

Who were the Samaritans?

The Samaritans occupied the country formerly belonging to the tribe of Ephraim and the half-tribe of Manasseh. The capital of the country was Samaria, formerly a large and splendid city. When the ten tribes were carried away into captivity to Assyria, the king of Assyria sent people from Cutha, Ava, Hamath, and Sepharvaim to inhabit Samaria (2 Kings 17:24; Ezra 4:2-11). These foreigners intermarried with the Israelite population that was still in and around Samaria. These "Samaritans" at first worshiped the idols of their own nations, but being troubled with lions, they supposed it was because they had not honored the God of that territory. A Jewish priest was therefore sent to them from Assyria to instruct them in the Jewish religion. They were instructed from the books of Moses, but still retained many of their idolatrous customs. The Samaritans embraced a religion that was a mixture of Judaism and idolatry (2 Kings 17:26-28). Because the Israelite inhabitants of Samaria had intermarried with the foreigners and adopted their idolatrous religion, Samaritans were universally despised by the Jews.

Additional grounds for animosity between the Israelites and Samaritans were the following:

1. The Jews, after their return from Babylon, began rebuilding their temple. While Nehemiah was engaged in building the walls of Jerusalem, the Samaritans vigorously attempted to halt the undertaking (Nehemiah 6:1-14).

2. The Samaritans built a temple for themselves on "Mount Gerizim," which the Samaritans insisted was designated by Moses as the place where the nation should worship. Sanballat, the leader of the Samaritans, established his son-in-law, Manasses, as high priest. The idolatrous religion of the Samaritans thus became perpetuated.

3. Samaria became a place of refuge for all the outlaws of Judea (Joshua 20:6-7; 21:21). The Samaritans willingly received Jewish criminals and refugees from justice. The violators of the Jewish laws, and those who had been excommunicated, found safety for themselves in Samaria, greatly increasing the hatred which existed between the two nations.

4. The Samaritans received only the five books of Moses and rejected the writings of the prophets and all the Jewish traditions.

From these causes arose an irreconcilable difference between them, so that the Jews regarded the Samaritans as the worst of the human race (John 8:48) and had no dealings with them (John 4:9). In spite of the hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans, Jesus broke down the barriers between them, preaching the gospel of peace to the Samaritans (John 4:6-26), and the apostles later followed His example (Acts 8:25).