

Lost and Found? A Non-Jewish Israel from the Merneptah Stele to the Byzantine Period

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The historical, the biblical and the ancient Israel

In 1992, Philip Davies made notice of a serious issue in dealing with histories of Israel and Judah. In order to reach a clearer and more truthful history, he suggested that a distinction be made between the historical, the biblical and the ancient Israel (Davies 1992: 16-18). Little could he know of the growing need for working with such clear distinctions when archaeology in the 90's revealed that what had hitherto been assumed or "known" about the Palestine of the late Iron, Persian and Hellenistic periods had to be rewritten, and that the biblical Israel, which towards the end of the first millennium had been transformed into a Jewish Israel, was far from identical with the historical Israel.

History's earliest testimony of an entity named "Israel" (*Ysr'el*) is found on the Merneptah Stele depicting the Egyptian Pharaoh Merneptah's campaign to Hatti-land around 1209 BCE (Pritchard 1969: 376-78). The authenticity of the stele's celebration of Merneptah's victory over his surrounding enemies is confirmed by three contemporary Egyptian inscriptions. The closing stance of the inscriptions includes the name 'Israel' as a conquered people, whose seed is no more. Scholars have disagreed about what the term signifies and how the hieroglyphs should be read as there are several possibilities. From the more remote *Sharon* and *Jizreel* as well as Biblical *Jeshurun* to the closer reading 'Asher, known as a thirteenth-century people *ísrw* in Papyrus Anastasia I, and mentioned also in inscriptions from the reigns of Seti I and Ramses II. A clan named 'Asher'el or *Asri'el* is mentioned in the Samaria Ostraca from the eighth century (Hjelm and Thompson 2002: 13-14).

Building on Davies' distinction, we must conclude that interpretation of the term Israel in the Merneptah Stele differs according to the chosen perspective.

Historical Israel?

From a historical Israel perspective, Israel designates the people of the land of Hurru located in an area comprising Gezer and the city states: Gaza, Ashkelon and Yeno'am. These names are mentioned in several Egyptian inscriptions from the late Bronze and early Iron Age, which deal with campaigns to Hatti land. After Thutmose III's conquest of Canaan around 1470-60 BCE (*ANET* 234-41), the cities appear in reliefs at Karnak (*ANET* 242-43), describing Egyptian campaigns and listing their conquests. Ashkelon, Gezer and Gaza also appear frequently in the Amarna letters (e.g. EA, no 287, 289, 290, 292; *ANET* 488-490). Gaza seemed to have been the capital city of Canaan for about 400 years under Egyptian rule (Liverani 2005: 10; Ahlström 1993: 236-37). The non-defined enemy population "Israel" of the Merneptah stele is wedded to Hurru, who being a widow can be taken as part of Egypt's household (Hjelm and Thompson 2002: 16).

Biblical Israel?

From a biblical perspective, we must conclude that Merneptah and Yeno'am are not mentioned in the Bible. This is not unique, as in fact, the Bible relates nothing whatsoever about Egyptian presence or campaigns in Palestine before Pharaoh Shishak's campaign in the 10th century BCE. Gaza and Ashkelon are mostly Philistine cities in the Hebrew Bible. They were never fully conquered by the invading Israelites or firmly included in Israelite territory. Gezer was partly conquered by Joshua (Josh 16:3; Judg 1:29), destroyed by Pharaoh and given as a dowry to Solomon, who fortified the city (1 Kgs 9: 15-18).

Ancient Israel?

An ancient Israel perspective will take its departure from biblical Israel's people, who had conquered the land under Joshua. It designates an Israel that is larger than the historical people of Hurru and Kanaan mentioned in the Merneptah stele as it also comprises the Transjordan. It is also larger than the Iron Age II kingdom called Israel and Bit Humri in the Mesha Stele and neo-Assyrian inscriptions from the 9th-8th centuries BCE. An ancient Israel perspective takes Egyptian historiography into consideration and harmonizes this with biblical narrative and archaeology. This perspective will also interpret "Israel" of the Merneptah stele as proof that the biblical Israelites did in fact exist as a people in the 13th century BCE, but will neglect the stele's statement that "Israel is laid waste, its seed is no more", and relegate this to conventional and hyperbolic phraseology (e.g. Kitchen 2003: 220). However, the settlements of the central and the Judean highlands increased in the Iron I (Kochavi 1971; Thompson 1979; Finkelstein 1988), so what did the stele designate when

using the term “Israel”? Although we have hundreds of Egyptian inscriptions, the “Israel” of the Merneptah stele never appears in any of these.

A non-Jewish historical Israel in the Iron II

The Merneptah stele’s designation of Hurru’s husband as “Israel” with the determinative of a people rather than land is exceptional in Egyptian epigraphy. The name does not occur elsewhere in this form although the Egyptian pharaohs led many campaigns to the region to fight the Hittites and the Sea peoples in order to maintain their sovereignty. Especially, descriptions of the major attempt by Shishak / Sheshonk I (10th cent.) to regain control over Syria and Palestine/Canaan by his conquest of “the Asiatics of foreign lands” or “the Asiatics of Mitanni” list some 150 names of cities in Palestine without using the term “Israel” for its people. The inscriptions, however, are not complete (*ANET* 263-64).¹

We find our next references to a non-Jewish historical Israel in the Mesha Stele and neo-Assyrian inscriptions from the 9th -8th centuries BCE. Israel in these inscriptions designates the mighty Iron II Omride Kingdom, mostly known as *Bît-Hu-um-ri-ia* or KUR *hu-um-ri-i i* (the land of Humrî) and only occasionally called *sir-i-la-a* in neo-Assyrian inscriptions (Hjelm 2009). The Moabite stele of Mesha uses the name Israel throughout. The name is thus firmly attested from the mid ninth century BCE for the kingdom, whose rulers were “Omri King of Israel” and “his son” (Mesha stele l. 5-6). The kingdom also comprised the newly conquered territory of Moab to the southeast, which were now taken back by Mesha, who hyperbolically states that “Israel has gone to ruin, yes, it has gone to ruin forever” (l. 7a; Smelik 2003: 137). Mesha’s patron god was Kemosh and following his conquest of Nebo, he offered its population of seven thousand individuals to Ashtar Kemosh and “took the vessels of Yahweh and hauled them before the face of Kemosh” (l. 14-18). Historical inaccuracy aside, the inscription nevertheless conveys two characteristics of the enemy kingdom, namely that its name is “Israel” and its patron god is “Yahweh”. This kingdom, which also the Hebrew Bible calls Israel and depicts as a sister kingdom to the kingdom of Judah, was, in fact, closer to its eastern northern and western neighbors, the Syrian/ Aramaean and Philistine/Phoenician kingdoms with which it made alliances when the political situation made that suitable. Denigrating its Omride kingship identity as *Bît-Humria*, which was the usual designation for the kingdom in neo-Assyrian inscriptions from Shalmanezar III - Sargon II (Hjelm 2009), “Israel” became enrolled in the biblical formation of a fictitious twelve tribes federation descended from Jacob/ Israel with its division into a ten tribe league for Israel and one or occasionally a two

tribes league for Judah (Hjelm 2004: ch. 2; 2010A). The kingdom of Judaea, however, was a late comer in the arena and did not gain much importance before the second half of the eighth century BCE. Judaea's growing self-esteem became devastating as it roused the anger of the Assyrian king Sennacherib, who destroyed most of Judaea (*ia-ú-du*), deported over 200.000 inhabitants and severely reduced the size of the Judaeian kingdom ruled by Hizkija, the Jew (*ia-ú-da-ai*; Oded 1979; Na'aman 1993; Stern 2001: 130-31; Lipschits 2003). This happened a little less than twenty years after the kingdom of Israel had ended and become an Assyrian province renamed *Sa-me-ri-na* around 720 BCE. Contrary to some claim in the Bible and further developed by the first century Jewish author Josephus, of a complete deportation of Israel's population, its demography remained rather intact. No major exchange of the population in the Assyrian period can be sustained archaeologically, although Adam Zertal has tried his best to do so.² Some 27.000 were deported by Sargon II according to Assyrian sources (*ANET* 284-85; Luckenbill, *ARAB* II §§55, 92, 99, 118; Lawson Younger 2000, II: 293-300; Fuchs 1994: 308; further ref. In Hjelm 2009: 16-18). However, an earlier inscription from the reign of Tiglat-pileser inconsequently states: 'The land of *Bît-Humria* [its] 'auxiliary army', [...] all of its people, [...] I carried off [to] Assyria. Peqah (^m*Pa-qa-ha*), their king [I/they] killed] and I installed Hoshea (^m*Aú-si-'i*) [as king] over them' (*ANET* 283-84; *ARAB* I § 616; Tadmor 1994: 140-41, 188-89; cf. Hjelm 2009: 17-18). Obviously all of its people had not been deported by Tiglat-pileser since Sargon II conquered Samaria two years later and carried off 27.290 or 27.280 people.

In spite of a rather substantial Assyrian presence in the province, no wide-spread cultural changes can be observed in the material remains (Stern 2001: 55; Lawson Younger 2004). Yahwism continued to be the dominant religion both before and after the Assyrian invasion (see further below). The name Israel, however, was replaced with the official name Samerina. During the Persian period it was termed *Shamrin / Shomron* in Aramaic and Hebrew, and became part of the fifth Persian satrapy *abar naharā*, known also from neo-Assyrian inscriptions since Tiglat-pileser III as *ebir Nāri* (literally, 'across the river' [Euphrates]). According to Herodotus (III. 91) it comprised the whole of Phoenicia and that part of Syria which is called Palestine, and Cyprus (Briant 2002: 49). During the second century BCE, the name Israel was appropriated for the upcoming Hasmonaean kingdom with its center in Judaea, while the regional Greek name of Samaria with its related gentilica Samareis and Samaritai continued to exist in addition to tribal names Ephraim and Manasseh. Such regional geographical terms, however, also became religious

designations when Judaeans Yahwists were termed “Jews” and Samaritan Yahwists were termed “Samaritans”.

A non-Jewish Israel in the Persian and Hellenistic periods

Two scenarios have and still prevail in biblical scholarship.

One is the aforementioned assumption of a total or nearly total disappearance of the Israelite population caused by the Assyrian conquest of the kingdom of Israel. In this scenario, the land did not remain empty as different peoples were settled there. Using the Samaritan temples, they developed a syncretistic Yahwism, which 2 Kings 17 claims did not fully align with proper Yahwism. Although there is little support for such a scenario in the remainder of the Hebrew Bible, scholars have readily embraced ideas of a total disappearance of the Israelite peoples (the ten tribes) of the Northern Kingdom, not least because Josephus in his writings had cast them out for good (*Jos. Ant.* 9.280; 10.184-85; cf. Hjelm 2000: 192-195; Pummer 2009: 67-80).³

The second scenario, advocated also by Josephus, is tied to the decline of the Persian Empire at the advent of Alexander the Great, who gave permission to some apostate priests from Jerusalem to build a temple for the Samaritan people on Mount Gerizim around 330 BCE (*Jos. Ant.* 11.297-347). They accompanied the brother (Neh 13:28: “son”) of Jerusalem’s High Priest, whose illicit marital alliance with the daughter of the Persian governor Sanballat caused his expulsion. Both Nehemiah 13 and Josephus imply or openly claim Sanballat’s foreignness and the scene is set for viewing the Samaritans as apostate and syncretistic Yahweh worshippers. The depicted scenarios rest on the all too familiar biblical paradigm that Israelite Yahwism became polluted by foreign cults and beliefs caused by illicit political and social alliances (Hjelm 2004; ch. 2). Josephus, however, does not explicitly depict the Samaritans as syncretists in his reuse of 2 Kings 17, but as foreigners, - Cuthaeans so-called. In other stories, he mixes them with apostate Jews and marks them as Sidonians, Shechemites, Medes or Persians and, elaborating on 2 Macc 6:1-2, he depicts the Sidonians of Shechem as willingly accepting Greek customs (Hjelm 2000: 216-222; 2005: 35-39). While in general, modern research has based itself on Josephus and regarded the Samaritans as schismatic Jews, the most persistent view on Samaritan origins in early rabbinic and patristic literature is the foreignness of the Samaritans based on an exegetical reading of 2 Kings 17 and Ezra 4:2, 8-10. On the background of such texts, Samaritans were considered to be Assyrian foreigners, who had adopted Jewish belief and tradition (the Law, given by Ezra). From the third century CE onwards, however both rabbinic and patristic literature express anti-Samaritan sentiments which accuse them of idolatry and syncretism.⁴ Nevertheless, toning down the question of foreignness,

Jewish Rabbis of the 3rd – 4th century CE also expressed hopes that the Samaritans would one day abandon Mt. Gerizim and return to Jerusalem (Montgomery 1907: 177; Hjelm 2000: 107). It is interesting that scholarship of the 20th century until quite recently has transferred ancient views on Samaritans as (Hellenised) syncretists onto Samaritans living in the Persian and Hellenistic period also. They basically found evidence for that in four different historical incidents of Greco-Roman influence in the Samaria region.

1) Alexander and his successors established Macedonian centres in Samaria and ancient Shechem (Tel Balatah). Both cities as well as the temple and city on Mt Gerizim were destroyed by John Hyrcanus between 110-117 BCE (Magen 2008: 18)

2) A rebuilding of Samaria was undertaken by the Syrian Governor Garbinius in the first century BCE and it was continued by Herod, who changed its name to Sebaste, populated it with pagan immigrants and constructed a temple dedicated to his patron, the Roman emperor Augustus.

3) Shechem became rebuilt as a Roman city in 72 CE with garrisons and pagan inhabitants who had their own temples and institutions (theater, hippodrome, mausoleums etc.) This was done in order to prevent the Samaritans from entering Mount Gerizim after they had revolted in 67 CE (Jos. *War* 3.307-315; Magen 2008A: 43-51).

4) In the mid-second century CE, Antonius Pius built a temple to Zeus Hypsistos on the northern summit of Mt. Gerizim.⁵ It was rebuilt by Caracalla and Julian the Apostate in the third century (Magen 1993: 488-489; 1993A). The Roman temple and the staircase have been depicted on coins from Neapolis and are mentioned in early Christian sources and Samaritan Chronicles (for ref. see, Mor 1989: 28-30; Hjelm 2010: 26).

Pivotal “proof” of Hellenization of the Samaritan cult and religion, however, came from Josephus’ creative elaboration of 2 Macc 6:1-2 in his *Antiquities* 12.237-64 (Hjelm 2000: 207-212). Denying any relationship with the Jewish population in order to be acquitted of the charges Antiochus IV had decreed on the Jews, the Samaritans declared themselves to be Sidonians, who through a certain superstition had chosen to follow the Jewish custom of observing the Sabbath. The correspondence between these “Sidonians” and Antiochus is brilliantly carried out when Antiochus’ reply permits the “Sidonians in Shechem” to live in accordance with Greek customs, be acquitted of the charges levelled against the Jews and let their temple on Gerizim be known as that of Zeus Hellenios. Attempts at reading Josephus’ narrative historically have proven unsuccessful. It has not been

possible to verify Josephus' account, nor decide who these Sidonians are or whether they, as in Josephus' accounts, were equivalent to the Samaritans.⁶ Knowledge of a Sidonian colony in Marissa in the second century BCE (Schürer 1885, II: 4-5; Tcherikover 1975: 453)⁷ has encouraged proposals of a similar colony in Shechem, one which did not belong to the Samaritans themselves but which made use of their temple (Delcor 1962: 35-38; Kippenberg 1971: 79; Pummer 1982). Confirmation of this proposal certainly would be interesting (Hjelm 2005). It would demand a further examination of who these Samaritans are who had their temple on Mt. Gerizim. They certainly could not be any of those groups presented in Josephus, but would most probably belong to the 'lost tribes of Israel', which Josephus had cast out for good (cf. *Ant.* 10.183, 11.133)! Our problem with Josephus' reliability does not relate to the authenticity of whatever correspondence he claims to have had access to, but to his use of it. It is Josephus, who purposely identifies the Sidonians with the Samaritans! He, in fact, succeeded so well in making that identification that modern scholars, in spite of arguing that Josephus was speaking about a Sidonian colony, which adhered to the Samaritan temple, have accepted his implied accusation of Hellenisation of the Samaritan cult (Egger 1986: 266-281).⁸

Some degree of Hellenization of the area of Samaria is attested from the 4th century BCE onwards, but have these sporadic institutions and artefacts (imported attic ceramic, luxury goods, Greek names and stamps with Greek icons) much to do with the Samaritan religion as practised on Gerizim in the Persian and Hellenistic periods? And does Josephus' progressive decrease of the Samaritans as a population at first comprising, the whole of the former Northern kingdom in the 8th century BCE, to the mixed population of renegade Jews in the time of Alexander, to a 'Sidonian colony' in the time of Antiochus IV, and finally to 'those living around Mt. Gerizim', when John Hyrcanus destroyed their temple in the second century BCE, reflect reality? (Hjelm, 2005: 35-36).

Mount Gerizim in the Persian and Hellenistic Periods

We have remarkable new insights regarding the histories of Shomron/ Samaria and Yehud/Judaea in the Persian and Hellenistic periods.

1) The dominant adherence to Yahwism in the Samaria region from the 9th through the 4th centuries BCE (Van der Toorn 1995) has been attested by a wide variety of epigraphic evidence, including the Mesha stele; the inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Weinfeld 1984; Schmidt in this volume), Khirbet al-Qom and Hamath (Dalley 1990; Van der Toorn 1992; Thompson 1999: 168-78). Iconographic similarities between the Kuntillat 'Ajrud graffiti from the 9th-8th centuries BCE and

Samarian coins from the Achaemenid Persian period (Meshorer and Qedar 1991; 2002: 71-81) are notable and testify to religious and ethnic continuation in spite of both emigrations and immigrations. As the Samaria Ostraca; Assyrian inscriptions and Persian documents from Wadi el-Daliyeh and Elephantine show, a high percentage of personal names contained the theophoric element Yah/Yau.⁹ Also archaized seal impressions that are inscribed in palaeo-Hebrew have a considerable overlap in personal names and a predominance of Yahwistic personal names (Knoppers 2006: 273-279). It is also noteworthy that the names of Sanballat's sons are Yahwist (Cross Jr., 1966, 1971; Leith, 1997: 10; Gropp, 2000: 823-825; 2001: 6; Dušek, 2007: 549). From the Achaemenid Persian and Hellenistic periods, phylacteries, coins and seals testify to a cultural continuity between Samaria and Yehud (Knoppers 2013: 109-120). Nevertheless, the province of Samaria functioned politically and religiously independent of Yehud and Jerusalem.

2) Archaeological surveys and excavations have shown that Samerina /Shomron did not suffer from the Babylonian conquest. Its provincial status continued. If there was any change, its power increased and the region became quite affluent by the Persian and early Hellenistic periods. Yehud was almost completely destroyed.¹⁰ Benjamin was the only area, which was left intact and the seat of the Babylonian administration was in Mizpah, not in Jerusalem. In the early Persian period the Persians seem to have transferred their center of government from Mizpah to Ramat Raḥel until at least the mid-fifth century (Lipschits 2003: 331; Na'aman 2001: 274-75; Stern 2001: 436-437). Jerusalem remained extremely impoverished (Lipschits 2003: 329-33, 364-66) and did not really gain in economic and political importance before the second century BCE. These issues have been widely discussed in especially the first three of four volumes on Judah in the Babylonian, Achaemenid and Persian periods and in the fourth century, with Oded Lipshitz as chief-editor.¹¹

3) Renewed excavation on Mt. Gerizim under the conduct of Yizhaq Magen from 1982-2006 revealed that the non-Jewish Israel of Shomron had a cult place on Mt. Gerizim, just south of Nablus, from the mid-fifth century. This place had traditionally been understood by scholars as belonging to a so-called Jewish sect, the Samaritans, known from Jewish and Early Christian sources. The excavation, however, revealed that tradition had it wrong, when esp. Josephus claimed that it was built by apostate Jews headed by priests from Jerusalem's temple after Alexander's invasion in 330 BCE (Jos. *Ant.* 11.297-347). The cult place served as a cultic center for Yahweh worship in the region and existed for a period of at least 350 years, after which both its surrounding city Luzah and the temple was destroyed by the Jewish king John Hyrcanus in 110 BCE along with

ancient Shechem (Tell Balatah) in 107 BCE (Magen, Misgav and Tsefania 2004, Magen, 2000, 2007, 2008; earlier ref. in Hjelm 2005).

The Samaritan cult place on Gerizim had two building phases from a more modest precinct in the early Persian period measuring 98 x 98 m to its enlargement in the early second century BCE. The excavators Yitzhaq Magen and his team date the Persian period stratum “to the time of Nehemiah”, that should be mid-fifth century, although the oldest coin excavated date to 480 BCE and the precinct had three six-chambered gates to the north, the south and probably to the east, although only its second century replacement has been excavated (Magen 2007 and 2008). It also had proto-ionic capitals, which usually are dated to Iron II, but here both the gates and the capitals are interpreted as imitations of an earlier fashion or the capitals might have been transferred from Samaria (Magen 2008: 152-53). The western wall was without a gate, presumably because of its proximity to the Holy of the Holies. A structure, interpreted as the Twelve Stones (Deut 27:4-8; Jos. 8:30-35), has been excavated there as well as the north-western corner of what is considered the temple building (Magen 2008: 113-14). A plastered altar with steps and a large quantity of sacrificial bones, ashes and pottery was excavated under the Hellenistic eastern gate just inside the Persian gate.

In the early second century BCE, the temple was magnificently rebuilt and enlarged and continuous walls were built on the foundations of the early walls. Four chambered gates replaced the old six-chambered gates and a monumental staircase was constructed on the eastern side connected to a gatehouse at its bottom. To the north and south of the staircase were courtyards.

The city, Luzah, that grew up around the temple had already begun to expand considerably after the invasion of Alexander the Great in 330 BCE and his conquest of the city of Samaria. Five residential quarters with streets and alleys have been excavated to the north, south and west of the holy precinct. The city had a great number of public buildings, workshops, private houses, defensive fortresses, towers and courtyards. It is estimated that it housed more than ten thousand people in addition to the many pilgrims who visited the temple (Magen 2008: 177). Both the city and the temple were destroyed around 110 BCE by John Hyrcanus (Magen 2008).

The finds include pottery and metal ware, about 13.000 coins dating from the Persian period to the time of John Hyrcanus and Alexander Jannaeus, and then from the Byzantine (fourth century CE) to the Umayyad period.¹² About 300.000 burnt animal bones of one- to three year old sheep, goats,

cattle (rare) and pigeons, are consistent with the distribution of sacrifices mentioned in Leviticus 1-6 (Magen, Misgav and Tsefania 2004: 9; Magen 2008: 160-62). No pagan objects, no Greek pottery with mythical depictions and no images have been uncovered. Miqvaot have not been found, but many bathtubs were found inside private residences from the Hellenistic period (Magen, Misgav and Tsefania 2004: 10; Magen 2008: 159). The second stratum yielded about 400 stone inscriptions in Aramaic ninety percent of which are dedicatory (see below). From the fourth century CE were found about 100 inscriptions in Greek and from a later time some medieval inscriptions in Samaritan Hebrew.

The 300.000 fragments of bones found on the site have mainly been found in four deposits inside and outside the walls of the holy precinct (Magen 2008: 160-164). Apart from those outside the eastern wall they date to the Persian stratum. A huge deposit of bones, ashes and broken pottery was found in the Persian period northeastern corner in a structure, which might be labeled “house of Ashes”. It also had a cistern and a small altar. The altar inside the eastern gate also yielded a huge quantity of bones and ashes. Only small samples of bones have been examined so far, but a significant difference of distribution appears between the Persian and Hellenistic deposits. In both groups, all the bones examined belong to sacrificial animals as prescribed in Leviticus 1-7 (Magen 2008: 161-2). A random sampling presents a high quantity of bones of sheep and goats from one to three years old, a few rock pigeons and turtledoves. Bones of cattle as oxen and calf were significantly fewer in the Persian period deposits than in the deposit from the Hellenistic period. A striking observation so far is it that bones of animals belonging to the local fauna have not been found in the deposits. The area is ripe with many kinds of game animals, especially roe deer and birds, which are permitted as food in the Pentateuch, but not as offerings.

In Oded Borowski’s discussion of animals in cultic contexts in his 1998 book, he states that “almost none of the Israelite cult places that have been located allow any verification of the biblical record” (Borowski 1998: 221). These places are the Iron Age I and II cult places in Arad (10-7th BCE), Lachish (10th), the Bull Site in Samaria, the altar on Mt. Ebal and Tel Dan (10th). Only Lachish, Mt. Ebal and Tel Dan have remains that have been dated and catalogued. A great majority of their offerings consists of domestic ruminants and birds (doves and turtledoves) with an additionally up to 15 percent of deer, gazelle, wild ungulates and lions. Lions are found also in pre-Israelite Jaffa and Iron I and II Tel Miqneh (Ekron) (Wapnish and Hesse 1991: 47-48). Also amulets, figurines and depictions of lions in cultic contexts have been found at Iron Age Dan, Ekron and Arad (Borowski 1998: 227). The bone samples from Tel Dan periods I (873-851) and II (785-745) show

that “the bulk of the remains are from sheep, goat and cattle, all permissible for sacrifice under Israelite rules, and characteristic of Canaanite sacrifice as well” (Wapnish and Hesse 1991: 46; cf. Borowski 1998: 225). Although Borowski concludes that the bones from Lachish align with “biblical prescription that call for the sacrifice of mostly young caprovines” (p. 226), the examination has yielded more than 50 % subadult and adult caprovines for both Dan (Wapnish and Hesse 1991) and Lachish (Lernau 1975). Mt. Ebal, which Zertal claimed was Joshua’s altar (Zertal 1986-87; critique of Zertal in Kempinski 1986), lying just north of Mt. Gerizim, yielded the most varied and highest percentage of non-prescribed animal bones of deer, polecat, tortoise, lizard and mole rat. The site’s identification as Israelite has been questioned by Kolska-Horwitz (1986-87: 187), and it seems that biblical tradition and the lack of pig bones at the site has determined its classification. However, pig bones are not such a clear ethnic marker as scholars have made it (Lev-Tov 2003). From the Late Bronze Age on, pig bones occur only in small amounts and “using pig percentage would create a huge Jewish world beyond the Galilee, covering vast nearly pig-free lands from Egypt to Persia to Asia Minor and beyond” (Lev-Tov 2003; cf. Hesse and Wapnish 1997). This is also true of the Persian and Hellenistic periods and, with the exception of a few Philistine cities, the distribution of pig bones in Palestine cannot be used as cultural boundary makers (Lev-Tov 2003). So far the material from Gerizim has not been compared with contemporary cult sites, so contextualizing the material has to await further research. Nevertheless, we can say something about Pentateuchal Yahwism on the basis of the bone material and other finds from Mt. Gerizim.

We must now turn to the other group of impressive finds on Mt. Gerizim, about 400 stone inscriptions dating to the Hellenistic period. Only one was found in situ on the Eastern staircase and most of the others were found in near proximity of this. The texts are votive inscriptions identifying the donors who offered to “Adonai”, “Elah” or “Yahweh” in “this place” or in “the temple” (Magen, Tsefania and Misgav 2000; Magen, Misgav and Tsefania 2004; Hjelm 2005: 167-171 and 2010; Gudme 2013: 52-90; Dušek 2012). The cult place was also termed “miqdas”, “house of god” and “house of sacrifice”. The texts of the inscriptions, most of which are incomplete, are rather uniform: ‘that PN son of PN offered for himself, his wife (PN) and his children’, זי הקרב פלוני בר, פלוני על נפשה על אנתתה ועל בנוהי, with little variation (name of wife might be added, or no wife mentioned, no children mentioned etc.). Some seventy inscriptions have the formulaic addition. ‘for good remembrance before God in this place’, לדכרן טב קדם אלהא באתרא דנה. (Magen, Misgav and

Tsefania 2004: 18). A close variant of this formula is found in Exod. 30.16. One inscription (no. 150) has the variant, ‘before Adonai (אֲדֹנָי) in the temple’ (מִקְדָּשׁ).

We cannot go into detail with the material, but a thorough analysis published by Anne Gudme in her monograph *Before the God in this Place for Good Remembrance* (Gudme 2013) states that the Aramaic inscriptions fall within a general pattern of formulating and giving offerings to the God in Semitic dedicatory inscriptions. Yet they also conform in every way to what we find about votive practice in the Hebrew Bible and thus testify to “Yahwistic votive practice anno 200 BCE” (Gudme 2013: 90). Most of the identified donors have about 80 % Hebrew and Aramaic names and about 20% Greek, Arabic, Nabatean, Palmyrean and perhaps a single Persian as well. The distribution of the Hebrew names is similar to that found in Jewish onomasticon of the post-exilic period (Magen, Misgav and Tsefania 2004: 27; Knoppers 2013: 125-31). If we compare the Gerizim names with the distribution in the Wadi el-Daliyeh Papyri (375-334 BCE) we find that they also contain about 80 percent Hebrew and Aramaic names, but 15-20 % Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian, a few Edomite, but hardly any Greek names (Hjelm 2005). So, were the Yahweh worshippers on Mt. Gerizim more Hellenized? That’s the interesting point, because looking at the material culture we find that the seals attached to the Wadi el-Daliyeh papyri expose a very high influence of Greek iconography in a mixed Greco-Persian style, known from coins also from the same period (Leith 1997: 20-24; Briant 2002: 715). This should not come as a surprise as it has been well known that the taste for Greek art was widespread in all of the Persian Empire (Leith 1997: 10-12). The documents did not come from a cultic context and anti-Greek sentiments belong to a later period when the influx of Greek citizens and customs had become a political and religious problem. The Greek names in the Gerizim inscriptions might belong to non-Samaritan pilgrims, who gave gifts to the temple. Contemporary evidence for such practise we find in the 2nd century inscriptions from Delos, where “The Israelites in Delos, who send the temple tax to holy Ar-garizein” honour donors having Greek names, for their contribution to the Samaritan colony and the building of a synagogue (Kartveit 2009: 216-225; Bruneau 1982).

On the basis of the finds it can be concluded that the excavated cult place on Mt. Gerizim testifies to a continuous Yahwistic worship in Northern Palestine for a period of more than 350 years in the Persian and Hellenistic periods with roots in the Iron II. The design of the cult place aligns with prescriptions for the temple in Ezekiel and the Temple Scroll. The cult corresponds with prescriptions found in the Pentateuch without any traces of syncretistic influence. This is attested in

the distribution of sacrificial bones, the votive inscriptions as well as other artefacts belonging to cultic activity. So far, the excavations from Mt. Gerizim give the earliest and fullest evidence of what one might term a 'Biblical or Pentateuchal Yahwist cult' in Palestine ever.

The "Israelite" Samaritans in the Roman Period

After the destruction of Gerizim, Samaria and ancient Shechem, the region was incorporated into the Hasmonean state for a period of about fifty years until the Roman takeover in 63 BCE, when for another short period the Samaritan regions were lifted from Jewish control and became part of the province of Syria. This, however, changed again when Herod the Great (40-04 BCE), and his son Archelaus (4 BCE-6 CE) ruled as ethnarchs over Palestine (Kasher 1995). The many similarities between Jews and Samaritans / Samaritans made it difficult for their neighbors to distinguish them from one another and especially from the centuries around the turn of the era, Samaritans / Samaritans were often subsumed under a Jewish designation and they fared similarly as their Jewish neighbors (Hjelm, forthcoming). Ancient sources relate that in pre-Christian times, Diaspora Samaritans and Jews fought for legitimacy and supremacy in front of their overlords (e.g. *Jos. Ant.* 12.7-10; 13.74-79; Pummer 2009: 179-199). The confusion increased because a growing identification with "Israel" had taken place in Judah from at least the second century BCE. Terms that used to signify geo-political "ethnic" differentiation transformed into religious designations based on literary traditions about a twelve tribe federation descending from an eponymic Jacob / Israel.

With emerging Christianity, the situation had become even more complex, when, beginning in the 2nd century CE, many Samaritans moved northwards and westwards from the Palestinian heart land. They basically settled in the larger coastal towns and in the valleys of Jezreel and Beth Shean, which already had a mixed population. Whatever the role of the Samaritans was in the Bar Kochba revolt, the 2nd - 3rd centuries and esp. the rise of Christianity in the fourth century improved their economic condition. Samaritan communities were founded in almost all the Roman cities of Palestine: Neapolis, Sebaste, Ascalon, Gaza, Iamnia, Caesarea, Scythopolis (Beth Shean), Emmaus, Ashdod, Antipatris, etc. (Levine 1975: 107-108; Crown 1989a: 59; Magen 2008A: 83, 100). It is believed that when many Jews fled after the failed Bar Kochba revolt in 135 CE, Samaritans took over many of their settlements. However, Jews did not flee Palestine in large numbers and ancient sources testify to their presence in many of the mentioned cities (see further in Sand 2009: 133; Hjelm, forthcoming). The depletion of the Jewish population basically happened in the south, while the

north and the coastal area had a growing Jewish population in the second-third century CE (Levine 1975: 64-67). The increase also of the Samaritan population to an estimated half million people in Palestine in the fourth century, their settlement outside of the Samaritan heartland and their integration into the Roman cities created confusion regarding Samaritan-Jewish relationship. Jewish rabbinical literature of the 2nd - 4th centuries CE testify to this in discussions, which sought to establish the identity and place of the Samaritans in relation to pagans and Christians also, and to set up standards for social interactions in light of Jewish *halachah* (Montgomery 1907: 167-203; Hjelm 2000: 104-115; Magen 2008A: 83-85).

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¹ For a recent discussion, transcription, translation and bibliography of these inscriptions, see Weippert 2009: 228-241.

² Zertal 1989 and 2003; cf. my critique of Zertal in Hjelm 2005: 163-4; 2010: 32-33.

³ For detailed analyses of Josephus' narratives about the Samaritans, see Egger, 1986; Dexinger, 1992; Hjelm, 2000: 183-238; Pummer, 2009.

⁴ The first author to build on Josephus is Eusebius (3rd century) in his *Chronicle*, transmitted through Jerome (4-5th century) and appearing in the writings of George Syncellus (8-9th century). In general, Josephus' views are unrepresented in 1st millennium Christian writings (Hjelm 2013).

⁵ Samaritan sources erroneously declare that the temple had been built by Hadrian, who ignited the Jewish insurrection, the Bar Kochba revolt, by erecting a temple to Jupiter in Jerusalem and changing the city's name to Aelia Capitolina.

⁶ E. Bickerman (1937) sought to establish the authenticity of the correspondence and argued that the term Sidonian should be interpreted as Canaanite, since in Gen 10:15 Sidon is Canaan's firstborn son (Hjelm 2000: 219-220). For recent discussion, see Pummer 2009: 161-78; Dusek 2012:101-104.

⁷ Tcherikover 1975: 453 n 128: 'The large number of Edomite names confronts the scholar with the question whether the Sidonians at Marisa were really from the neighbourhood of Tyre and Sidon, or whether they were 'Canaanites' in the broad sense of the term.'

⁸ Egger (1986: 266-281) probably offers the clearest example when she states (p. 278): 'die Sidonier hätten von nun an nicht mehr oder nicht mehr ausschliesslich JHWH verehrt: Der Garizin-Tempel ist einige Jahrzehnte später (129/128) zerstört worden. Der Grund dieser Zerstörung durch Johannes Hyrcanus ist uE. bei den Sidoniern bzw. ihrer Herrschaft über diesen Tempel zu suchen.'

⁹ For further information on Samaria Ostraca, Assyrian inscriptions and Persian documents from Wadi el-Daliyeh and Elephantine, see Tigay 1986; Dušek 2007.

¹⁰ References to discussions about the extent of the depopulation and destruction of Jerusalem and Judaea in Hjelm 2005 and Hjelm forthcoming (Equinox 2016).

¹¹ Lipschits and Blenkinsopp (eds.) 2003; Lipschits and Oeming (eds.) 2006; Lipschits, Knoppers and Alberz (eds.) 2007; Lipschits, Knoppers and Oeming (eds.) 2011.

¹² The oldest coin dates to 480 BCE; 68 to the fifth and fourth centuries, while most come from 330 onwards. Magen, Misgav and Tsefania 2004; Magen 2008: 168-171.