

What is a Samaritan?

A Samaritan in the Bible was a person from Samaria, a region north of Jerusalem. In Jesus' day, the Jewish people of Galilee and Judea shunned the Samaritans, viewing them as a mixed race who practiced an impure, half-pagan religion.

Samaritans, as a people distinct from the Jews, are first mentioned in the Bible during the time of Nehemiah and the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity (Ezra 4:17; Nehemiah 2:10). Both Ezra 4 and a fifth-century BC Aramaic set of documents called the Elephantine Papyri point to a schism between the Jews and Samaritans during this Persian period.

The Samaritans saw themselves as the keepers of the Torah and the true descendants of Israel, from the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. They had their own unique copy of the Pentateuch, the first five books of Moses, and believed they alone preserved the original Mosaic religion. Samaritans also had a unique religious system and established their primary worship site on Mount Gerizim. They considered the Jerusalem temple and the Levitical priesthood illegitimate.

The historian Josephus and Jewish tradition trace the origin of the Samaritans to the captivity of the northern kingdom under Assyria in 721 BC. Jews of the northern kingdom intermarried with Assyrians after the captivity and produced the half-Jewish, half-Gentile Samaritan race. When the Jews accused Jesus of being a "Samaritan" in John 8:48, they were rudely suggesting that He was a half-breed, born of an unfaithful mother.

In New Testament times, the Jews despised Samaritans and would have nothing to do with

them. The Samaritans were still living primarily around Mount Gerizim (John 4:1-42), but also kept to their own villages (Matthew 10:5; Luke 9:52). Scripture mentions encounters with Samaritans in towns bordering Samaria (Luke 17:11-19) and on roads between Jerusalem and Jericho (Luke 10:29-37).

Jesus met with difficulty when ministering to people in Samaritan villages (Luke 9:52-53) and at one point told His disciples not to enter them (Matthew 10:5-6). Nonetheless, Christ shared the good news with Samaritans, ministering to a Samaritan woman (John 4:4-26) and healing a Samaritan leper (Luke 17:11-19).

The most recognized Samaritan in the Bible is the one in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). A Jewish legal expert had put Jesus to the test, asking Him to explain the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself"; specifically, he asked Jesus to define the word neighbor.

That's when Jesus told His parable of a man in need, portraying the Samaritan as the hero in the story. In the lawyer's eyes, the Samaritan was the least likely candidate to act lovingly and compassionately to his neighbor. As intended, the story shocked Christ's audience of prejudiced Jews. The Lord showed that authentic love must transcend all human boundaries of race, religion, nationality, economic class, and educational status.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus told His disciples that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, they would be His witnesses in Samaria. In Acts 8 the prophecy was fulfilled, and Samaria became an early mission field for the spreading first-century church: "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria

and proclaimed the Messiah there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city" (Acts 8:4-8).

Several hundred Samaritans survive to this day in Israel and continue to practice their sect of Judaism. The faith concentrates on five affirmations: there is one God, Yahweh; His chief mediator is Moses; the Torah is the vehicle of mediation; the central worship site is Mount Gerizim; and the Messiah will initiate a future Day of Vengeance and Recompense.

Samaritans observe several holy days including Passover; the Feasts of Unleavened Bread, Yom Kippur, and Tabernacles; and the "80 days of solemn assembly." They also celebrate regular Sabbath services. Their most solemn annual festival, Passover, is held on Mount Gerizim with animal sacrifices as prescribed in the book of Deuteronomy.