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# The Ancient Samaritans and Greek Culture

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**Abstract:** After the conquest of the Near East by Alexander the Great in 332 BCE, the Samaritans, like all other peoples in the region, fell under the influence of Greek culture. In a gradual process of Hellenization, the Samaritans developed their own variant of Hellenism. The extant fragments of Samaritan literature in Greek, as well as quite a number of Greco-Samaritan inscriptions (both in Palestine and the diaspora) testify to the existence of a variegated Samaritan Hellenism.

**Keywords:** Hellenism; Greco-Samaritan literature; inscriptions (Greek); Greek philosophy; Faustinus; Marinus; Theodotus; Pseudo-Eupolemus

When Alexander the Great conquered the Middle East, including ancient Palestine, in 332 BCE, that conquest brought about profound changes in the entire region. From then onwards, all countries in that area (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Palestine) underwent a gradual process of Hellenization (as the process of being influenced by Greek culture is commonly called; see Gruen 2010) which lasted and left its traces for many centuries to come. For instance, in Palestine—as elsewhere—Greek cities were founded (such as Scythopolis/Beth She'an); there and at other places in Palestine, Greek institutions, such as rhetorical and philosophical schools, theatres, and hippodromes came into being, and Jews were more and more exposed to the various accomplishments of ancient Greek culture, including architecture. The more educated among them learned how to speak Greek, and some of them even started to write books in that language. All this applied a fortiori to the Jews in the large diaspora, especially in the West. The result was that a rich and variegated Judaeo-Greek culture came into being and lasted for at least a thousand years. The Samaritans did not remain immune to these developments. They, too, developed their own brand of 'Samaritan Hellenism,' as we shall presently see.

Admittedly, and unfortunately, we know disappointingly little about this Samaritan Hellenism because most of the evidence has not been preserved. Some passages in *2 Maccabees* (6.2) and Josephus' *Antiquitates Judaicae* (12.257–264) would seem to indicate that Samaritans, like the radical Judaean Hellenizers in Jerusalem, requested the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 167 BCE to Hellenize their Israelite cult by changing their sanctuary for the Lord on Mt. Garizim into a temple of Zeus Olympios or Xenios. However, the translation of the passage in *2 Macc*. is highly uncertain,[1] and Josephus' passage may well imply that it was only a small minority of the Samaritans (or even a group of non-Samaritan Sidonian colonists in Samaria!) that made this request.[2] The latter point has to do with the fact that it is unwarranted to translate the Greek designations *Samaritês* and *Samareus* (or Latin *Samaritanus*) always to 'Samaritans,' a point that we will have to return to below. Be that as it may, whether or not it was Samaritans who asked for a Hellenization of their cult, we can nonetheless clearly observe that Hellenistic culture had begun to exert its influence on both 'liberal' and 'orthodox' Samaritans—I use this contemporary terminology for the sake of convenience—as it did on the Jews

[1] See (Goldstein 1983, pp. 523–39 (Goldstein); Schwartz 2008, pp. 275–76).
[2] (Egger 1986, pp. 260–83; Pummer 2009).

in Palestine and elsewhere. However scanty the remains of Samaritan Hellenistic culture may be, they clearly demonstrate that Samaritans indeed adopted the Greek language and Greek literary genres to voice their ideas. The extant fragments of this literature, however, show opposite tendencies, both a strict and a more liberal or syncretist approach to Scripture (the Samaritan Pentateuch).

We have fragments of an epic poet called Theodotus (probably from the second century BCE).[3] These fragments reveal what may be seen as a strictly biblical outlook. Theodotus' poem deals with the history of Shechem and is written in Homeric style and language, which in itself is a clear indication of a more than superficial knowledge of Greek culture. In it, the author glorifies the murder of the Shechemites by Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi (Genesis 34). He presents this murder as carried out at God's command, an apologetic motif that is non-biblical but well-known from Jewish haggadic elaborations of this biblical story.[4] The author has Simeon convince his brother Levi that killing the Shechemites is justified by citing an oracle: "For well have I heard a word from God, for he once said that he would give to Abraham's sons ten nations," a promise derived from Gen. 15:18–21 and interpreted as if "give to Abraham's sons" meant "have them killed by Abraham's sons." He also heavily emphasizes the importance of an absolute prohibition of mixed marriages with uncircumcised gentiles. Jacob says to the leader of the Shechemites, concerning the necessity of their being circumcised: "For indeed this very thing is not allowed to Hebrews, to bring home sons-in-law and daughters-in-law from another place, but only one who boasts of being of the same nation ( . . . ) That one himself [God] once, when he led the noble Abraham out of his fatherland, called from heaven the man with all his house to strip off the flesh from the foreskin, and this he [Abraham] accomplished it; and it remains unchanged since God himself uttered it" (fragment 5, quoted in Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 9.22.6–7).

Theodotus' poem has often been regarded as an anti-Samaritan writing.[5] It has been argued that the poem was designed to justify the destruction of the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim by John Hyrcanus about 110 BCE (recent archaeological discoveries seem to have questioned the traditional dating of this event in 129/128 BCE[6]) and his aggression and violent behavior against the Samaritans. That is, however, an improbable interpretation. It is more likely that a poem on the history of Shechem, of all places, called by the author 'a holy city' at that (fr. 1 in Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 9.22.1),[7] from the second century BCE cannot but derive from a Samaritan author. It would seem to be very hard to imagine that a non-Samaritan, Jewish author would sing the praise of a city that was the cultic center of the rival group of the Samaritans, and this is exactly what the author does in the very first fragment of this poem.[8] In addition to that, there is such a heavy emphasis on the fact that the opponents of Jacob's sons are uncircumcised, whereas all male Samaritans *were* circumcised—and every Jew knew that!—that it is utterly improbable that we have here a composition by a Jew directed against Samaritans. Moreover, and even more importantly, the Samaritans of Theodotus' time certainly did not claim to be descendants of the pre-Israelite pagan Shechemites, but of the Israelites (and hence also of the sons of Jacob) left in the land at the time of the deportation of the Northern Kingdom (in 722 BCE) and the Assyrian exile. The contents of the poem are thus from beginning to end most easily explicable by the assumption that the author was a Samaritan. Therefore, the poem should most probably be read as a piece of Samaritan propaganda literature in which the author presents the remote ancestors of the Samaritans as zealous, law-abiding, anti-pagan Israelites.[9]

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3 Available in (Holladay 1989, pp. 51–204). A more recent edition and study is (Kuhn 2012).
4 References in (Van der Horst 1988), reprinted in (Van der Horst 1990a, pp. 187–219), esp. pp. 194–96.
5 See, e.g., (Collins 1980).
6 See (Pummer 1992, p. 59).
7 Although I am aware of the possibility that 'holy city' is here no more than a Homeric 'Floskel' (cf. Homer, *Od*. 1.2), it is much more probable that for our author it has a fully religious sense.
8 (Holladay 1989, pp. 106–9) (=Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 9.22.1). Even though Alexander Polyhistor (*ap.* Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 9.22.1) says the quotes are from Theodotus' work *On the Jews*, this need not be taken as the title of the work (Holladay, *ibid*. 55–56). Whatever the exact title may have been, what matters is that the poem displays an unusually great interest in Shechem, the "capital" of the Samaritans, and that in a very positive vein.
9 See (Freudenthal 1875, pp. 82–103); also (Van der Horst 1988).

On the more syncretistic side, we have a fragment of an anonymous Samaritan historian who is commonly called Pseudo-Eupolemus (because the fragment has been wrongly ascribed in the process of transmission to the Jewish historian Eupolemus). It probably dates to the second century BCE.[10] (Perhaps we even have two fragments, but the small second fragment may very well derive from another author; it has been handed down as an *adespoton*.)[11] In the larger first fragment, the author displays a marked religious openness in the way he incorporates Greek and Babylonian mythological figures into the biblical genealogy of Genesis 10. For instance, the Greek god Kronos is identified with the Babylonian deity Bel, and receives a place in this genealogy as the father of Canaan. (In the dubious second fragment Bel is called, on the one hand, the one who escaped the great flood and, on the other, the one who built the tower of Babel, which might even imply the equation of Bel with both Noah and Nimrod, hence perhaps even an equation of Noah with Nimrod (!), who is often called the builder of the tower of Babel in Jewish haggada,[12] *if*, that is, the fragment derives from a Jewish author, or a Samaritan author for that matter, which remains uncertain.) It is noteworthy that by means of this device, the author simply turns these pagan deities into human beings, which is a kind of demythologization so strongly reminiscent of the theories of the Hellenistic author Euhemerus of Messene that the conclusion can hardly be avoided that this way of dealing with these gods has been inspired by knowledge of Euhemeristic ideas. Euhemerus of Messene, who lived in the early third century BCE, earned his fame by his anthropological theory of the gods, as put forward in his *Hiera Anagraphê*, 'Sacred Scripture,' to the effect that the gods of popular worship had originally been great kings and generals to whom mankind had shown their gratitude for their amazing and beneficial deeds by worshipping them as gods; this theory enjoyed some popularity not only in critical Greek and Roman circles but also among some Jewish and Christian authors in antiquity.[13] In a demythologizing, Euhemeristic way, the author of this passage claims that the chief deity of the Babylonian and Greek pantheons was originally nothing but a great human being. It should be added, however, that there is an important point of difference between the way this author uses Euhemeristic ideas and the way other Jewish (and Christian) authors use them: whereas the latter mostly use this approach as a means of criticizing, or even ridiculing, pagan religious traditions, our Samaritan author uses it to incorporate elements from these pagan traditions into his own biblical worldview.

We further read in the same fragment that, according to Pseudo-Eupolemus, the biblical Enoch is identical to the Greek Atlas. Enoch taught Abraham astrology, says this author, Enoch being the inventor of this science as Atlas was among the Greeks, and the patriarch passed on this sacred knowledge to the Phoenicians and Egyptians! Confusingly enough, elsewhere in the same fragment, Abraham himself is also said to have been the inventor of astrology. Be that as it may, we see here a markedly 'syncretistic' way of interpreting Scripture, in which the typically Hellenistic motif of the great prestige of the 'first inventor' (*prôtos heuretês*) plays such an important role that all the biblical and post-biblical warnings against astrology could not prevent the author from attributing the discovery of what was regarded as one of the most significant accomplishments of humankind to the great culture-hero Abraham (or to Enoch, by identifying him with Atlas).[14]

Admittedly, so far nothing specifically Samaritan in Pseudo-Eupolemus' work has been mentioned. However, we also find in this fragment the striking tradition that Abraham was received by Melchizedek (most probably) in the temple of the Most High on Mt. Gerizim. To be sure, Genesis 12:7 states that, when Abraham entered the land of Canaan, he came to "a place near Shechem," and Genesis 14:18

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[10] Edition, translation and commentary now most readily available in (Holladay 1983, pp. 157–88). Doran's arguments to the effect that this fragment derives from the Jewish historian Eupolemus himself carry little conviction; see his discussion in (Doran 1985, 1987).

[11] See (Doran 1987, pp. 246–97), esp. pp. 270–71.

[12] See (Van der Horst 1990c, pp. 220–32).

[13] On Euhemerus see the bibliography in the latest critical edition of the fragments by (Winiarczyk 1991), XVIII–XXXVI, and esp. (Winiarczyk 2002); here he discusses Pseudo-Eupolemus and Theodotus at pp. 177–79.

[14] On Jews and astrology (Charlesworth 1977, 1985, 1987; Leicht 2006).

tells us about a meeting between Abraham and Melchizedek, priest of the Most High in Salem, but in a fascinating haggadic turn, Pseudo-Eupolemus combines the two stories and embellishes them by having Melchizedek receive the patriarch in the temple of the Most High on Mt. Gerizim, presumably also because the Septuagint has Salem located in Samaria (Gen. 33:18). This is obviously meant to legitimize the Samaritan cult on that mountain over against the one in Jerusalem by forging a positive link between the ancestor of the people of Israel and the main site of the Samaritan cult (see the quotations in Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 9, 17, 1–9).[15]

The openness towards pagan culture to which this author testifies, even to the point of claiming the prestigious 'science' of astrology to be the invention of the 'Samaritan patriarch' Abraham (or of his remote ancestor Enoch), demonstrates in a striking manner that this anonymous Samaritan had no fear of Hellenistic culture: "it must simply be assimilated into existing structures."[16] Alternatively, as an editor of the fragments rightly remarked, because the fragments from Pseudo-Eupolemus "reflect an outlook which both knows and values pagan mythological traditions, it may be necessary to modify the common view of Samaritans as a sect immune to outside influences."[17] Tiny though this fragment (or these fragments) may be, it shows (or they show) us the midrashic traditions of a group of Samaritans, who welcomed Greek culture and tried to work out a synthesis between their own biblical traditions and the dominant Hellenistic civilization.

Ps-Eupolemus and Theodotus give us glimpses of the diversity of the haggada and the multiformity of the religion of the Samaritans in the Hellenistic period. Unfortunately, what we can learn from them is not as much as we would have liked to, but it is enough to demonstrate that in the Hellenistic period there were already diverging movements in Samaritanism, and that these differences were partly related to the extent of the influence of Hellenistic culture.

No Samaritan writings in Greek from the post-Hellenistic period have been preserved, but we do have some fragments of what appears to be a Samaritan Bible in Greek, commonly called the *Samareitikon*. These meagre fragments (both on papyrus and stone) suggest that, at least in the diaspora, the Samaritans had to use a Greek translation of their Pentateuch because they, like the Jews, could no longer understand the biblical text in its original language.[18] Recent discoveries of Samaritan inscriptions in Greek in various parts of the Hellenistic and Roman world, in which biblical passages are quoted in Greek, corroborate this impression. That is not to say, however, that the Samaritans made their own Greek translation of the Pentateuch, for it is more probable that they used a revised version of the Septuagint, the Jewish Bible translation into Greek, with several adaptations. In this way, "Greek-speaking Samaritans produced a Greek version of the Pentateuch agreeing with their Hebrew text and with their exegetical traditions" (Joosten 2015, p. 13).

This brings us to the second set of evidence, the non-literary sources, i.e., the Samaritan inscriptions from both ancient Palestine and the diaspora.[19] This evidence is highly relevant to the study of Hellenization among the Samaritans in antiquity. Moreover, this material also affords us insight into the question to what extent there existed a Samaritan diaspora in the Hellenistic and Roman world, and to what extent these communities were exposed to Greek culture. A word of caution, however, is in order here. Even though the awareness that the Greek terms *Samaritês* and *Samareus* and their Latin equivalent *Samaritanus*, do not necessarily always mean 'Samaritan' has been growing in recent decades, it certainly cannot yet be said to have become common knowledge. Too often inscriptions have been claimed, including in the recent past, as evidence of a Hellenistic Samaritan diaspora

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[15] See the commentary by (Holladay 1983, pp. 178–87); but also the comments by (Kippenberg 1971, pp. 74–85, 148–50), and by (Wacholder 1963). The attempt by (Gruen 1998, pp. 147–50), to prove that Pseudo-Eupolemus cannot have been a Samaritan is not convincing.

[16] (Sterling 1992, p. 206).

[17] (Holladay 1983, p. 160).

[18] (Noja 1989, pp. 408–12); but see the reservations expressed by (Tov 1987, pp. 185–86; Pummer 1998).

[19] A concise but good survey of Samaritan synagogue inscriptions is (Pummer 1999, pp. 118–60), here pp. 119–21.

without sufficient justification.[20] It should, therefore, be stated emphatically that strict methodology requires that we take these terms to mean 'Samaritan' *only if* we have other, corroborative indications, apart from that term itself, to the effect that we have to do with a member of the Samaritan religious community, because the words concerned can also denote a 'Samarian,' which is the current term for an inhabitant of Samaria who is not a member of that religious community. This is an important distinction that one should never ignore. Unfortunately, only very rarely is an ancient author or scribe aware of this problem of terminological ambiguity: a notable exception, the only one as far as I know, is the late papyrus with a divorce deed from Egypt of the year 586 CE (*Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* no. 513), where the scribe unambiguously states that the two people concerned were *Samaritai tên thrêskeian*, 'Samaritans by faith.' This is not the place to present a list of unquestionable instances of epigraphic Samaritans, but let us quote some illustrative examples with the question of Hellenization in mind.

In 1980, two Samaritan inscriptions in Greek were discovered on the small but important Greek island of Delos.[21] Both inscriptions, dating respectively from the third to second and from the second to first century BCE, do not speak about Samaritans explicitly, but they do mention "the Israelites on Delos who pay their first offerings to the sanctuary (of) Argarizin." The mention of *Argarizin* leaves little room for doubt.[22] They identify themselves as Israelites probably also in order to distinguish themselves from those called *Ioudaioi*, who had their own synagogue nearby on Delos (a Samaritan synagogue has not been excavated at Delos, unless the synagogue identified as Jewish is in fact a Samaritan one). These Delian Samaritans honor a certain Sarapion of Cnossos (on Crete) and Menippus of Heraclea (which Heraclea is unknown) for their benefactions towards the religious community, possibly the building of a synagogue. One of the interesting features of these inscriptions is that not only are they witnesses of a very early presence of a Greek-speaking community of Samaritans at Delos, but also that they make it very probable that as early as the second century BCE, Samaritans, most probably also Greek-speaking, lived on Crete as well (Sarapion of Cnossos). It must further be noted that these Samaritans had already adopted in this relatively early period the typically Greek custom of honoring benefactors of the community with golden crowns or wreaths and immortalizing this honorific decree by inscribing it upon a stone set up in public, which is also a clear sign of Hellenization in this religious community. "The steles themselves, the form and language of the inscriptions, and the honors paid to benefactors all follow the most proper and common Greek style."[23]

Another important discovery is an inscription from a Samaritan synagogue in Thessalonica from the fourth or fifth century CE.[24] In this inscription of 20 lines, one finds first a *berakhah* in Samaritan Hebrew (*barukh 'elohenu le'olam* = blessed be our God forever), no doubt because it was a liturgical text; then follows, in Greek, the priestly blessing from Numbers 6: 22–27, with a dozen or so small deviations from the Septuagint that probably derive from a Samaritan revision of the Septuagint; then again a *berakhah* in Samaritan Hebrew (*barukh shemo le'olam* = blessed be His Name forever); and finally there is a Greek dedication to Siricius from Neapolis (Nablus), possibly the rhetorician Siricius who was a teacher of rhetoric in Athens in the fourth century.[25] Although it cannot be concluded with absolute certainty from this dedication whether or not this rhetorician was really a Samaritan, it is possible at least. *If* he were, we would have to consider the implications of a Samaritan being an orator who taught rhetoric in Athens for our understanding of the extent of Hellenization among certain segments of the Samaritan community in late antiquity.[26]

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[20] See (Van der Horst 1990b, pp. 136–47; Pummer 2016, pp. 180–87).
[21] (Bruneau 1982). See now ithe re-edition of these inscripotions as *IJO* 1.Ach66–67 in (Noy et al. 2004, pp. 228–33).
[22] But see the cautionary remarks by (Pummer 1987).
[23] (Kraabel 1985, p. 222).
[24] (Lifshitz and Schiby 1968). Re-edition as *IJO* 1.Mac17 in (Noy et al. 2004, pp. 100–5).
[25] On this Siricius see (Von Christ et al. 1924, pp. 947, 1102; Antoni 2001).
[26] On the synagogue inscriptions of Delos and Thessalonica see now also (Pummer 2016, pp. 92–96).

A final epigraphic example of Samaritan Hellenism is a fifth- or sixth-century Greek inscription found in the Circus or Hippodrome of Tyre (Lebanon). It is inscribed on a stone seat and indicates the proprietors of the area of seating: "Place of the Samaritans" (*IJO* 3 Syr11: *topos Samaritôn*). Not only the language is Greek, but also the fact that diaspora Samaritans in the Lebanon apparently attended typically Greek (and Roman) forms of public entertainment is a telling sign of Hellenistic influence.

In this connection, it is worthwhile to observe that the Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea (6th cent.) wrote (in his *Anecdota* 27.26–31)[27] that during the reign of the emperor Justinian (527–565 CE) there was in Constantinople a senator of high repute, Faustinus, who had become Christian in name but in fact remained a Samaritan (a kind of Samaritan *converso* 'avant la date'). This senator was accused before Justinian of hostility towards Christians and condemned to exile, but he was able to bribe Justinian so that the verdict was not carried out. This passage has given rise to the supposition, rightly so I think, that in the early Byzantine period, there must have been more crypto-Samaritans in government service, which implies a thorough acquaintance with things Greek among these Samaritans. Finally, the philosopher Damascius (6th cent.) tells us in his *Philosophical History* that Proclus' successor as head of the Platonic Academy in Athens, Marinus of Neapolis, was originally a Samaritan believer, who, under the influence of Greek philosophy, had become an apostate and adopted paganism (fragment 97 Athanassiadi).[28] This Marinus wrote, among other things, commentaries on Plato's *Philebus* and *Parmenides*, an introduction to Euclides' *Data*, and his famous *Vita Procli*.[29] A stronger and more striking example of the influence of Hellenistic culture on Samaritan intellectuals can hardly be given. Apparently, however, Marinus did not think the two cultures were compatible.

It is not only synagogue inscriptions in the diaspora that make it clear that many Samaritans spoke and read Greek. In Ramat Aviv, an excavation of an ancient Samaritan synagogue yielded three inscriptions: one of them in Samaritan Aramaic, but two of them in Greek, the only complete one reading "Blessing and peace be upon Israel and upon this place, Amen."[30] In another Samaritan synagogue, in Beth She'an-Skythopolis, three of the four inscriptions found there are in Greek, only one in Samaritan Aramaic.[31] In the village of Selebi (Sha'alvim), a fifth-century synagogue was discovered with both a Greek inscription and one in Samaritan Hebrew.[32] The geographical spread of the inscriptions from both the diaspora and the Land of Israel, almost all of them in Greek, indicates that Samaritans lived all over the ancient world. It is far from improbable that the majority of them, just like the Jews, lived in the diaspora, and that only a minority lived in the old Samaritan area. Both in the diaspora and in Palestine, many of them spoke Greek.[33]

All this may well imply that we have to envisage a situation in which the majority of the Samaritans in the Roman Empire possibly understood and spoke Greek, which would make it exactly parallel to the Jewish situation in the same period: an Aramaic/Hebrew-speaking minority in the Land of Israel, and a Greek-speaking majority in the diaspora, not to mention the many Greek speakers in the homeland itself. We have seen parts of the Greek writings of at least two Samaritan authors (and there were certainly more), we have seen quite a number of Greek inscriptions both in and outside the homeland, we have seen Samaritan communities adopting Hellenistic modes of honoring benefactors, we have seen a Samaritan Platonist philosopher and perhaps a teacher of rhetoric, and, finally, also a Samaritan as a high official at the Byzantine court (and there were certainly more of them). This is a fascinating picture, and it is highly regrettable that for the most part the relevant evidence for Samaritan Hellenism is probably lost. However, recent finds make us hope that new discoveries in the future will gradually enlarge our knowledge of Samaritan Hellenism, both inside and outside of the Samaritan homeland.

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27 Text and translation in (Pummer 2002, pp. 296–301).
28 See (Athanassiadi 1999, p. 237). Text also in (Stern 1980, pp. 673–75) (no. 548).
29 See (Saffrey and Segonds 2001).
30 (Reeg 1977, p. 631).
31 (Reeg 1977, pp. 572–73).
32 *CIIP* 2755 = W. (Ameling et al. 2018, pp. 179–80).
33 See (Van der Horst 2001).

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