

SHECHEM

Shechem. Ancient Shechem dates all the way back to the fourth millennium B.C. The city was located between Mount Gerizim (to the southwest) and Mount Ebal (to the north-east). The name Shechem means “shoulder” or “slope,” which most likely refers to the neighboring mountains.

Shechem was the site of many key events in the Old Testament period. After Abraham entered the land of Canaan, the Lord spoke to him there and promised to give his offspring the land (Gen. 12:6, 7). Jacob settled near Shechem, after leaving his father-in-law Laban in Aram (Gen. 33:18). Some time later, Jacob’s two sons, Simeon and Levi, killed the male inhabitants of Shechem; they did this to avenge the rape of their sister Dinah (Gen. 34:1-31).

After the conquest and allotment of Canaan, Shechem was located on the border of Manasseh and Ephraim, the two tribes descending from Joseph (Josh. 17:7-8). It was a city given to the Levites as well as a city of refuge (Josh. 20:7; 21:20, 21). Although Joseph had died in Egypt, the Israelites had taken his bones with them in the exodus and they ultimately buried them at Shechem (Gen. 50:24-26; Ex. 13:19; Josh. 24:32).

In modern times, the traditional site of Joseph’s tomb has been one of great controversy. The site used to be under Israeli control, and Jewish and Christian pilgrims were allowed to visit there. However, after being handed over to the Palestinian authorities, it has been repeatedly vandalized and desecrated by their people. Visits to the site are not safe, although some Jews have gone to the tomb under the guise of darkness.

During the Judges period, Shechem was the setting for the story of Abimelech, who has often been labeled an “anti-judge.” This story involves the temple of Baal-berith, a tower, and the stronghold of El-berith. Archaeologists have found ruins from the temple of Baal-berith (see www.bibleplaces.com/shechem.htm). In that story, Abimelech’s half-brother Jotham climbed Mount Gerizim, from which he spoke his famous fable of Abimelech’s destruction (Judg. 9). Like the Israelites of Joshua’s day who spoke the blessings and the curses, Jotham utilized the natural acoustics of the facing mountains and the valley below.

Shechem was a key site for the dissolving of the United Kingdom. Solomon’s son Rehoboam went there to be crowned king over all Israel, but was ultimately rejected by the northern tribes (1 Kings 12:1, 16-17). Ironically, Rehoboam’s adversary Jeroboam made Shechem his first capital after the kingdom divided, and he fortified the city (1 Kings 12:25). Shechem lasted until the second century B.C., when it was destroyed by John Hyrcanus (Josephus *Antiquities* 13.9.1).

Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. In the heart of Israel, there are two mountains of great significance—Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. According to Moses' instructions, when the Israelites came into the Promised Land, they were to go to these mountains. Six of the tribes were to pronounce the blessings for obeying God's law from Mount Gerizim, whereas the other six were to pronounce the curses for disobeying God's law from Mount Ebal. When these events took place, Joshua also built an altar to the Lord on Mount Ebal (Deut. 11:29; 27:11-13; Josh. 8:30-35).

Hundreds of years later, Mount Gerizim became the holy site of the Samaritans. After the Assyrians took the northern tribes into captivity (722 B.C.), they settled foreign peoples among the poor Israelites left in the land. Then a priest was sent to teach them about the Lord God, so that he would not destroy them (2 Kings 17:24-41). The foreigners and poor Israelites intermarried, resulting in the Samaritan people. The Samaritans caused problems for the Post-exilic Jews after they had returned to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple in 538 B.C. (Ezra 4:1-5). The Samaritans came to view themselves as the faithful people of God, whereas they looked down upon the Jews as apostates. Of course, the Jews took the opposite position.

The Samaritans only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament. Today, they have their own unique copy of the Law known as the Samaritan Pentateuch or the Abisha Scroll. The Samaritans claim that this scroll was written by Aaron's great grandson Abisha (see 1 Chron. 6:50), but in reality it only dates to about the eleventh century A.D. Significantly, the Samaritan Pentateuch says in Deuteronomy 27:4 that Joshua built an altar to the Lord on top of Mount Gerizim—not on Mount Ebal as the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint have it. (Apparently, a fragment from the Dead Sea Scrolls also has Mount Gerizim, causing some scholars to argue that this was the original reading.) The Samaritans taught that Mount Gerizim was the place where God had placed his name—and not Jerusalem (see Deut. 12:11, 21; 14:23-24; 16:2, 11; 26:2). The ruins of an ancient altar have been discovered on top of Mount Ebal, which date to the thirteenth century B.C. (see *BAR* [Jan/Feb 1986]: 42-53). It may be that this altar was built on the site of Joshua's original altar from the earlier time of the conquest in the fourteenth century A.D.

According to Josephus, the Samaritans built a temple on Mount Gerizim in the fourth century B.C., the time of Alexander the Great, in imitation of the temple in Jerusalem (*Antiquities* 11.8.2; 13.9.1; *Wars* 1.2.6). Josephus also reported that, in order to avoid persecution from Antiochus Epiphanes (175-164 B.C.), the Samaritans denied any relationship to the Jews and suggested that their temple be named after the Greek god Zeus (*Antiquities* 12.5.5; see 2 Maccabees 6:2). The Samaritan temple was destroyed by the Jewish ruler John Hyrcanus in the second century B.C. (*Antiquities* 13.9.1).

The animosity that existed between the Samaritans and the Jews is evident from the New Testament (Lk. 9:51-56; Jn. 4:9; 8:48). Josephus also testified to their hostility, reporting that the Samaritans killed some Galilean pilgrims on their journey to Jerusalem and that the Jews retaliated by killing many Samaritans and burning their villages (*Antiquities* 20.6.1; *Wars* 2.12.3). No wonder the Jews often skirted Samaria—crossing over on the east side of the Jordan River—when traveling between Galilee and Judea!

The debate over Mount Gerizim and Jerusalem as the place of worship serves as the background for Jesus' discussion with the woman at the well (Jn. 4:20). The Samaritans believed in Moses and anticipated the prophet like Moses whom God would send (Deut. 18:15-19). They anticipated a messianic figure—the *Taheb* ("Restorer")—who would unveil the truth to them (*Memar Marqah* 2.33, 70, 180). Jesus revealed to the woman that he was indeed the long-awaited Messiah (Jn. 4:25-26).

Many ruins can be seen on Mount Gerizim today, which span a period of several centuries (see www.biblewalks.com/sites/MountGerizim.html). (1) There are some foundational remnants of the Samaritan temple from the Greek period. (2) In the second century A.D., the Roman Emperor Hadrian built a temple to Zeus there. Incidentally, a coin was minted under the rule of Antoninus Pius about A.D. 160 with a representation of that pagan temple. (3) The emperor Zeno ordered the construction of the Church of Mary Theotokos here in the fifth century, which led to a Samaritan revolt. (4) The emperor Justinian enlarged the church building in the sixth century. It was later destroyed by Muslims in the seventh or eighth century. Ruins from that structure include a hexagonal baptistry.

Today, only about 750 Samaritans are in existence. About half of these live in the vicinity of Mount Gerizim, while the others reside in Holon south of Tel Aviv. Although they have no temple, the Samaritans still celebrate the Passover and the feast days commanded in the Law on top of Mount Gerizim.

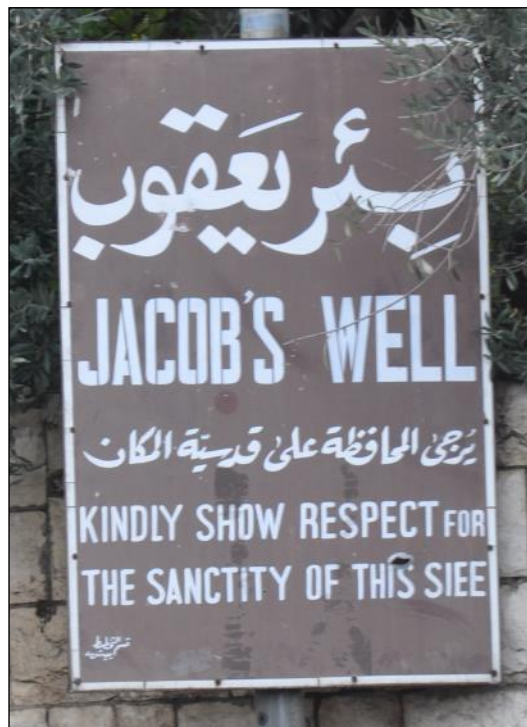
Sychar. According to ancient sources—including Eusebius, the Bourdeaux Pilgrim, and the Medeba Map—the New Testament town of Sychar was distinct from (but nearby) the ancient site of Shechem. Some identify it with Askar, outside modern day Nablus.

Jesus met a woman at "Jacob's well" outside of Sychar (Jn. 4:6, 12). The Old Testament does not specifically mention this well, but it does say that Jacob purchased land at Shechem (Josh. 24:32; see Jn. 4:5). Jacob's well contained "living water," that is, water that flowed (underground). "Living water" stood in contrast to the still, stagnate water collected in cisterns. Jesus gave new meaning to the term "living water" when he offered the sinful woman eternal life (Jn. 4:10-14). Today, Jacob's well is maintained by the Greek Orthodox Church.



St. Photini Church, Housing Jacob's Well

(St. Photini is the traditional Greek Orthodox name given to the Samaritan woman whom Jesus encountered at Jacob's well in John 4.)





Dr. David Lipe Operates the Crank,
Drawing a Bucket of Water from Jacob's Well



Nablus. The city of Nablus was founded as Flavia Neapolis (“New City”) by the Roman Emperor Vespasian in A.D. 72. It is about a mile west of the site of ancient Shechem. During the Byzantine period, it was inhabited by Samaritans and Christians. When taken over by Muslims, the name Neapolis was transferred into Arabic as Nablus. In modern times, the population includes Samaritan and Christian minorities, but it is predominantly Muslim. In 2017, the city held more than 160,000 people.



This limestone lintel is displayed at the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem. It dates to the third or fourth century A.D. and comes from a Samaritan synagogue in Nablus. The lintel bears the following fragmentary inscription in Hebrew, which includes some of the Ten Commandments:

“I am Yahweh your God. You shall have no other gods before me. Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Honor your father and your mother. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall place these tablets with which I am charging you today on Mount Gerizim.”



This limestone altar, which dates from the first to the third centuries A.D., was discovered at Nablus. The Latin inscription on the altar contains the names of five Roman legions. The altar is on display at the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem.



Floor Mosaic from a Dining Room (Triclinium) in a Roman Villa at Nablus
Featuring the Mythical Greek Hero Achilles
3rd Century A.D.
(Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

