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It is widely believed that Samaritans built a temple on Mount Gerizim during the second century B.C.E. However, archaeologists have been stymied so far in their attempts to turn up any indisputable evidence for such a temple. Add to this a surprising lack of historical documentation, and there is continuing sentiment that the temple never existed.

Legend has it that the Samaritan Temple was authorized by Alexander the Great and built of unhewn stone, was comparable in size and proportion to the temple at Jerusalem, and was destroyed by John Hyrcanus in 168 B.C.E. Josephus, a Jewish historian from the first century C.E., provides the earliest and most explicit documentation in *Jewish Antiquities* (book 11, sections 7–8; Marcus 1966) and is es-

Archaeology has failed to find any evidence for a Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim.

entially the exclusive source for the myriad repetitions of the assumption that the temple did exist.

Unquestioning references to the Samaritan Temple dot commentaries, histories of Hellenistic Palestine and general statements about the Samaritans. Nevertheless, serious reasons remain to question the existence of the temple: none of the accounts of its building are ultimately creditable; it would not have

The Elusive Samaritan Temple

by Robert T. Anderson



Excavations on the main peak of Mount Gerizim early in the exploration that began in 1984 under the direction of Itzhak Magen. It was already clear that the site contained only remains from the Hellenistic period. Hopefully, these excavations will illuminate the Samaritan use of the site and possibly shed light on the likelihood of a temple. Photo courtesy of Reinhard Pummer.

served the political or theological needs of the Samaritans; and the archaeological evidence is simply not there.

The Temple in Historical Literature Samaritan accounts state that Joshua built a temple on Mount Gerizim and placed the tabernacle in it (Bowman 1977: 64; Stenhouse 1985: 33). No account or description of the building is offered, and there is no other attestation to such a building. The Hebrew scriptures not only fail to mention any temple built on Mount Gerizim but explicitly state that, rather than at Mount Gerizim, "The whole community of the Israelites met together at Shiloh and established the Tent of Presence there" (Joshua 18:1). Further, there is no suggestion anywhere of any archaeological evidence for such a temple. The recent arguments regarding a possible temple on Mount Ebal are not relevant to any claims regarding the Samaritans (Kempinski 1986; Zertal 1986).

The Samaritan chronicles and traditions are surprisingly silent on the building of a temple in the second half of the first millennium B.C.E. Only Abu'l Fath, in the fourteenth century C.E., speaks of such a temple, and that very sparingly. In chapter 20 of his *Annals*, he describes the Samaritan exiles returning from Babylonia and building the temple soon thereafter. The total account reads, "The Temple (literally "house") building was 35 cubits square" (Stenhouse 1985: 95). The startling lack of detail or expected story structure (Anderson 1989), the denial of any superfluous wealth in the "house" (Stenhouse 1985: 128) and the subsequent lack of any men-

tion of this temple or “house” all call such a building into question. Abu’l Fath wants to argue against Josephus that the Samaritan Temple (assuming, but not arguing, that there was one) was not built by the Greeks, but by the Persians.

Tabernacle versus temple. Samaritan literature is much more likely to speak about a tabernacle than a temple. The famous Abisha scroll, a likely eighth or ninth century C.E. scroll attributed to the grand nephew of Moses, was purportedly written not in a temple, but at the door of the Tent of Meeting: “I, Abisha, the son of Phinehas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest—God’s favor and glory be upon them—have written the holy book at the door of the Tent of Meeting on Mount Gerizim in the thirteenth year of the settlement of the children of Israel in the land of Canaan, within its borders roundabout. I give thanks to God” (Crown 1975: 49).

The major theological work of the Samaritans, the Memar Markah composed in the third or fourth century C.E., is preoccupied with the tabernacle and does not mention a temple. When the Samaritan Messiah (Taheb) comes, according to a hymn by Abisha ben Phineas (1340–1364), he will bring the rediscovered tabernacle vessels to the Holy Tabernacle reestablished on Mount Gerizim (Bowman 1977: 271).

Since the Torah describes the tabernacle and not a temple, it is not surprising that the Samaritans placed significance on a tabernacle. A temple, which is fraught with political implications, is the palace of the deity, and anchors monarchy and deity in the significant political locality. Bereft of

monarchy, as the Samaritans were, a tabernacle was sufficient.

Non-Samaritan literature also implies, if not states, that the Samaritans did not have a temple. The cryptic comment of II Maccabees 6:1–3 is not much help. The New English Bible provides a typical translation: “Shortly afterwards King Antiochus sent an elderly Athenian to force the Jews to abandon their ancestral customs and no longer regulate their lives according to the laws of God. He was also commissioned to pollute the temple at Jerusalem and dedicate it to Olympian Zeus, and to dedicate the sanctuary on Mount Gerizim to Zeus God of Hospitality, following the practice of the local inhabitants.” The word *neos* (temple) can be used in both a broader (sanctuary) and narrower (shrine) sense, and in any case is not actually repeated in reference to Gerizim in the text.

Procopius, a Byzantine historian from the sixth century C.E., wrote “In Palestine there is a city named Neapolis, above which rises a high mountain called (Gerizim). This mountain the Samaritans originally held; and they had been wont to go

up to the summit of the mountain to pray on all occasions, not because they have ever built any temple there, but because they worshipped the summit itself with the greatest reverence” (*Buildings*, book V, section 7, lines 1–2; Dewing 1961). Procopius is a late source and his argument has been questioned (Kippenberg 1971: 104–9), but it does fuel the cumulative doubt.

Josephus’s account in *Antiquities* has been frequently challenged. It is suspiciously parallel to the account of the building of the Jerusalem Temple. Reinhard Pummer (1988: 771) has commented: “The whole account of *Antiquities* 11:302–12 seems to be a midrash on Nehemiah 13:28.” In his article “Josephus and the Judaeen Restoration” Lester Grabbe first suggests the possibility about a midrash on Nehemiah (1987: 236–42). Grabbe thinks that Josephus is passing on a midrash of which he is aware, rather than creating one. Theodor H. Gaster suggests “that Josephus grotesquely patched his story together by fusing a Jewish and Samaritan tradition” (1962: 192). Josephus’s account does seem to be polemical literature rather than historical (Anderson 1989).

Two of the major cultural factors associated with a temple and in mutual sanction with it are monarchy and wealth, neither of which was a relevant factor for the Samaritan community. The northern monarchy was long gone before the Samaritans became a distinctive group. When “the place”

(Deuteronomy 12), Jerusalem, became part of the polemic against the Samaritans, the Samaritans repudiated the temple at Jerusalem for several reasons, including the political association it had with



Tell er-Ras from the main peak of Mount Gerizim with Mount Ebal in the background. Discovery of building B beneath the remains of Hadrian’s Temple awakened hopes that the Samaritan Temple had been found. Subsequent analyses indicated that building B was more likely a platform built to raise building A. Photo courtesy of Reinhard Pummer.

the south and particularly with Solomon, who was anathema to the Samaritans.

Lack of monarchy eliminated much of the motivation for a temple (Meyers 1987: 364) and the economic condition of post-exilic Samaria did not help. Oppressed by Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians, the Samaritans had minimal resources. A significant temple would require tremendous financial and labor resources, which the post-exilic Samaritans likely lacked. Consider the disappointment expressed in the comparison of the post-exilic Jewish temple with its Solomonic predecessor built in somewhat similar circumstances of poverty and oppression (Meyers 1987: 368). The Jews apparently viewed the Samaritans with contempt rather than anger, as if the Jews considered them beneath their class. This is reflected in the New Testament comment that Jews have nothing to do with Samaritans (John 4:9).

Archaeological evidence. Archaeological evidence has played a frequent role in the search. There are three peaks on Mount Gerizim, each of which is a possible location for the temple. No archaeological report mentions any indications of buildings on the westernmost peak, which at 807 meters is the lowest of the three.

The central peak, at 881 meters the highest, has received considerable attention. A German expedition, led by Alfons M. Schneider, excavated this peak in 1930 but found no materials dating from any period relevant

to a Samaritan Temple (Schneider 1951: 209–334). At the northern end of the peak, that expedition and others found and identified the tomb of Sheikh Ghanim, which was originally a sixteenth century watchtower, the adjacent Theotokos church built about 484 C.E., and a fortification built by Justinian to protect the church. Samaritan tradition places the temple about 100 meters further south on this peak, but no remains have been identified.

Some ancient coins depict a structure on this peak: “On the other (right-hand) peak is a construction which seems again to be rather an altar than a small temple” (Hill 1914: xxix). This evidence could argue for an altar without a temple.

North of this central peak and at a somewhat lower elevation (831 meters) is the peak known as Tell er Ras, a small conical mound about 120 by 80 meters that has been the primary focus of archaeological research in the past generation. In the late 1960s, Robert Bull referred to the “long sought Temple of the Samaritans” and offered: “While we

Views of Mount Gerizim on three different coins of Flavia Neapolis dating from mid-second century to early third century C.E. Each portrays a large building on the left, presumably Hadrian's Zeus Temple on Tell er-Ras, and another structure on the right, likely on the central peak since it is portrayed on a higher level and in appropriate perspective from Neapolis. It is smaller and has been variously interpreted as a Pagan sanctuary (Montgomery 1907: 89), an altar (Hill 1914: xxix) and a Samaritan synagogue (Pummer 1987: 33). Photos are used courtesy of Reinhard Pummer, Biblical Archaeology Review and Zev Radovan, and the Israel Museum.

have no inscriptions identifying this structure, the evidence below convinces us that it (building B) is the temple of the Samaritans” (Bull 1969: 8). As evidence, he cited that it is on Mount Gerizim, dates from the Hellenistic period, is surrounded by a high temenos wall of the same date and structure, is made of unhewn stones and stands alone for its size and period on Gerizim and thus supports the record of Josephus.

Charles W. Wilson excavated the site in 1866 on behalf of the Survey of Western Palestine. Bull cites Wilson: “At the extremity of the arm running northwards from the castle is a mound, partly artificial, and isolated from the ridge by a deep ditch. There are traces of steps on four sides leading to the summit of the mound, which was occupied by a building fifty-three feet square, having walls of great thickness. Some excavations were made. But with the exception of a few Roman coins nothing of interest was found” (Bull 1968: 61). Bull comments that “Surface examination failed to locate clear evidence of the building (53 feet square) mentioned by Wilson” (Bull 1967: 390).

Coins have already indicated some of the structures on this peak and the central peak. “On the left hand peak is the temple which, since it first appears on coins of Pius is doubtless the temple of Zeus Hypsistos built by Hadrian” (Hill 1914: xxviii–xxix).

Two significant structures have been excavated on Tell er-Ras. Build-



ing A is assumed to be the temple of Zeus Hypsistos built on Mount Gerizim by Hadrian in 130 C.E. Building B "can best be visualized as a half cube 20.93 (by) 20.14 (by) about 10 meters, some 4000 cubic meters of unhewn stone set in a square-shaped foundation trench cut into the bedrock of the mountain top" (Bull 1978: 1,022). The stones were a local limestone dressed to dimensions 1.2 meters long, 1 meter wide and .5 meter thick (Bull 1978: 1,021). No architectural or numismatic materials were found in the massive fill that surrounded the wall, and the pottery dated to Roman times. Bull believes that "building B was constructed in the center of a courtyard of walls and on a center line which was the north-south axis of building B and the mid-point of the gateway in the east-west wall north of building B" (1978: 1,022). No evidence of a ramp, steps or other approach to building B was found. A section of the perimeter wall at the northwest corner was found to be in earth rather than bedrock and yielded some pottery dating to the third century B.C.E. Since building B seems to have been built in the center of the courtyard formed by the walls, Bull deduced that it was also built in the third century.

George E. Wright led the Drew-McCormick excavations at Shechem (1956–64), but based his observations about the Samaritan temple on Josephus, whom Wright assumed had three sources available (citing Ralph Marcus): a Jewish source, a Samaritan source and an anti-Samaritan source (Wright 1965: 178). "From all this it seems to me that we may accept the following as fairly certain: (1) The substantial reliability of Josephus' first source about the Samaritans: namely, the story about the founding of the Temple on Mt. Gerizim by permission of Alexander the Great. . . ."

Excavations on Mount Gerizim were taken up anew in 1984 by Itzhak Magen. He has issued no published reports, but Pummer has followed the excavations and communicated

several times with Magen. In a 1988 book review, Pummer reported "The large 'Building B' on Tell er-Ras has been shown to date only from Roman times, and the excavations currently underway on the main peak have so far not brought to light any remains older than the second century B.C.E." (Pummer 1988).

A year later, Pummer made a more extensive report on Magen's excavations (Pummer 1989). Bull's main dating device for building B, the sherds found in the northeast corner of the surrounding wall, are now thought to have been brought in as fill from the central park. All the speculation on building B seems to be rendered moot. It is most likely that building B was a platform to raise building A to a higher elevation.

Magen's excavations shift interest back to the central peak for pursuit of the elusive Samaritan Temple. Tradition and practice would make that peak a more likely site, and now excavations beneath the Theotokos church reveal the outlines of a large building, holding out yet another thread of hope for those who expect to find a Samaritan Temple.

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