# Large Mirrors, Small Mirrors:

# Reflections of the Samaritan “Other”

# in the Jerusalem Talmud and Genesis Rabbah

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**Abstract**

Every society deals, to some extent, with the definition of its identity, and this definition is frequently refined in light of a society’s encounters with its “others.” The rabbinic Sages also dealt extensively with the definition of their identity, and they described their encounters with various “others” for this purpose. The definition of identity is especially necessary on a society’s “seam lines,” in order to distinguish it from other similar societies. As a result, rabbinic literature presents several encounters between rabbinic Sages and Samaritans, who belong to the group that some called the “first Jewish sect.”

In this article, I focus on three traditions from the Land of Israel that describe a parallel story of the Sages. One version is presented in the Jerusalem Talmud, and two are presented in Midrash Genesis Rabbah. Specifically, I focus on the “mirror” that each tradition chose to present before the Samaritan “other” that it encountered: The first tradition (from the Jerusalem Talmud) presents a direct religious dispute between the Sages and the Samaritans, in which the Samaritans are described as idolaters, the Sages’ absolute “others.” The second tradition (from Genesis Rabbah) is mostly similar to the first tradition, but its poetics are slightly more complex. In the third tradition (also from Genesis Rabbah), the voice of the Samaritan is muted throughout the dispute, and in fact, the Samaritan serves as a sort of “background scenery” for the presentation of the wisdom of the Sages and their followers. An examination of this three-pronged tradition shows that, despite the proximity in time and space between the composition of the Jerusalem Talmud and Genesis Rabbah, each tradition chose to present a slightly different “mirror” of the Samaritans, due to unique considerations.

**Keywords:** Samaritans, “other”, Jerusalem Talmud, Genesis Rabbah, Stories of the Sages, parallel story, Rabbi Meir