OF ESARHADDON KING OF ASSUR, WHICH BROUGHT US UP HITHER.”

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When that approach failed then Sanballat, the ruler of Samaria, turned to coercion and intervention to defeat the efforts of the Jews.

Ezra 4:12-13 “BE IT KNOWN UNTO THE KING, THAT THE JEWS WHICH CAME UP FROM THEE TO US ARE COME UNTO JERUSALEM, BUILDING THE REBELLIOUS AND THE BAD CITY, AND HAVE SET UP THE WALLS *thereof*, AND JOINED THE FOUNDATIONS. ¹³BE IT KNOWN NOW UNTO THE KING, THAT, IF THIS CITY BE BUILDED, AND THE WALLS SET UP *again, then* WILL THEY NOT PAY TOLL, TRIBUTE, AND CUSTOM, AND *so* THOU SHALT ENDAMAGE THE REVENUE OF THE KINGS.”

But this effort didn't work either. However, they were able to influence the Jews to turn from the mission that God had given them to accomplish. This is what we studied in the book of Haggai. Through intermarriage, business relationships, and the general cooperation between peoples they were able to draw the Jews away from God. They even infiltrated the priesthood and caused a division among the Jews:

Nehemiah 13:28 “AND *one* OF THE SONS OF JOIADA, THE SON OF ELIASHIB THE HIGH PRIEST, *was* SON IN LAW TO SANBALLAT THE HORONITE: THEREFORE I CHASED HIM FROM ME.”

So Nehemiah drove at least one priest who refused to give up his Samaritan wife from the temple and refused to let him serve in that capacity. Josephus, the Jewish historian, in Antiquities XI, vii, viii says that a temple was built by Sanballat on Mt. Gerizim for Manasseh so that he could both function as priest and be married to Sanballat's daughter. This account is disputed by some scholars but it is somewhat confirmed by the conversation between Christ and the Samaritan woman:

John 4:19-20 “THE WOMAN SAITH UNTO HIM, SIR, I PERCEIVE THAT THOU ART A PROPHET. ²⁰OUR FATHERS WORSHIPPED IN THIS MOUNTAIN; AND YE SAY, THAT IN JERUSALEM IS THE PLACE WHERE MEN OUGHT TO WORSHIP.”

This woman states plainly that the Samaritans worshiped God in their mountain instead of going to Jerusalem; a place they would not have been welcome. We do know from history that a temple did exist on Mt. Gerizim that was destroyed by John Hyrcanus, one of the Maccabees, about 100 A.D. So what the Samaritans could not accomplish by cooperation or by force they did accomplish, in part at least, by their influence and leading the Jews to turn from the commandments of God.

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The Jews at Elephantine:

Possibly from being exiled from Israel and Judah; possibly from being scattered by war and most likely from serving Egypt as mercenaries there was a settlement of Jews at Elephantine that was large enough to support a temple. The city at this location is called Aswan today and I'm sure that if we remember recent history we remember that Egypt built a huge dam on the Nile at Aswan. This location was in what is called Upper Egypt and not too far from the current border between Egypt and Sudan. The Jewish temple was built on an island in the Nile River, there was a city there at that time as well and a fortress that protected Egypt from invasion via the Nile Valley from out of Ethiopia or other parts of Africa.

While these Jews seemed to be much concerned about the temple and worship of the God of Israel, they did not maintain the purity of worship as directed under the Mosaic Covenant. While through letters and documents that have been found, translated and preserved we know that they observed the Passover, Feast of Unleavened Bread and had a priesthood and sacrifices they also worshiped others gods such as Ishumbethel, Herembethel, and Anathbethel who was thought to be the sister of Baal. They practiced a mixture of worship of God with the addition of whatever other gods seem to suit their fancy. This has led some scholars to contend that these Israelites were from the Northern Kingdom rather than Judah. That they could have been a mixture of Jews from Judah and Israelites is further supported by the existence of ancient documents. Specifically these are letters, one written in 407 B.C. to the Bogoas, the Persian governor of Judea, and another written to Sanballat, whom we recognize as the ruler of Samaria. The temple at Elephantine had been damaged by an uprising in the city and the letters requested funds from these two rulers to help in its repair.

The mixture of pagan and Mosaic worship that has been documented at Elephantine is much like men today who accept those parts of God's revelation that they like and substitute their own ideas for the rest.

The Synagogue's Origin:

As we had noted early in the prior lesson one of the most significant practices to come out of the exile of the Jews to Babylon was the development of the synagogue. While God had commanded his worship to be carried out either at the tabernacle or in later times the temple, people worshiped at other times and other places. Frequently this worship was to the local god rather than Jehovah God. So for the Jews in captivity, local worship was not something totally alien to them.

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They had been told to prepare for a long absence from the “mountain of Zion”, Jerusalem, the location of the house of God. They were commanded through the prophet of God to make these preparations for that long exile:

Jeremiah 29:5-7 “BUILD YE HOUSES, AND DWELL *in them*; AND PLANT GARDENS, AND EAT THE FRUIT OF THEM; ⁶TAKE YE WIVES, AND BEGET SONS AND DAUGHTERS; AND TAKE WIVES FOR YOUR SONS, AND GIVE YOUR DAUGHTERS TO HUSBANDS, THAT THEY MAY BEAR SONS AND DAUGHTERS; THAT YE MAY BE INCREASED THERE, AND NOT DIMINISHED. ⁷AND SEEK THE PEACE OF THE CITY WHITHER I HAVE CAUSED YOU TO BE CARRIED AWAY CAPTIVES, AND PRAY UNTO THE **LORD** FOR IT: FOR IN THE PEACE THEREOF SHALL YE HAVE PEACE.”

Since the temple had been destroyed, the people moved to a foreign land, the sacrifices and other parts of Mosaic worship ceased. But prayer and the study of the sacred scriptures were not limited by geographic boundaries. We find in the writings of Ezekiel that they gathered in his home and the Word of God came to him.

Ezekiel 8:1 “AND IT CAME TO PASS IN THE SIXTH YEAR, IN THE SIXTH *month*, IN THE FIFTH *day* OF THE MONTH, *as* I SAT IN MINE HOUSE, AND THE ELDERS OF JUDAH SAT BEFORE ME, THAT THE HAND OF THE **LORD GOD** FELL THERE UPON ME.”

Ezekiel 20:1-3 “AND IT CAME TO PASS IN THE SEVENTH YEAR, IN THE FIFTH *month*, THE TENTH *day* OF THE MONTH, *that* CERTAIN OF THE ELDERS OF ISRAEL CAME TO ENQUIRE OF THE **LORD**, AND SAT BEFORE ME. ²THEN CAME THE WORD OF THE **LORD** UNTO ME, SAYING, ³SON OF MAN, SPEAK UNTO THE ELDERS OF ISRAEL, AND SAY UNTO THEM, THUS SAITH THE **LORD GOD**; ARE YE COME TO ENQUIRE OF ME? **As** I LIVE, SAITH THE **LORD GOD**, I WILL NOT BE ENQUIRED OF BY YOU.”

It is said that these gatherings become more common, more frequent and ultimately became the weekly synagogue services consisting of prayer and study of the scriptures. By the providence of God the basic pattern for Christian worship that was to come was established and the location, a local house of worship, also came into existence. Those Jews who were further disbursed and those who did not return to Judea now had a place to worship God and maintain their faith. Even when the Jews were returned to Jerusalem and the temple rebuilt for the sacrifices, feasts, and the center of the annual observances of the Mosaic Law they still worshipped weekly in their synagogues. A further need for the existence of the synagogue was that the scriptures were in Hebrew and the common language of the returning exiles was Aramaic.

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The word “synagogue” is Greek in origin, meaning a gathering place of people, or a congregation. In other words, it has the same meaning as our word church today. In addition and in the same way it is not only used to designate the congregation but the structure where the congregation assembles as well. The Hebrew word for this gathering is “keneseth”, the same word used as the name of the parliament of the modern country of Israel. In Hebrew the building is distinguished from the congregation and may be referred to as “beth hakkeneseth” or “the house of assembly.”

The development of the synagogue also generated the structure of the Jewish civil government that existed during the time of Christ. The rulers of the synagogue also served the functions we recognize as mayor and town council. The requirement for the establishment of a synagogue was a quorum of the heads of ten families. In the smaller towns and villages the governing body consisted of seven elders. In the larger towns and cities a body of twenty-three elders was formed, called the Sanhedrin, a word very familiar to us, and was the ruling body of the synagogue community in that location. From this group one was designated a “chief ruler”. The sanhedrin also served as a court. They had the authority to prescribe punishment scourging, excommunication and even death. But as we know under Roman rule they could not carry out a death sentence but had to leave that task to their Roman overseers. Scourging sentences were carried out in the synagogue building and the Apostle Paul describes them this way:

II Corinthians 11:24 “OF THE JEWS FIVE TIMES RECEIVED I FORTY STRIPES SAVE ONE.”

Excommunication, or Greek anathema (Galatians 1:8-9, ASV), was considered a more serious sentence and in its earliest form meant absolute and final exile from the Jewish community. In later times another form of excommunication was created that was temporary in nature when transgressions were not considered serious enough for permanent exile. This form of excommunication was very similar to and the logical shadow of the withdrawal of fellowship commanded under God’s New Covenant with mankind. Each community large enough had it’s sanhedrin with the Great Sandhedrin in Jerusalem becoming a body similar to our federal government. Its authority reached beyond Jerusalem as we see in:

Acts 9:2 “AND DESIRED OF HIM LETTERS TO DAMASCUS TO THE SYNAGOGUES, THAT IF HE FOUND ANY OF THIS WAY, WHETHER THEY WERE MEN OR WOMEN, HE MIGHT BRING THEM BOUND UNTO JERUSALEM.”

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The Synagogue Worship:

Charles Pfeiffer in his book "Between the Testaments" tells us that "the worship services of the synagogue enjoyed great freedom. Any competent Israelite could officiate. The liberty which was accorded the Apostle Paul illustrates that fact."

Acts 17:1-3 "NOW WHEN THEY HAD PASSED THROUGH AMPHIPOLIS AND APOLLONIA, THEY CAME TO THESSALONICA, WHERE WAS A SYNAGOGUE OF THE JEWS: ²AND PAUL, AS HIS MANNER WAS, WENT IN UNTO THEM, AND THREE SABBATH DAYS REASONED WITH THEM OUT OF THE SCRIPTURES, OPENING AND ALLEGING, THAT CHRIST MUST NEEDS HAVE SUFFERED, AND RISEN AGAIN FROM THE DEAD; AND THAT THIS JESUS, WHOM I PREACH UNTO YOU, IS CHRIST."

Synagogue worship was doubtless very simple in its early history and consisted of prayer and the reading and explanation of a portion of scripture. By the time of the third century A.D. it had developed into five principle parts: the Shema, prayer, the reading of the Law, the reading of the prophets with the benediction and the translation and explanation of the Scripture lesson. The word Shema in Hebrew means "hear" and consisted of the reading of **Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21** and **Numbers 15:37-41**. The answer that Jesus gave in response to the question "WHICH COMMANDMENT IS THE FIRST OF ALL?" is a quotation the first verse of the Shema:

Mark 12:29 "AND JESUS ANSWERED HIM, THE FIRST OF ALL THE COMMANDMENTS *is*, HEAR, O ISRAEL; THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD:"

The word benediction is from the Latin and means the giving of a blessing or to speak well of something or someone. In the case of the Jewish it most likely took the form of encouraging their hearers to listen and heed the Word of God.

The reading of a lesson from the Law was a major part of the synagogue worship. Jewish tradition is that "Moses instituted the reading of the Law on the sabbaths, feast days, new moons and half feast days; and Ezra appointed the reading of the Law for Mondays and Thursdays and the sabbath afternoons". This information comes from the Targum, which were paraphrases of the Hebrew Old Testament in the Aramaic language. This part of the worship was open to all Israelites, even minors. During the Sabbath worship at least seven readers were chosen; priests first, then Levites and then regular members of the congregation. After the reading of each verse in Hebrew an Aramaic translation was given by an interpreter. In Palestine they were not allowed to use written translations and never were they allowed to expand upon, or explain, the reading given.

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As the synagogue worship developed, the reading of the Prophets also became a part of the service. This reading was usually chosen for the purpose of illustrating or explaining the portion that had been read from the Law. We have an example of this activity in the time and preaching of Jesus:

Luke 4:16 “AND HE CAME TO NAZARETH, WHERE HE HAD BEEN BROUGHT UP: AND, AS HIS CUSTOM WAS, HE WENT INTO THE SYNAGOGUE ON THE SABBATH DAY, AND STOOD UP FOR TO READ.”

In the earliest development of the synagogue a sermon was not part of the worship but seems to have developed as an exposition of the reading from the Prophets. Anyone that was able could be asked to preach, such as Paul when he was at Antioch of Pisidia:

Acts 13:14-16 “BUT WHEN THEY DEPARTED FROM PERGA, THEY CAME TO ANTIOCH IN PISIDIA, AND WENT INTO THE SYNAGOGUE ON THE SABBATH DAY, AND SAT DOWN. ¹⁵AND AFTER THE READING OF THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS THE RULERS OF THE SYNAGOGUE SENT UNTO THEM, SAYING, **Ye MEN and** BRETHREN, IF YE HAVE ANY WORD OF EXHORTATION FOR THE PEOPLE, SAY ON. ¹⁶THEN PAUL STOOD UP, AND BECKONING WITH **his** HAND SAID, MEN OF ISRAEL, AND YE THAT FEAR GOD, GIVE AUDIENCE.”

Contrary to the practice in the churches of today the preacher spoke from a sitting position:

Luke 4:20-21 “AND HE CLOSED THE BOOK, AND HE GAVE *it* AGAIN TO THE MINISTER, AND SAT DOWN. AND THE EYES OF ALL THEM THAT WERE IN THE SYNAGOGUE WERE FASTENED ON HIM. ²¹AND HE BEGAN TO SAY UNTO THEM, THIS DAY IS THIS SCRIPTURE FULFILLED IN YOUR EARS.”

At the close of the service a benediction was given by a priest or Levite if one was present. If none were present the service was closed with a prayer, just as we do today according to the New Testament pattern.

Pfieffer says “Without the development of the synagogue, neither Judaism nor Christianity could exist as we know them today.” This is another example of what David called God’s “WONDEROUS WORKS” in **Psalms 26**.

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The Greek Empire:

From the time of Xerxes, husband of Biblical Esther, the power of the Greek colonies was increasing and created havoc with the Persian desire to conquer them. And while Persia did indeed conquer almost all of Asia Minor, today's country of Turkey, they were never successful in crossing the Aegean Sea and gaining a foothold on the Greek mainland. At the same time the independent city states of Greece were never able to form a united government either. When this was accomplished it wasn't even a Greek that did so; but Philip of Macedon; a Macedonian, actually a European who brought it about through the Hellenic League. This was a confederation of the Greek city states with the exception of Sparta.

But Philip did not live to complete his plans. He was murdered in 336 B.C. and his rule fell to his son, Alexander. Alexander was a Macedonian by birth but a great admirer of the Greek culture, a student of Aristotle and adopted the Greek philosophy, values and way of life.

His first steps were to cross the Dardanelles, which is the very narrow strait between Europe and Asia Minor. Today both sides of this strait are in the country of Turkey. There he conquered the city of Troy and prepared to move eastward toward the northern provinces of Persia. Darius III didn't take Alexander seriously and rather than leading his armies himself, sent an army of Greek mercenaries, Persian cavalry and local troops to arrest Alexander. Alexander defeated this army and executed all of the Greek mercenaries as traitors to Greece.

Alexander proceeded take all of the cities that once were Greek back from Persia and did not encounter any real opposition until he reached the Cilician Gates, known today as Gulek Pass, located about 50 miles north of the Apostle Paul's home city of Tarsus. There he dealt Persia a decisive defeat and proceeded to conquer all of the land down to Syria where its capital, Damascus was surprised and conquered. The family of Darius III and a great amount of spoils were captured. Darius retreated toward Babylon but Alexander chose not to follow.

To keep others, probably those of Egypt and anyone they could claim as allies, from coming up the Mediterrean coast after him he turned south and occupied the cities of Phoenicia and attacked Tyre. We remember from our study of Amos that even though it was an island bastion, God had caused the prophets to speak of the time that Tyrus or Tyre would fall. A more detailed account is found in Ezekiel:

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Ezekiel 26:4-5 “AND THEY SHALL DESTROY THE WALLS OF TYRUS, AND BREAK DOWN HER TOWERS: I WILL ALSO SCRAPE HER DUST FROM HER, AND MAKE HER LIKE THE TOP OF A ROCK. ⁵IT SHALL BE ***a place for*** THE SPREADING OF NETS IN THE MIDST OF THE SEA: FOR I HAVE SPOKEN ***it***, SAITH THE LORD GOD: AND IT SHALL BECOME A SPOIL TO THE NATIONS.”

And it did fall. It took Alexander seven months to build a causeway to be able to reach the city walls with his siege engines and battering rams but in the end the island was conquered. The dominance of Mediterranean sea lanes by the Phoenician peoples basically ended because their power base was destroyed.

From there Alexander conquered Gaza with a two month siege and moved on to Egypt. The Egyptians hated the Persians and welcomed Alexander's Greeks with open arms. He was even recognized as a legitimate Pharaoh, and crowned as such in the temple at Karnak. Alexander basically left the civil government of Egypt alone but placed their army under his Macedonians. He built a new city called Alexandria that literally replaced Tyre as the center of commerce for the eastern Mediterranean. Jewish colonists were encouraged to settle there and this will have a very important influence on the subsequent history of both Judaism and the growth of the church of the Bible.

In 331 B.C. Alexander moved back north again through Palestine and Syria and encountered Darius III and his armies at Gaugamela, a location thought to be near modern day Mosul in Iraq and trounced them. Darius escaped but Alexander went on to occupy the cities of Babylon, Susa, Persepolis and Ecbatana.

Not satisfied with his conquests to this point Alexander continued around the base or south end of the Caspian Sea and captured Bactria, Sogdiana (modern Turkestan) and even the Punjab region of India.

Tragedy dogged the return of Alexander to his western lands. The Greeks became very unhappy with him because he adopted the ways and morals of an oriental despot even to the extent of executing his own nephew, who was a historian named Callisthenes. They mutinied but were put down. Alexander started on a sea voyage around the Arabian peninsula, back toward Egypt, but died of a fever on the way. Even though his Bactrian wife gave birth after he died he left no heirs capable of assuming his rule and the Greek Empire came to an end.