

Sunday Sidebar – July 14, 2019

Who were the Samaritans?

1 Kings 12 tells us how, after the death of King Solomon, the Kingdom of Israel split apart (around 922 BC). The Northern Kingdom became known as Israel, consisting of 10 of the tribes and first led by Jeroboam. The Southern Kingdom became known as Judah, consisting of 2 tribes (Judah and Benjamin) and first led by Solomon's son, Rehoboam. All the kings of the Southern Kingdom were thus, descendants of David, while the Northern Kingdom kings were various leaders, some political and some military, who established their dynasty for a generation or two or three, before being replaced by a new leader. The Northern Kings ruled Israel out of Samaria, while the Southern Davidic Kings ruled Judah out of Jerusalem.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel lasted only around 200 years and was eventually defeated by the Assyrian King Sargon II (c. 722-705), who died during the battle, but his son, Sargon II (c. 721-705) inherited the task of finishing the job. So in the first months of the year 721 BC, after a three-year siege, Samaria fell. According to Sargon's records, he deported 27,290 Israelites into the region of Persia, leaving only the poorest of the land, and repopulated Israel with colonists from Babylonia, Elam, and Syria. All of these folks intermarried with the remnants of the Northern Kingdom, and eventually became the Samaritans of New Testament times.

Meanwhile, the smaller Kingdom of Judah survived intact. In 587 BC, the southern kingdom was conquered by King Nebuchadnezzar and most of the leaders and upper class people were forcibly taken to Babylon. This is referred to in Biblical history as The Exile. Then the Persian King Cyrus defeated the Babylonians. In 538 he issued an Edict allowing the Jews who wanted, to return to their homeland and rebuild, as long as they would be loyal to the Persians. This was the period of Ezra and Nehemiah and it seems to indicate some developing animosity between the returning exiles, and the "Samaritans" to the north.

When the returning exiles began rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem, the northern kingdom Jews offered to help but were politely (or not so politely) rebuffed. The returning Jews considered the Samaritans to be "unworthy." So the hand extended in friendship, recoiled into a fist.

This animosity persisted and intensified into the New Testament period. So when Jesus told a story about a "Good Samaritan," that would have seemed like an oxymoron to his listeners. They could not imagine any Samaritan being good...

The Samaritan taking the victim to the innkeeper

Jesus' parable followed a discussion with a lawyer about the requirements for eternal life. Jesus and the lawyer discussed the importance of loving God and loving neighbor. And then the lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbor?" and Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Indeed, who are our neighbors and how can we love them, in fulfillment of God's commands? Are neighbors the people who live nearby, or anyone in need? Do we have to help, or can we just say a prayer? What if helping interrupts our plans or delays us from our work? Can we just toss a little money at the issue? Jesus wants us to live as loving, compassionate people. What that looks like, is for us to work out. How are you showing love and compassion these days? And to whom?