

SAMARIA

After Solomon's death about 930 B.C., Israel divided into the northern and southern kingdoms. At first, the capital of the north was established at Shechem (1 Kings 12:25), but it eventually moved to Tirza. After Omri became king, he transferred the capital to Samaria (about 880 B.C.). The name Samaria (*Shomeron*) is derived from the original owner of the land, Shemer (1 Kings 16:23-24).

Samaria was located in central Israel, about 40 miles north of Jerusalem. The city was built on a hill some 300 feet above the valley below. For this reason, it is referred to in Scripture as "the mountain of Samaria" (Amos 4:1; NASB). The Hebrew word for "mountain" (*har*) could also be translated "hill."

Like his father Omri, Ahab maintained Samaria as the capital of the northern kingdom. Ruins of a royal palace from his time period have been discovered, measuring 89 by 79 feet. Ahab's palace, which apparently had two stories (2 Kings 1:2), was known for its inlays of ivory (1 Kings 22:39). Over 500 ivory fragments have been uncovered by archaeologists at Samaria. In addition to a royal palace, the city also had a temple devoted to the false god Baal (1 Kings 16:32). The building of this pagan temple was most likely due to Ahab's marriage to Jezebel, a Sidonian princess who was a staunch advocate of Baal worship.

Samaria was a place known for its olive oil and wine. Several ostraca—pieces of pottery with writing on them—were discovered in the excavations of the city. Some of these were ancient receipts given for the purchase of oil and wine. The personal names written on these ostraca include the elements *Yah* (a shortened form of *Yahweh*) and *Baal*, demonstrating that both were worshiped during this period (*ANET*, 321).

The city became the most prosperous during the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.), even though he was wicked. It was during his reign that the prophet Amos chastised the wealthy citizens of Samaria for cheating the poor while they themselves enjoyed an extravagant lifestyle—drinking wine, eating fattened calves, lounging on ivory furniture, and playing harps (Amos 6:4-7). (A wooden bed inlaid with ivory has been discovered at Salamis, Cyprus.) After the time of Jeroboam II, the kingdom weakened due to internal strife and foreign invasion. The Assyrians conquered a good portion of the northern kingdom in 732 B.C. Later, they returned and besieged Samaria, conquering the city in 722 B.C. (2 Kings 17:3-6). Other peoples were settled among the poor Israelites left in the land (2 Kings 17:24-41). Their intermarriage resulted in the Samaritans we read about in the New Testament (Lk. 17:11-19; Jn. 4:1-26; Acts 8:5-14).

During the Persian and Greek periods, Samaria served as the capital of a province. The city was destroyed by the Jewish leader John Hyrcanus about 108 B.C. (Josephus *Antiquities* 13.10.3). Nevertheless, after Pompey conquered Palestine for the Romans in 63 B.C., the city was restored by the Syrian proconsul Gabinus (57 B.C.). Later, Samaria was given to Herod the Great by Octavian in 30 B.C. A few years after this, Octavian changed his name to Augustus. To honor his patron, Herod the Great rebuilt Samaria and renamed it Sebaste, which is Greek for Augustus. He also erected a temple to Augustus there (Josephus *Wars* 1.21.2).

After Herod died in 4 B.C., Samaria was under the jurisdiction of his son Archelaus. When his reign came to an end in A.D. 6, the city was placed under the control of the Roman governors who were responsible for Judea. About A.D. 200, Septimus Severus made Sebaste a Roman colony. Many Christians occupied the city in the Byzantine period. Some believed that John the Baptist had been beheaded there, but this is extremely doubtful.

The ruins of Samaria include the following: a colonnaded street, a Roman forum, a stadium, a Roman theater, round towers, and a Christian basilica. Ruins from the temple of Augustus built by Herod can be found on the acropolis of the city; it once measured 115 by 79 feet (McRay, 145-148). Interestingly, there are also ruins of Israelite walls built of bossed stones dating back to the time of Omri or Ahab.



This ivory piece from the Israel Museum in Jerusalem was found at Samaria. It features a sphinx striding through lotus blossoms. The winged creature has a human head with a lion's body. The sphinx, a common image in Egypt, was adopted by the Phoenicians. Perhaps this ivory piece, which dates from the ninth or eighth century B.C., was imported from Phoenicia to northern Israel. It was during the eighth century B.C. that Amos denounced the Israelites for their self indulgence, which included lounging "on beds inlaid with ivory" (Amos 6:4).



This bronze bull figurine was discovered northeast of the city of Samaria, along a ridge overlooking the ancient road between Tirzah and Dothan. The figurine, which is on display in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, measures five inches high and seven inches long. Its eye sockets are now empty, but probably once held semi-precious stones or glass inlays. The bull was a divine symbol of power and fertility. Sometimes a deity is portrayed as standing on the back of a bull; the animal serves as a divine pedestal. This bronze bull may have been a votive offering, or it may have been worshiped as a god (such as Baal).



Seal of Jezebel, Unprovenanced
9th-8th Century B.C.
(Israel Museum)