

# Who Was Sanballat?

Does this name mean anything to you? He is mentioned in the Bible as someone who tried desperately to prevent the Judeans from rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem.

A quick historical recap. The Assyrian King Sargon the 2<sup>nd</sup> conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE. As was his policy, he exiled most of the pagan ten northern tribes to the ends of the Assyrian empire. And he replaced them with other peoples he had conquered. For the next two hundred years, the inhabitants of the north lived alongside the Judeans of the south and adopted much of their religious customs. They became known as Samaritans.

From **590 BCE to 586 BCE** the Babylonian Empire under Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judea and in three stages removed most of its inhabitants to Babylonia. There they were able to establish their own community. And, as the Book of Daniel shows, many entered into government service, while still maintaining their Judean religious traditions.

In **539 BCE** the Persian Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon and a year later authorized the Judeans who wanted, to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city and the Temple. Most stayed put. But when Judeans did return in four waves, they came up against the Samaritans who claimed that they were possessors of the land and the heirs to the Israelite tradition. They, together with other local governors, did all they could to block the returnees including sending messages back to the capital accusing them of undermining Persian authority and being disloyal.

After Cyrus's death, the community in Judea went into decline. Only when Darius the Great discovered Cyrus's authorization in the palace archives, did he then send his closest Judean advisor Nehemiah to Judea as the Governor with reinforcements and supplies to complete the work.

There is some confusion between the Jewish and the Persian sources as to which Persian kings were involved with whom and at what time. As there are about the dates of the different Judean leaders Sheshbazzar, Zerubavel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, and when each one arrived at Jerusalem. But both sets of sources agree on the overall story. It was a combination of the political power of Nehemiah and the religious revival under Ezra that succeeded in rebuilding the Judean community in the Land of Israel.

There were then, in the Ancient Near East, as now, lots of different rival clans, tribes, fiefdoms, and kingdoms all jockeying for power within larger power conglomerate empires. **Sanballat** was the head of the then influential Samaritan community in the province described by the Persians as Judea. According to the Book of Nehemiah, he was the archrival and opponent of the returning Judeans because he claimed that they were imperial, colonial usurpers, who did not belong there and had occupied what was now Samaritan territory. Ring any bells?

He claimed that the Samaritans were the indigenous population and the true heirs of the Mosaic tradition which only names the mountains Gerizim and Ebal on the West Bank of the Jordan( Deuteronomy Chapters 11 and 27) where Samaritan temples were. There was no mention in the Bible of Jerusalem as a holy city or that the Temple should be built there. He also claimed that the Judeans were falsifying the Torah ( not unlike Islam a thousand years later). He accused the Babylonian Jews of undermining the Law of Moses by inventing an Oral Law that could modify and update the Torah to meet the needs of an exiled community. If the Judeans would succeed in establishing themselves, Samaritan culture would find itself in an inferior position.

Sanballat appealed to other people in the area to aid him in blocking Nehemiah's construction. Nehemiah was equal to the emergency and with his forces held off the opposition while they rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and then expanded the Temple.

The Judeans were as divided then as they are today. In Babylon, a lot of the priests and the aristocracy had adopted Persian laws and a Persian way of life. They had assimilated and intermarried. Even so, they insisted on retaining their Biblically commanded tithes and status. Ezra who led the religious revival, and Nehemiah both tried to force the assimilated priests either to return to the demands of the religion or to relinquish their privileges.

Nehemiah discovered that one of the grandsons of the current high priest Eliashib had married a daughter of this Sanballat and was thus son-in-law of the chief enemy of the Jews. Nehemiah also found that Eliashib had leased the storerooms of the temple to Samaritan supporters in effect running his own private economy. This struggle and the issue of intermarriage are reflected in the Prophet Zacharia's metaphor of the High Priest wearing filthy garments ( Chapter 3 ). Meanwhile, throughout the struggle to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple, most Jews were happy to live elsewhere in the Persian empire even if many of them made regular pilgrimages to Jerusalem.

I am mentioning all this precisely because in so many ways all this mirrors the divisions in the Jewish world today. One is strongly involved nationally in the survival and success of the reborn Jewish community in the land of Israel. Others are more loyal to their adopted countries and identify with the secular culture of the Diaspora. One part of the Jewish community is happy to marry out, the other strongly wishes to marry partners who share their religious commitment. One section is loyal to the Oral Law as well as the written Law. Another rejects the Oral Law. One section sees itself as culturally Jewish, the other as religiously so. And everywhere there is a huge gap between the wealthy and the poor. Meanwhile, we face a constant threat from antagonists who claim we are aliens and want to "replace us" or drive us from our land and claim we have no right to be there. The Samaritans have survived to this very day too. But in far smaller numbers and influence than the Judeans,

Given all of this, what is the secret of our survival? Why have we done so much better than the Samaritans? Let's leave God out of this for we cannot know. Was it religious fanaticism? Neither Daniel, Zerubavel, Ezra nor

Nehemiah were religious fanatics. They all interacted with Persian society at the highest levels. Was it extreme nationalism? They were all part of and loyal to a Diaspora world and non-Jewish societies. I believe the answer lies in the fact that we went into exile, then and many times later. We learned to adapt and adopt. We were not stuck in a rigid Samaritan world of narrowing religious and cultural identity but experienced and adapted to other worlds. If our constitution held us together, our adaptability helped us thrive.

As they say in Hindustani (sic), Plus Ca Change!