



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2015.03.02

Gary N. Knoppers, *Jews and Samaritans: The Origins and History of their Early Relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pages 352. ISBN 9780195329544. Hardcover. \$55.00.

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The author of this volume, Gary N. Knoppers, is the O'Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. His intentions, as the title suggests, are to show the origins of the split between Jews and Samaritans, to evaluate its extent, and to examine whether or not it prohibited continued relations between them.

The first chapter, entitled, "Samaritans, Jews, and the Contested Legacy of Classical Israel," is an introduction to the work in which the author outlines the topics to be examined and defines the terms used.

The first part of the chapter is devoted exclusively to the Samaritans, rather than the Jews or the relationship between them. The main source used is 2 Kings 17, where we read the story of the conquest of Samaria by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser V in 722/721 B.C.E. after the previous military campaign of Tiglath-pileser III in 733-732 B.C.E.

The second chapter, "The Fall of the Northern Kingdom and the Ten Lost Tribes," is devoted entirely to this episode. Knoppers compares evidence from the Hebrew Bible, Assyrian sources, archaeology, and epigraphy. He begins by presenting the dominant interpretation, which follows 2 Kings 17 closely. According to this approach, "The effect of Assyrian onslaughts was to refashion the demographic, ethnic, and religious landscape of Israel in the course of just a few generations" (25). In effect, during the eighth century a "wholesale cultural metamorphosis" happened to the Samaritan people (26). But how deep was this change historically? Knoppers discusses competing theories which postulate that the Assyrian invasion caused fewer consequences in northern Israel than previously thought. These alternative approaches claim that the exiles were a small percentage of the population, the immigrants were located in one location, or the deportations were limited to Israel's elite. The author tries to mediate between these two positions, and his results are very interesting. He concludes that "there is no compelling evidence that the Assyrians systematically imposed their own culture or religious practices upon subject peoples" (32). Although Knoppers admits that in the areas of Galilee and

the northern Transjordan we find indications of sites razed or destroyed by the Assyrian army, he argues that the situation is quite different in other areas of northern Israel. There we find restored settlements and continuity in material culture, as is evident from the study of buildings and of ceramic remains. The Assyrian sources confirm that there was little devastation.

The third chapter, "God and Country," is the most interesting, since it discusses the split between the Samaritan religion and Judaism. Knoppers returns to 2 King 17: "On the level of ethnicity the text suggests total discontinuity, but on the level of religious practice the text asserts substantial continuity." (48) How can we explain this? The author argues that the complexity of Samaritan religion is caused by "the survival of native culture in modified form within this region" (49). Here, Knoppers seems to lean toward a strong contribution of foreign populations, settled in Samaria by the Assyrians, on the evolution of Samaritan religion: "The verbal parallels between Jeroboam's system of worship and the immigrants' system of worship are too many and too close to be accidental" (56). But in the previous chapter Knoppers seemed to downplay the importance of these transformations.

The result of this religious fusion is not, according to Knoppers, an out-and-out syncretism, but "the old cult in a new form" (56). He draws attention to the land and the link between the land and God. But in other passages he emphasizes the importance of syncretism, writing, "The implication is that the preexilic northern priests practiced a syncretistic religion, one that (from a Deuteronomistic perspective) combined Yahwistic practices with idolatrous and polytheistic practices. . . . The southern cultus perpetuates the ancient institutions of sacrifice, priesthood, ark, and festival (1 Kings 8), while the northern cultus creates an idolatrous and syncretistic new alternative" (54).

I believe that, with this position, Knoppers runs the risk of losing the historical framework and allowing theological considerations to intrude on the actual religion of ancient Israel. In fact, to understand the process of transformation that has taken place in the Samaritan religion, one cannot take biblical Judaism as a comparative reference. The author of 2 Kings should not be read as an exponent of the authentic and proper expression of the Hebrew religion, but of a possible and historically conditioned evolution of the Hebrew religion. If it is true that the Samaritan religion has been influenced by alien elements in the postexilic period, the same is also true of Judaism and its evolution, and the Hebrew Bible itself marks the stages of this evolution. A comparative approach must be aware of this evolution. Otherwise, one runs the risk of passively conforming to the theological positions of 2 Kings.

Chapter 4 is entitled, "The Fall of the Northern Kingdom as a New Beginning in Northern Israelite-Southern Israelite Relations." Here, Knoppers, in the wake of other scholars, tries to overcome the classical theory according to which the author of Chronicles is anti-Samaritan. He notes that "ethnographers speak of multiple and sometimes overlapping indices of ethnic identity, such as ties to an ancestral homeland, a common language, collective genealogy, a single religion, and shared history" (73). The Chronicler does not consider Samaritans to be pagan people or a mongrel race. Rather, Jacob / Israel is the common father of both peoples. If they have a common father and share the same God, the main difference is the shrine: the author of Chronicles focuses on the cult in Jerusalem, which the Samaritans have not accepted.

The fifth chapter, “A Distinction without Difference?” deals with Samaria during the Iron IIC or Iron III, Persian and Hellenistic periods. This entire era, from the end of the eighth century to the end of the fourth, is also characterized by continuity. Only in the Hellenistic period, after the revolt against Alexander, can we note a decline and an ethnic transformation, when the native population was replaced by colonists from Macedonia. But in the earlier Persian era, according to Knoppers, the archaeological evidence shows continuity throughout. Knoppers analyzes the language and the personal names used in the Samaritan papyri, coins, and inscriptions. In addition, he examines the latest archaeological discoveries from Mt. Gerizim, arguing that the erection of the temple occurred earlier in time than scholars (and Josephus) had previously thought.¹

From this thorough analysis Knoppers draws two conclusions: 1) the classic idea of scholars that a schism occurred between Samaria and Judah in this time is not correct; 2) the Samaritan religion (Knoppers uses the term “Yahwism,” I think to make clear the common background with Judaism) is a development from the religion of Israel.² Taken together, these ideas overturn the notion that a Samaritan schism initiated a move towards paganism and away from the authentic religion of Israel. In fact the author minimizes the religious difference between Samaria and Judah, emphasizing instead the gap in each area between the people and the elites. This does not mean, however, total identity between the two regions. Knoppers writes, “Such evidence points to a significant cultural overlap between the cultures of Samaria and Yehud in the Achaemenid era. But in examining the material cultures of the two adjacent provinces, one may also recognize distinctive features exhibited by each geopolitical entity. My argument is not that the material cultures of the two provinces were completely identical” (117).

It is interesting that, according to Knoppers, the continuities are not so much diachronic as synchronic. He presents a horizontal continuity between Samaria and Judah, rather than one running from past to present. So we have to think that, for him, the mutual influences are more important than the common roots. I will return to this idea below.

Chapter 6, “Ethnicity, Communal Identity, and Imperial Authority,” deals with the problem of Ezra-Nehemiah, in which the hostility between Samaria and Judah emerges. If in Chronicles, Israel is the twelve tribes, in Ezra-Nehemiah Israel is the people who returned from captivity in Babylonia. According to Knoppers, this does not involve a schism, because there are relations between the leaders of each group. But the position of Ezra-Nehemiah’s author is quite anti-Samaritan. Interestingly, Knoppers points out that there is an internal opposition to Nehemiah, but it is not clear what the relationship is between the enemies without and the enemies within. In particular, it would be interesting to see if there was a common social base between the two groups. (Concerning the internal enemies, Knoppers speaks broadly of people belonging to the elite of Jerusalem.) He also uses a less-than-convincing argument when he says that “the very animosity that characterizes the relationship between the Judean governor and his Samaritan

¹ Was the Yahwistic temple built on Mt. Gerizim’s summit intentionally antagonistic to that of Jerusalem? It is interesting that an Aramaic inscription refers to a “house of sacrifice,” using the same appellation as 2 Chron 7:12 (128). Even more interesting is the finding of thousands of burnt bones, a sure sign that sacrificial rites occurred in the temple (124–25).

² According to Knoppers, “the area of Samaria became more Yahwistic, not less so, in the Persian period than it had been in the Iron Age, the time of the Israelite monarchy” (117).

counterpart presupposes a history of closer relations between the two societies in the past” (141). In other words: there is hatred because there is love! But if one cannot speak of a real schism, on what level can one speak of the divisions between Samaria and Judah which clearly do exist? Are they theological? Political? Or is it only a battle for power?

The last pages of the chapter are very interesting, because they introduce the problem of double identity: how are the people of Judah related to the people of Israel? If in Chronicles we find a larger identity, in which Israel comprehends all Jacob’s children, in Ezra-Nehemiah we find a smaller conception of identity. But, according to Knoppers, this debate on identities also occurs within Judea and influences the development of Judaism itself.

Chapter 7 (“The Torah and ‘the Place[s] for Yhwh’s Name’ ”) touches the heart of the issue: the Temple and the Torah. Knoppers speaks of the rise of the Pentateuch, trying to show if it is the result of a collaboration between Samaritans and Jews. He examines all the various textual witnesses to the Torah: the Masoretic Text, the Samaritan Torah, the Septuagint, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. How all these texts relate to each other is very interesting: we can find correspondences between the Masoretic Text and the Samaritan Torah which do not align with the Septuagint.³ In some cases, the Samaritan Torah and the Dead Sea Scrolls line up together. In sum,

The SP [Samaritan Pentateuch] differs from the Jewish Pentateuch in the addition of a series of small but critical sectarian changes. These sectarian additions were introduced fairly late in the 2nd century or 1st century BCE, probably during Maccabean times, when the relations between the Samaritans and Judeans took a decidedly negative turn. (188)

This is the focal point of the issue: the Pentateuch is a common text shared by Samaritans and Jews, developed, according to Knoppers’s hypothesis, by the Aaronide priesthood. It was able to do so due to the fact that it controlled both the Jerusalem and Mt. Gerizim temples. This question brings us back to the main issue in the rupture between Samaritans and Judeans: the Temple. Both groups legitimated their own temple using the same Pentateuch, because it contains on the one hand shared but ambiguous passages, allowing each group to maintain an interpretation favorable to itself and in opposition to its competitors, as well as passages unique to each tradition on the other hand.

The eighth chapter provides a conclusion to the work. In it, Knoppers wonders whether there is “An Absolute Breach” between Jews and Samaritans. To examine this topic, he takes up various issues. He is forced to admit that in the late Hellenistic and Roman periods, “relations between the two groups soured considerably” (218). There were some incidents of violence, the destruction of the temple on Mt. Gerizim being the most serious (this was been destroyed in 128 B.C.E. by John Hyrcanus). The rise of the Samaritan Torah is a further sign of the divide.

³ The *communis opinio* that the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Septuagint are similar is, according to Knoppers, a mistake (179).

But the picture is more complex than it seems. Knoppers points out that relations between members of each group did not cease in this period. Especially among the common people, opportunities to meet and maintain ties occurred.

Knoppers notices that in the New Testament as in other Jewish writings, the position concerning the Samaritans is ambivalent. Jesus knows the Jewish hostility towards them, affirms that “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22), and does not seem to consider Samaritans as belonging to Israel. But he does enter into Samaritan towns and eat with the people (John 4:8, 43). The section comparing Jewish and Samaritan synagogues is especially interesting and deserves further study.

In Roman times, both Samaritans and Jews met the same fate, though “this time of adversity, upheaval, and humiliation did not bring the two groups closer together against a common enemy” (226). The deterioration of Samaritan-Jewish relations during this time goes very deep. But, according to Knoppers, “this decline did not amount to a total rupture. Bad relations between groups are still relations” (238).

This is indeed the thesis of the entire volume: the breach between Jews and Samaritans is not as deep as previously thought. This is a very interesting position, which Knoppers defends with great skill. To do so, he marshals a large number of sources and an impressive bibliography. But the argument lacks clarification about why the two groups are so similar. Does Knoppers believe that the Samaritans and Jews had a common starting point from which they took different paths, or that they were two distinct peoples with different origins? His answer is not clear. It is likely that the Jewish people had been formed through a federative process, a kind of synoecism of the family-based tribes. But can one posit that a common ethnic (and cultural) origin unites Jews and Samaritans? And did the basic cultural characteristics common to the Hebrew people develop before or after the separation of ancient Israel into two kingdoms?

A related point lacking clarity is the development of a common Pentateuch. Even granting the eighth century *political* rupture, a *religious and cultural* break may never have occurred, or may have occurred much later. Knoppers’s argument concerning the origin of the Pentateuch is ambiguous, especially concerning whether it emerged prior to the split as a common text or developed in parallel fashion among the two groups.

The book is also very useful for understanding the relations between Christianity and Judaism. The Samaritan-Jewish relationship throws light on Christian anti-Judaism, on the relations between nascent Christianity and Samaritanism, and even on the study of the Qumran literature.

A new picture of the history of the Hebrew people comes out of this book, opening the way to new opportunities for researching the periods both preceding and following the one which has been treated.