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Mount Gerizim and the Polemic Against the Samaritans

Mount Gerizim appears in the Pentateuch as the mountain of blessing and plays a prominent role in Samaritan tradition, but the Jewish tradition sidelines this mountain and the Samaritans themselves in a polemic that began more than two and half thousand years ago.[1]

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Samaritans at Mount Gerizim, West Bank, during a Sukkot pilgrimage. Edward Kaprov / wikimedia

**Part 1**

Becoming a Nation at Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal

Deuteronomy describes two commandments that the Israelites are to fulfill immediately upon arriving in the Land of Israel:

1. The construction of an altar on Mount Ebal.[2]
2. A convocation with a ceremony of blessings and curses on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal.

This ceremony appears twice in Deuteronomy, first in the section of *Re’eh*(11:26–30) and later in *Ki Tavo* (Deut. 27:1–26), thus forming a frame or an inclusio around the collection of laws in chapters 12–26. The ceremony establishes the people of Israel as a nation upon entry into the land (Deut 27:9):

הַסְכֵּת וּשְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה נִהְיֵיתָ לְעָם לַי-הֹוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ.

Silence! Hear, O Israel! Today you have become the people of YHWH your God.

A Parallel Altar to Sinai

The construction of the altar on Mount Ebal and the writing of the Torah on the stones of the altar parallel the construction of the altar and the writing of the Torah at Mount Sinai/Horeb (Exod. 24:4):

Sinai account (Exod 24:4)

וַיִּכְתֹּב מֹשֶׁה אֵת כָּל דִּבְרֵי יְ-הוָה וַיַּשְׁכֵּם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיִּבֶן מִזְבֵּחַ תַּחַת הָהָר וּשְׁתֵּים עֶשְׂרֵה מַצֵּבָה לִשְׁנֵים עָשָׂר שִׁבְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Moses then wrote down all the commands of YHWH. Early in the morning, he set up an altar at the foot of the mountain, with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel.

Altar law (Deut 27:2-3)

…וַהֲקֵמֹתָ לְךָ אֲבָנִים גְּדֹלוֹת וְשַׂדְתָּ אֹתָם בַּשִּׂיד. וְכָתַבְתָּ עֲלֵיהֶן אֶת כָּל דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת…

…You shall set up large stones. Coat them with plaster and inscribe upon them all the words of this Teaching…



A sign post on Mt. Gerizim marking the location of the twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel.

The Disappearance of Gerizim and Ebal in the Rest of the Bible

Joshua 8 (vv. 30-35) narrates that the namesake of that book faithfully executed the instructions given by Moses, thereby underling the importance of this ritual. Nevertheless, these mountains never again surface in any of the following books of the Bible,[3] and are not assigned any significance in Jewish tradition. This contrasts sharply with Jerusalem, which occupies a central place in the books that follow the Torah (referenced hundreds of times!), though it is never mentioned by that name in the Torah.[4]

Even Deuteronomy’s law of centralization of worship, in which Jerusalem might be expected to appear, never mentions it. The Masoretic Text instead uses the expression “the place that God will choose (המקום אשר יבחר ה),” a phrase that occurs no fewer than 22 times. The Samaritans have a slightly different version of the Pentateuch, and the exact wording of this phrase in Deuteronomy is one of the key differences between these versions.

The Samaritan Pentateuch and the Sanctity of Mount Gerizim

Some six thousand variants distinguish the Samaritan version of the Pentateuch (SP) from the Masoretic Text (MT). Most of these did not originate with the Samaritans, and already existed in the Torah text they inherited, the Proto-Samaritan text, attested among the Dead Sea Scrolls.[5] One group of variants that likely did originate among the Samaritans are readings that underline the importance of Mount Gerizim as God’s chosen place of worship.[6] This difference appears in three forms:

1. **Mount Gerizim** ***not* Mount Ebal** is the mountain upon which the altar is built and the “*torah*” (teaching? set of laws?) written on. In the Samaritan view, it is only logical to construct the edifice on Mount Gerizim, designated “the mountain of the blessing,” rather than “the mountain of the curse,” Mount Ebal.
2. **The SP reads,** **“the place that God has chosen (בחר),”**wherever the MT uses the phrase “the place that God will choose (יבחר),” a reading also reflected in the LXX. Since the only place in the Torah in which God commands an altar be built is on Mount Gerizim (according to the SP), then clearly, Gerizim is God’s chosen mountain.[7]
3. **The Samaritan version the Decalogue** as recorded in both Exodus and Deuteronomy contains a commandment to erect an altar on Mount Gerizim.[8]

The Pentateuch is the Samaritan Bible; Samaritans do not subscribe any of the other books in the current Jewish Bible,[9] and see these as sectarian Jewish works. Thus, no sacred text in their tradition consecrates Jerusalem as a holy city, and the text of the Samaritan Pentateuch strongly supports the holiness of Mount Gerizim and the Samaritan tradition that Mount Gerizim is God’s chosen location and the rightful place of the Temple.

The Samaritan Temple and its Destruction

Josephus (*Antiquities* 11:321–330) states that the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim was constructed during the fourth century BCE, but archeological excavations there indicate that the temple was extant even earlier, in the fifth century, i.e., during the Persian Period.[10]

The Samaritan temple was destroyed by the Hasmonean ruler of Judea, John Hyrcanus, in 109 BCE, and was never rebuilt. Nevertheless, the Samaritans retained—and still retain—the social order that pertained when their temple was in existence: their high priest continues to be the leader of the community, and to this day they offer the paschal sacrifice on Mount Gerizim, even though it has lacked a functioning temple for over two millenia.[11]

The Location of Mount Gerizim: Did the Rabbis Agree with the Samaritan’s Identification?

Given the precision of the geographic description given by the Torah in its description of the ceremony of the blessings and the curses (Deut 11:30), the location of Mount Gerizim should be obvious:

הֲלֹא הֵמָּה בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן אַחֲרֵי דֶּרֶךְ מְבוֹא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בְּאֶרֶץ הַכְּנַעֲנִי הַיֹּשֵׁב בָּעֲרָבָה מוּל הַגִּלְגָּל אֵצֶל אֵלוֹנֵי מֹרֶה.

Both are on the other side of the Jordan, beyond the west road that is in the land of the Canaanites who dwell in the Arabah—near Gilgal, by the terebinths of Moreh.

The terebinths of Moreh are mentioned in Genesis (12:6) as adjacent to Shechem. This is attested as well in m. *Sotah* (7:5):

ברכות וקללות כיצד כיון שעברו ישראל את הירדן ובאו אל הר גריזים ואל הר עיבל שבשומרון שבצד שכם שבאצל אלוני מורה שנאמר (שם י”א) הלא המה בעבר הירדן וגו’ ולהלן הוא אומר (בראשית י”ב) ויעבר אברם בארץ עד מקום שכם עד אלון מורה מה אלון מורה האמור להלן שכם אף אלון מורה האמור כאן.

Blessing and curses how so? When Israel come to cross the Jordan and arrived before Mount Gerizim and before Mount Ebal in Samaria, near Shechem, beside the oak of Moreh, as it is written, “Are not they beyond the Jordan….” (Deut 11:30) and elsewhere it says, “And Abram passed through the land to the place of Shechem to the oak of Moreh (Gen. 12:6) – just as the oak of Moreh spoken of there is at Shechem, so the oak of Moreh of here.

The Rabbis thus were familiar with the location of Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, and generally were in agreement with their identification of these mountains.

A Polemical Alternative

A contrary opinion explaining the location of the mountains in Deut 11:30 is recorded in the Jerusalem Talmud (j. *Sotah* 7:3).[12] While Rabbi Yehudah approves of the Samaritan identification of Mount Gerizim, Rabbi Eliezer opines that the geographic features described by the Torah are not Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal located in Samaria, but two *artificial* hills near the Jordan that were formed for the purpose of the ceremony.

שתי גבשושיות עשו וקראו זה הר גריזים וזה הר עיבל.

They made two heaps of stones and named them Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal.

Although the Yerushalmi explains exactly how Rabbi Eliezer reads each phrase in the verse,[13] he is motivated by a polemic to discredit the sanctity ascribed to Mount Gerizim in the Samaritan tradition.[14]

Eusebius Takes Rabbi Eliezer’s Side

Eusebius of Caesarea, a significant Church Father of the early fourth century CE, in his *Onomasticon,*[15] writes:

(307) Ebal – (Γαιβαλ; Deut 11:29). A Mountain in the land of promise, where Moses commanded an altar to be erected (Deut 27:4-5). It is said that there are two mountains located near Jericho across from each other in close proximity, one being Gerizim and the other Ebal. But the Samaritans show others that are near Neapolis. They are mistaken, because those that are shown stand too far apart from each other, to the extent that it is not possible to hear from one (mountain) the calling from the other.[16]

Oddly, both traditions about the location of these mountains are evident in the Madaba Map (ca. sixth century CE),[17] on which Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal appear twice, once adjacent to Shechem (Neapolis) and again near Jericho. This double-counting of the mountains defangs R. Eliezer’s polemical position, and ends up merely confusing map makers and traditional readers of Bible.

**Part 2**

The Identity and Status of the Samaritans: An Ancient Polemic

Rabbinic literature also polemicizes against the Samaritan accounts of their identity and status.[18] The Samaritans view their origin as Israelite, with roots in the Israelite kingdom of the First Temple Period, members of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh as well as priests of the tribe of Levi, the latter of whom claim descent from Phineas, the son of Elazar and grandson of Aaron.

The Judaean tradition, however, maintains that the Samaritans originated among the exiles transferred to the Land of Israel by the Assyrians from various places in Mesopotamia after the 721 BCE destruction of the Northern Kingdom.[19] This claim first appears in 2 Kings 17, which states that the Samaritans were pagans who adopted the worship of the Israelite God only after they were being killed by lions (v. 25) and wished to appease the local gods. The biblical account further accuses them of never having really accepted Israelite monotheism:

מלכים ב יז:מא וַיִּהְיוּ הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה יְרֵאִים אֶת יְ-הֹוָה וְאֶת פְּסִילֵיהֶם הָיוּ עֹבְדִים גַּם בְּנֵיהֶם וּבְנֵי בְנֵיהֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ אֲבֹתָם הֵם עֹשִׂים עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה.

2Kings 17:41 Those nations worshiped YHWH, but they also served their idols. To this day their children and their children’s children do as their ancestors did.

Most modern scholars recognize that the biblical account is polemical, and assume that the Samaritans derive from a combination of Israelites and Judeans, perhaps with an admixture of some foreigners who were exiled there after the destruction of the Northern Kingdom. In the years between the writing of 2 Kings 17 and the Rabbinic Period, the relationship between the Judeans and Samaritans has many ups and downs.[20]

In the late Second Temple and Rabbinic periods, however, many Jews took the biblical account in 2 Kings 17 as factual. For this reason, Josephus and the rabbis use the appellation *Cutheans* for the Samaritans, a reference to one of the locations—Cuthah (2 Kings 17:24)—from which this group was brought to Samaria. Use of this term is designed to cast doubts on the legitimacy of the Samaritans. Some rabbis declared explicitly that “the Cutheans are lion (=insincere) converts” (כותים גירי אריות הם, b. *Bava Kamma*38b), using the scriptural account to express their own attitude toward the Samaritans of their time.

Samaritans and Jews during the Tannaitic Period

During the Mishnaic period, the sages were ambivalent toward the Samaritans. Some of their practices were considered Jewish, such as ritual purity, circumcision, Sabbath observance, unleavened bread on Passover. Other *halakhot* treated them as non-Jews, forbidding consumption of bread and cooked foods prepared by a Samaritan, testimony by a Samaritan, etc.[21]

One example of a positive attitude toward the Samaritans is found in Tosefta *Pesachim* (2:3):

מצה של כותיים מותרת ואדם יוצא בה ידי חובתו בפסח. ור’ לעזר אוסר לפי שאין פקיעין בדקדוקי מצה. רבן שמעון בן גמליאל או’ כל מצוה שהחזיקו בה כותים הרבה מדקדקין בה יותר מישראל.

The unleavened bread of Samaritans is permitted. And a person fulfills therewith his obligation for Passover. But R. Eleazar prohibits doing so, for they are by no means expert in the details of the laws of unleavened. Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel says: “Any religious duty which the Samaritans preserved they observe with far greater punctiliousness than Israelites.”

The anonymous first sage (the *tanna kama*) accepts Samaritan matza; although R. Elazar disagrees, this is because the Samaritans are not proficient in all the fine details pertaining to the making of matza, *not*because they are “gentiles,” whose matza would be forbidden for per se.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel’s strong approbation of Samaritan piety is particularly important due to his position as president of the Sanhedrin in the Usha generation (after the Bar Kochba Revolt, in the middle of the second century C.E.). As a whole, these tannaitic sources indicate that the Samaritans were regarded as quasi-Jews rather than gentiles.

Yehuda HaNasi’s Negative Turn

Yet, only one generation later, R. Shimon ben Gamliel’s son, R. Yehuda HaNasi, expresses a starkly different view in the context of the law of separating *terumah* and tithes for the priest and levites (t. *Terumot* 4:12):

הכותי כגוי דברי ר’ רבן שמעון בן גמליאל או’ כותי כישראל.

“A Samaritan is [treated] like a gentile” the words of Rabbi. Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel says, “A Samaritan is [treated] like an Israelite.”

Samaritans and Jews during the Amoraic Period

This negative attitude dominates the rabbinic discourse in the Amoraic period. For example, R. Abbahu, who lived in Caesarea in the early 4th century C.E., relates to the Samaritans as gentiles, and expresses himself aggressively about them.

בעון מר’ אבהו חלוט שלהן מהו אמר לון הלואי היינו יכולין לוסר גם מימיהן.

They asked Rabbi Abahu: “What is the status of their vinegar?”[22] He answered them: “If only we could forbid even their water” (j. *Avodah Zarah* 5:4, 44d).

רבי יצחק בן יוסף שדריה רבי אבהו לאתויי חמרא מבי כותאי, אשכחיה ההוא סבא, א”ל: לית כאן שומרי תורה. הלך רבי יצחק וספר דברים – לפני רבי אבהו, והלך רבי אבהו וספר דברים לפני רבי אמי ורבי אסי, ולא זזו משם עד שעשאום עובדי כוכבים גמורין.

R. Isaac b. Joseph was sent by R. Abbahu to fetch some wine from among the Cutheans. He was met by a certain old man who said to him: “There are none here that observe the Torah.” R. Isaac went and reported the matter to R. Abbahu who reported it to R. Ammi and R. Assi; the latter forthwith declared the Cutheans to be absolute heathens (b. *Hullin*6a, Soncino translation).[23]

Samaritans and Jews: Present and Future

The total rejection of Samaritans as Israelites in the Amoraic period characterized later Judaism, and brought about a rift that lasted for almost 2000 years and their version of the Torah was almost unknown outside their community. In modern times, renewed scholarly interest in the Samaritan Pentateuch has produced numerous books, translations, and articles. Studying the SP has become standard fare in Bible departments.

At the same time, the modern period, with the massive return of Jews to the Levant and the founding of the State of Israel, Samaritans and Jews live together once again. This time, the ancient antagonism seems to have been left by the wayside and a new rapprochement has begun. Where that will lead is anyone’s guess.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/mount-gerizim-and-the-polemic-against-the-samaritans)

1. This essay was translated from the Hebrew by David B. Greenberg and then adapted by the TABS editors.
2. This is the reading of MT and LXX; the Samaritan places this event on Mount Gerizim as does the OG.
3. Technically, Mount Gerizim appears once more in the context of the parable of Jotham (Judg. 9:7), but there it is only an indication of geography without relevance to any significant historical event or sacred place.
4. The city of Shalem, likely Jerusalem, appears as the town of King Melchizedek in Gen 14.
5. The differences between the Proto-SP (including the SP) and the MT fall into two general categories:
	1. Differences of plene or defective spelling that reflect no underlying differences of principle and do not alter the meaning of the text.
	2. Significant variants that fill in “missing” pieces of a narrative (called by scholars “expansive readings”) or that redact the text for consistency.

For an example of the latter, see Zev Farber’s TABS essay, [“The Missing Speeches in the Plague Narrative and the Samaritan Pentateuch.”](http://thetorah.com/the-missing-speeches-in-the-plague-narrative-and-the-samaritan-pentateuch/)

1. Stefan Schorch has argued that some of these variants may also predate the Samaritan adoption of the Proto-Samaritan text. See, Stefan Schorch, “The Samaritan Version of Deuteronomy and the Origin of Deuteronomy,” in *Samaria, Samarians, Samaritans: Studies on Bible, History and Linguistics* (ed., József Zsengellér; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 23-38.
2. The Samaritans defend their version of the text by noting that the expression “המקום אשר (י)בחר ה’” first appears in chapter 12, only a few verses after the commandment to conduct the ceremony of blessings and curses. Moreover, Chapter 12 opens with a commandment to destroy all traces of pagan worship “על ההרים הרמים,” a contrast to Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, where the covenantal ceremony is to take place. Thus, in the Samaritan view, the place is one that already has been chosen, namely, Mount Gerizim, which indeed appears a few verses earlier, in the instructions for the covenantal ceremony. For more on this, see Jonathan Ben-Dov’s TABS essay, “[An Altar on Mt Ebal or Mt Gerizim: The Torah in the Sectarian Debate](http://thetorah.com/an-altar-on-mt-ebal-or-mt-gerizim-the-torah-in-the-sectarian-debate/).”
3. The addition is not considered to do any violence to the total number of these commandments because the first, “I am the Lord …,” is regarded as only an introductory clause in the Samaritan enumeration.
4. The Samaritans do have an Arabic work called the Book of Joshua that differs considerably from the biblical text, but this is a medieval work and not part of their canon.
5. Yitzhak Magen, *Mount Gerizim Excavations* (Jerusalem, 2004).
6. In contrast, the destruction of the Jewish Temple by the Romans in 70 CE brought about fundamental social changes: the place of the priests was taken by rabbinic scholars, and the liturgy was adapted to refelct a society that did not view the Temple as its religious center.

זה הר גריזים והר עיבל שבין הכותים דברי רבי יהודה.

“This refers to Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal in Samaria”, the words of R. Judah.

רבי אליעזר אומר אין זה הר גריזים והר עיבל של כותים שנא’

R. Eliezer says, “This does not refer to Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal in Samaria. For it is said:

* 1. הלא המה בעבר הירדן מן הירדן ולהלן.

* 1. ‘Are they not beyond the Jordan’ – [that is,] from the Jordan and beyond;

* 1. אחרי דרך מבוא השמש. מקום שהחמה שוקעת.

* 1. ‘West of the road, toward the going down of the sun,’ – [that is,] the place where the sun sets.

* 1. בארץ הכנעני אילו בין החוי.

* 1. ‘In the land of Canaanites’ – this refers to the Hivites.

* 1. היושב בערבה אילו בין ההרים.

* 1. ‘Who live in Arabah’ – this is the area among the hills [where the Hivites live].

* 1. מול הגלגל אין כאן גלגל

* 1. ‘Over against Gilgal’ – this does not refer to Gilgal.

* 1. אצל אלוני מורה. אין כאן אלוני מורה.

* 1. ‘Beside the oak of Moreh’ – this does not refer to the oak of Moreh.”

מה מקיים ר’ אלעזר הר גריזים והר עיבל. שתי גבשושיות עשו וקראו זה הר גריזים וזה הר עיבל.

How does R. Eliezer then deal with the reference to Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal? They made two heaps of stones and named them Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal.

על דעתיה דרבי יהודה מאה ועשרים מיל הלכו באותו היום. על דעתיה דרבי אלעזר לא זזו ממקומן.

In the view of R. Judah, they traversed a hundred and twenty *mil* on that day. In the opinion of R. Eliezer they did not move from they were.

1. For details, see the previous note.
2. Another case that bears out the polemic between the Jews and the Samaritans over which are the true Israelites concerns competing Hebrew scripts. The Samaritans use a variation on the Paleo-Hebrew alphabet, whereas the Jews during the Second Temple Period began instead using the Assyrian script, a type of Aramaic alphabet. To the Samaritans, their choice of script reflects faithfulness to the original script of the Torah, while the Jews took the path of innovation and transited to a different script. The Rabbis were aware of this position, and the talmudic sages took different approaches to the Paleo-Hebrew script as well. The most extreme of these is that of Rabbi Yehudah the Patriarch, who claims (t. *Sanhedrin* 4:7) that the Torah was given in the Assyrian script and absolutely denies the legitimacy of the Paleo-Hebrew alphabet—notwithstanding the discrepancy between his position and historical knowledge certainly available at the time. Other rabbinic scholars were more mild in their treatment of the subject, acknowledging that Paleo-Hebrew alphabet was the earlier of the two but giving historical reasons for the Jews’ use of an alternate script (b. *Sanhedrin* 21b).
3. This work is a Greek directory of toponyms found in the Tanakh and the Gospels, arranged alphabetically and in the order of the books of the Bible.
4. R. Steven Notely and Ze’ev Safrai, *Eusebius, Onomasticon – The Place Names of Divine Scripture*, Boston and Leiden, 2005, pp. 63-64.
5. The Madaba Map forms part of the mosaic floor of the early Byzantine church of Saint George in Madaba, Jordan. It contains the oldest surviving cartographic depiction of Israel. The mountains of Gerizim (Gabal at-Tor/Tour Garizin) and Ebal (Gabal Islamiya/ Tour Gobal) are listed twice on the Madaba map twice. An online clickable version of the map is available through *Studium Biblicum Franciscanum* on the website of the Franciscan Friars ([www.christusrex.org](http://www.christusrex.org/)). The mountains appear in their historical place above and beneath the plane of Neapolis/Shechem in[section 5](http://www.christusrex.org/www1/ofm/mad/sections/section5.html) (Gerizim is #43, Ebal is #42) as well as in their “polemical place” at the edge of the mountains northwest of Jericho in [section 2](http://www.christusrex.org/www1/ofm/mad/sections/section2.html) (Gerizim is #14, Ebal is #13).
6. Reconstructing the history of the Samaritans is a difficult task due to the lack of contemporary Samaritan sources. Available Samaritan chronicles were written after the period in question, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries CE. Practically all known information about the Samaritans of antiquity, from the time of the First Temple until the conclusion of the Byzantine Period, is derived from non-Samaritan sources, including Assyrian inscriptions, biblical books, contemporary historians, Rabbinic literature, and Christian sources, which naturally omit the perspective of the Samaritans themselves. For an introductory book on Samaritans, see Reinhard Pummer, *The Samaritans – A Profile* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2015).
7. Editor’s note: Whether this verse is reflective of the view of the biblical authors as a whole, or just the author of this text, is a complicated question. For an updated and thorough discussion of the problem, see Gary Knoppers, *Jews and Samaritans: The Origins and Early History of Their Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
8. See discussion in Knoppers, *Jews and Samaritans*.
9. Shmuel Safrai, and Ze’ev Safrai, *Mishnat Eretz Israel- Tratate Brachot*, (Jerusalem, 2010), pp. 361-400 (Hebrew).
10. Wine processed or even touched by gentiles are forbidden in the Talmud out of fear that they may have libated it to their gods. Vinegar is never libated, but before it ferments vinegar is grape juice/wine. The point here is that the questioner is asking whether they should be treated like gentiles and R. Abahu responds with a hyperbolic but emphatic yes.
11. The aggressive stance characteristic of the Amoraic period halakhic discourse is amplified in Aggadic literature, which shows a clear negative attitude toward them. This fits the above pattern since aggada is primarily Amoraic or even post-Amoraic. Thus it seems that by the end of the Amoraic period, rabbinic Judaism had entirely excluded Samaritans from the being considered Jewish at all.