

WERE SAMARITANS CURSED IN PRE-70 JEWISH SYNAGOGUES? DID
THE PEOPLE OF EPHEBUS THANK JESUS FOR CASTING OUT EVIL
SPIRITS?—WHY RESEARCH AUTOPSY IS MANDATORY

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Every veteran scholar has had the experience of looking long and hard for a text (ancient or modern) that has been inaccurately referenced or perhaps not referenced at all. Because of this experience, I make it a point to impress upon my students the need to practice ‘autopsy’, that is, to put their eyes on the text in question and to cite it correctly. In this brief note, I discuss two examples. The first is an assertion of an ancient practice, for which no evidence whatsoever is provided. The second is an example of misrepresenting and misapplying evidence. In both examples, it is apparent that no autopsy of the relevant materials took place; and as a result, in both cases readers will be frustrated and misled.

Were Samaritans Cursed in Pre-70 Jewish Synagogues?

In his comments on Lk. 9.51-56 (where Jesus is rebuffed by a Samaritan village), a well-known New Testament scholar asserted that Samaritans ‘were publicly cursed in the synagogues and made the object of a daily prayer—that they might not enter eternal life’.¹ The commentator does not provide a reference to a primary text. Instead, he references a work on the parables by W.O.E. Oesterley. Here is what Oesterley says: ‘The Samaritans were publicly cursed in the synagogues; and a petition was daily offered up praying

1. E.E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, rev. edn, 1974), p. 151.

God that the Samaritans might not be partakers of eternal life.² Oesterley provides no reference, neither primary nor secondary. For evidence of the general Jewish dislike of Samaritans, he cites Sir. 50.25-26, which refers to 'that foolish nation that dwells in Shechem', which interpreters (rightly) assume refers to Samaria.

Although Oesterley provides no primary documentation for his claim, it is likely that the 'daily' petition he had in mind was the *Amidah* (the 'Standing' prayer, also called the *Shemoneh Esra*, i.e. the 'Eighteen' Benedictions), whose Twelfth Benediction, in which Nazarenes (viz., Christians) and *minim* ('heretics') are cursed, was modified. Interest in the Palestinian version of the *Amidah*, particularly the textual form of its Twelfth Benediction, was awakened by its discovery among the tens of thousands of documents recovered from the Cairo synagogue Genizah in 1896. Solomon Schechter published the text in 1898.³

The word 'Samaritans' (or *Kutim*, as the Rabbis usually called them), however, does not appear in the Twelfth Benediction (or *Birkat ha-Minim*). The argument that Samaritans were cursed in the synagogue is based on the assumption that they were, or at least were included, in the *minim* (מינים) referenced, along with the Nazarenes, in this benediction. The text reads,

- 1 For those doomed to destruction may there be no hope
- 2 and may the dominion (מלכות) of arrogance⁴ be quickly uprooted in our days
- 3 and may the Nazarenes and the heretics (והנצרים והמינים) be destroyed in a moment
- 4 and may they not be inscribed with the righteous.
- 5 Blessed are you, O Lord,
- 6 who subdues the arrogant.⁵

2. W.O.E. Oesterley, *The Gospel Parables in the Light of their Jewish Background* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), p. 162.

3. For the fragments of the *Amidah*, see S. Schechter, 'Genizah Specimens', *JQR* 10 (1898), pp. 654-61 (656-57).

4. The 'kingdom [or dominion] of arrogance' refers to Rome.

5. The translation is from J. Marcus, 'Birkat Ha-Minim Revisited', *NTS* 55 (2009), pp. 523-51 (524). Marcus follows the Hebrew text presented in Schechter, 'Genizah Specimens', p. 657.

The identification of the *minim* in line 3 as Samaritans is evidently a deduction based on a few texts elsewhere in the rabbinic literature, in which Samaritans are called *minim* or their writings are called ‘books of the *minim*’. For example, in a passage that cautions against saying ‘amen’ until one hears the whole prayer, Samaritans seem to be lumped in with *minim* (cf. *t. Ber.* 3.25-26). In another passage (cf. *Sipre Deut.* §331 [on Deut. 32.41]), Samaritans seem to be lumped in with the *minim* who hate God. It is also possible that Samaritans were suspected of remaining silent in the recitation of the *Amidah*’s Fourteenth Benediction, which refers to God as ‘Builder of Jerusalem’,⁶ and in the recitation of the Second Benediction, in which God is described as he who ‘revives the dead’ (cf. *y. Ber.* 5.3, 9c; *Kutim* 2.7).⁷

Other texts link Samaritans with *minim*. In the tannaitic rabbinic commentary on Numbers, Rabbi Aqiba opines, in reference to ‘the books of the heretics [ספרי מינין]’, one must burn them entirely (*Sipre Num.* §16 [on Num. 5.23]). Later in this tannaitic commentary, Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar claims that he can prove that ‘the books of the Kutim [ספרי כותים] are forgeries, for they maintain that the dead do not live’ (*Sipre Num.* §112 [on Num. 15.31]). The same assertion appears in the Talmud, only it is credited to Rabbi Eleazar ben Rabbi Yose (cf. *b. Sot.* 33b [ספרי כותיים] ‘books of the Kutim’; *b. Sanh.* 90b). The rabbis regularly call Samaritans ‘Kutim’ because of what is said in 2 Kgs 17.24: ‘And the King of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah [כּוּתָּה] ... and placed them in the cities of Samaria in place of the people of Israel.’ Similarly, we read in the tannaitic commentary on Deuteronomy, ‘This [Shechem] refers to Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, which are located where the Kutim [i.e. Samaritans] dwell’ (*Sipre Deut.* §56 [on Deut. 11.30]). For more early references to Samaritans, see *Mek. Nez.* §12 (on Exod. 21.35); *m. Demai* 5.9; *t. Demai* 5.21-22; *t. Git.* 1.4; *t. Nid.* 6.15, where it is claimed that the Kutim ‘bury their abortions’ in the bathhouse toilets!⁸ The biased tendency of these references is obvious.

6. The Samaritans had no desire to rebuild Jerusalem or the Jewish temple. The Samaritans believed that the proper place for worship, where the temple should stand, was Mount Gerizim (cf. *Jn* 4.20).

7. According to *Kutim* 2.7, the Samaritans (or *Kutim*) do not believe in the resurrection of the dead.

8. Alas, archaeological excavations have shown that some societies in antiquity did this very thing. See the brief report in M. Rose, ‘Askalon’s Dead Babies’,

As already mentioned, we also find references to ‘books of the heretics’ (ספרי מינין), e.g. ‘The Gospels and the books of the heretics [הגליונים וספרי מינין] they do not save from the fire’ (*t. Shab.* 13.5; cf. *b. Shab.* 116a); ‘The Gospels and books of the heretics [הגליונים וספרי מינין] do not convey uncleanness’ (*t. Yad.* 2.13), i.e. they are not canonical.⁹ To what do ‘the books of the heretics’ refer? Christian writings? Samaritan writings? Some think גליון (*gilāyōn*) transliterates εὐαγγέλιον (‘gospel’),¹⁰ and so these could be references to Christian books. However, Karl Georg Kuhn cautions that גליונים alone might refer only to ‘margins’, i.e. ‘the margins [*or* blank spaces] and the books of the heretics they do not save from fire.’¹¹ Perhaps in most texts, this is true. Nevertheless, in older, uncensored MSS of the Talmudic tractate *Shabbat*, the passage in question, i.e. *b. Shab.* 116a, has a final line: ‘Rabbi Meir called it *Aven giljon* [און גליון] and Rabbi Yohanan called it *Avon giljon* [עון גליון].’¹² Travers Herford, Morris Goldstein and others are convinced that the ‘transliterations’ *Aven giljon* and *Avon giljon*

Archaeology 50 (1997), pp. 12-13. The materials date to the late Roman period. The evidence confirms that some pagans, who practiced infant exposure, cast unwanted infants into latrines. There is no evidence that Samaritans did this.

9. Inspired (canonical) books ‘defile the hands’ (as do all holy things).

10. Although L. Goldschmidt, *Der babylonische Talmud* (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1929), I, p. 790 (at *b. Shab.* 116a), translates the phrase ‘die Ränder und Minäerbücher’ as ‘the blank spaces and heretical books’, he remarks, ‘Unter גליונים sind hier zweifellos die Evangelien zu verstehen; die Talmudisten haben diese Barajtha mißverstanden’ (‘גליונים undoubtedly refers to the Gospels; the Talmudists have misunderstood this baraita’) (p. 790 n. 23). The Soncino edition of the Talmud also translates ‘blank spaces’, though acknowledging (*ad loc.*, n. b 5) that M. Jastrow (*A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* [New York: Pardes, 1950], I, pp. 248-49) believes that, in some texts (e.g. *t. Shab.* 13.5), גליונים is a satirical reference to the Christian ‘gospels’.

11. K.G. Kuhn, ‘Giljonim and sifre minim’, in W. Eltester (ed.), *Juden—Urchristentum—Kirche: Festschrift für Joachim Jeremias* (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1960), pp. 24-61 (31-35).

12. R. Travers Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1903), p. 162. For Hebrew text, see p. 415. In the Soncino edition of the Talmud, this line does not appear.

intentionally mimic the word εὐαγγέλιον.¹³ If so, we may have a parallel with the Twelfth Benediction, in which *nosrim* (Nazarenes, or Christians) and *minim* (perhaps including Samaritans) are juxtaposed.

There is another meager piece of evidence that might support the Samaritan interpretation of the Twelfth Benediction. One will recall that in his *Dialogus cum Tryphone*, Justin Martyr complains of harassment in synagogues, where Christians are cursed. Justin says, ‘And now you reject those who hope in him, and in him who sent him—God the Almighty and Maker of all things—cursing in your synagogues [καταρώμενοι ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς ὑμῶν] those that believe on Christ’ (*Dial.* 16.4). One will further recall that Justin was born and raised in Samaria, as he himself acknowledges: ‘I gave no thought to any of my people, that is, the Samaritans [τοῦ γένους τοῦ ἐμοῦ, λέγω δὲ τῶν Σαμαρέων], when I had a communication in writing with Caesar’ (*Dial.* 120.6). The maledictions to which Justin makes reference may have been keenly felt, for he was cursed not only for believing in Jesus but, perhaps, for also being of Samaria.

If the *minim* (מִינִיּוֹת) (‘heretics’) of the *Amidah*’s Twelfth Benediction do indeed refer to or at least include Samaritans, then perhaps we can agree with Oesterley. But we must remember that in rabbinic literature the word *minim* refers to various groups, including Sadducees, Christians and others. Moreover, the Twelfth Benediction underwent several redactions. We are not sure when and where the words, ‘Nazarenes and heretics’, were added to this ancient prayer.¹⁴ The evidence—geographically and chronological-

13. Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash*, p. 163; M. Goldstein, *Jesus in the Jewish Tradition* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), pp. 53-54; cf. H. Laible, *Jesus Christus im Thalmud* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 2nd edn, 1900), pp. 62-66.

14. For an assessment of the textual traditions and variants of the Twelfth Benediction, see A. Marmorstein, ‘The Amidah of the Public Fast Days’, *JQR* 15 (1925), pp. 409-18; K.G. Kuhn, *Achtzehngebet und Vaterunser und der Reim* (WUNT, 1; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1950), pp. 18-21; U. Ehrlich and R. Langer, ‘The Earliest Texts of the *Birkat Haminim*’, *HUCA* 76 (2005), pp. 63-112; R. Langer, *Cursing the Christians? A History of the Birkat HaMinim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 187-95. One should also consult R. Kimelman, ‘*Birkat Ha-Minim* and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Late Antiquity’, in E.P. Sanders et al. (eds.), *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition 2: Aspects of Judaism in the Greco-Roman Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981),

ly—is simply too uncertain for commentators to assert that in the days of Jesus the Samaritans were cursed in the synagogues.

Did the People of Ephesus Thank Jesus for Casting Out Evil Spirits?

Our second example of failure to look carefully at what is being cited concerns an inscription unearthed in Ephesus. In the discussion of Acts 19.11–20, where professional exorcists in Ephesus—who invoke the name of Jesus ‘whom Paul preaches’—are defeated and embarrassed by a violent evil spirit, a prominent commentator remarks, ‘A later Ephesian source also reports Jesus’s power to expel “unclean spirits and demons” (I.Eph. 46.3–4).’¹⁵ I.Eph. is an abbreviation that refers to a published collection of inscriptions from ancient Ephesus. The specific volume in question is edited by Hermann Wankel.¹⁶ The lines from I.Eph. 46 that are cited read, ἀκάθαρτα πνεύματα καὶ δαίμονας ἐκβάλλεις (‘unclean spirits and demons you cast out’).

As it turns out, inscription no. 46 is not an ‘Ephesian source’ that ‘reports Jesus’s power to expel’ demons. On the contrary, it is an inscribed talisman that quotes the apocryphal correspondence between Jesus and Abgar, the ruler of Edessa, a city in Syria. I.Eph. 46 is not a ‘report’ about an exorcism or healing, either; it is an apotropaic charm whose intention is to protect cities, families and individuals from harm. The reference to the inscription in the Acts commentary is highly misleading and reflects a lack of autopsy. After all, on the first page of the discussion of I.Eph. 46, Wankel explicitly identifies the inscription as *Der apokryphe Briefwechsel zwischen Abgar und Jesus* (‘The apocryphal correspondence between Abgar and Jesus’).¹⁷ In his discussion of this inscription, Wankel notes that there are

pp. 226–44; W. Horbury, ‘The Benediction of the *Minim* and Early Jewish-Christian Controversy’, *JTS* 33 (1982), pp. 19–61.

15. Craig S. Keener. *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012–2015), III, p. 2843.

16. H. Wankel (ed.), *Die Inschriften von Ephesos—Teil 1a: Nr. 1–47 (Texte)* (Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien, 11/1; Bonn: Habelt, 1979), pp. 285–91 (no. 46).

17. Wankel (ed.), *Die Inschriften von Ephesos*, p. 285. This apocryphal correspondence can be conveniently accessed in H.J.W. Drijvers, ‘The Abgar Legend’, in W. Schneemelcher (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha. Volume One: Gospels and*

several other inscriptions citing all or part of the apocryphal *correspondence of Abgar and Christ*.¹⁸ The major inscriptions of this text on stone include a gate in the city of Philippi (Macedonia), a grave just outside Edessa (Syria), a lintel above the door of a house in Ephesus, a slab in Euchaïta (Pontus) secondarily built into a mosque and a fountain, also in Euchaïta. These several examples closely agree in wording. The apocryphal Abgar-Jesus correspondence was well known in the early Byzantine period and is in fact discussed by Eusebius. In a recent study, Theodore de Bruyn notes several artifacts, mostly amulets (and mostly in Greek and Coptic), that contain parts of the Abgar-Jesus correspondence, especially the part where Jesus promises to heal the king.¹⁹

I conclude this brief note with another example of sloppy referencing, which in some—if not most—cases took place, in all probability, because scholars did not consult the source they cited. Commentators in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the first decade or two of the twentieth century sometimes cited a first-hand account of an eerie encounter in the mountains of southern Lebanon, as an approximate parallel to the strange event that Jesus and his disciples experienced on the east side of the Sea of Galilee (i.e. Mk 5.1-20 and parr.). After British adventurer Eliot Warburton

Related Writings (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, rev. edn, 1991), pp. 492-500; J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation Based on M.R. James* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 538-42. For Greek text, see Wankel (ed.), *Die Inschriften von Ephesos*, pp. 287-90; B.D. Ehrman and Z. Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 416. The text is also quoted in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 1.13.6-9; cf. K. Lake, *Eusebius: Ecclesiastical History I* (LCL, 153; Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), p. 88.

18. The various editions of this apocryphal text are compared and discussed in C.A. Evans, *Jesus and the Manuscripts* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2020), pp. 420-23.

19. T. de Bruyn, 'Christian Apocryphal and Canonical Narratives in Greek Amulets and Formularies in Late Antiquity', in P. Piovaneli and T. Burke (eds.), *Rediscovering the Apocryphal Continent: New Perspectives on Early Christian and Late Antique Apocryphal Texts and Traditions* (WUNT, 349; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), pp. 153-74. See also A.M. Henry, 'Apotropaic Autographs: Orality and Materiality in the Abgar-Jesus Inscriptions', *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 17 (2016), pp. 165-85.

returned home from his travels in the Holy Land, he published his lengthy diary. Here is what he says of his encounter with a mentally troubled man:

On descending from these heights, I found myself in a cemetery ... The silence of the night was now broken by fierce yells and howlings, which I discovered proceeded from a naked maniac, who was fighting with some wild dogs for a bone. The moment he perceived me he left his canine comrades, and, bounding along with rapid strides, seized my horse's bridle, and almost forced him backward over the cliff ... A madman is not a pleasant opponent any where [*sic*]; but on a dangerous precipice at midnight, far from all human aid, he becomes the most formidable opponent one can encounter.²⁰

All or parts of this intriguing narrative are quoted in several older commentaries. Alas, I could not find one that cited it correctly. Invariably, bibliographical information was incomplete and inaccurate. Almost always the quotation itself was corrupt, largely due to the fact that the first to quote this passage did not indicate what parts of the text went back to Warburton and what parts were the commentators' added remarks. It became clear to me that very few actually consulted Warburton's text and those few who perhaps did consult it, did not take care to record accurately either Warburton's words or the bibliographical data (such as the actual title of the book!).

Additional examples of careless scholarship could be cited, but I have no desire to embarrass the living or the departed. What we teach our students, we must ourselves practice, and that is to practice autopsy, to view our sources—both primary and secondary—with our own eyes. Critical scholarship is challenging enough without adding to it the burden of deciphering inaccurate and misleading references.

20. E. Warburton, *The Crescent and the Cross; or Romance and Realities of Eastern Travel* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1845), Part 2, pp. 175-76. The work has been reprinted many times.