

# Zachary Wong

## Samaria-Sebaste

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Nestled amongst Olive groves in the central hill country of Samaria, the ancient city of Samaria-Sebaste remains hidden from the main tourist routes that run through the country of Israel. Although the Palestinian authorities desired to develop the site into a main tourist destination for visitors that dare to venture into deep into the heartlands, the site remains contested and still is a victim of political turmoil even as recent as a month prior to the writing of this article<sup>1</sup>. While providing a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, or to the neglected situation of Samaria-Sebaste is not the goal of this research paper, a brief study of the history and archaeological remains will hopefully bring attention and appreciation to this hidden gem that was once capital of the Israelite Kingdom.

### **Samaria, the Capital of Kingdom of Israel**

According to the Bible, the city was founded by Omri, the founder of the Omride Dynasty of the Kingdom of Israel.

He[Omri] bought the hill of Samaria from Shemer for two talents of silver, and he fortified the hill and called the name of the city that he built Samaria, after the name of Shemer, the owner of the hill (1 Kings 16:24 ESV).

The Biblical account does not provide the reasoning for the need of a new capital, but one can easily relate Omri's desire to leave a legacy as a new dynastic ruler. Besides political motivations, Monson suggests the move was also strategic, moving the capital westward provided a much larger buffer zone between the Arameans in Transjordan when compared to the previous capital Tirzah (Monson, 1983, pp. 136). Samaria also commanded a much more accessible location in terms of its connection to the International Coastal Highway.

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<sup>1</sup> Palestinians pave new road over archaeological site in northern West Bank, <https://www.jpost.com/archaeology/article-734320>

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Rainey suggests this move provided Israel's connection to Tyre, the economic power house over trade in the Mediterranean Sea (Rainey & Notley, 2015, pp. 93).

The buffer zone between Aram and Israel did not have to wait long before it was tested. Ben-Hadad II's forces from Damascus were able to penetrate twice into the hill country of Samaria during the reign of Ahab (1 Kings 20:1, 874–853 BCE), and Jehoram, his son (852–841 BC). The latter siege resulted in dire shortages of food, which drove inflation off the roof and Samaritans even had to resort to cannibalism<sup>2</sup>. However, both Aramean efforts proved unsuccessful.

After the siege laid by the Arameans, Samaria's would not see foreign swords for a century or so, until the arrival of the Assyrians in 722 BCE. But that did not mean that Samaria was spared of violence, 2 Kings record two military coups/assassinations that took place in the city<sup>3</sup>. This would not be the only time that Samaria has witnessed royal blood being shed, two sons of noble lineage would later also be murdered in Samaria. Samaria would see its end as Israel's capital upon the arrival Assyrian King Shalmaneser V. The three year long siege resulted in the deportation of Israelite King Hoshea and organization of the Samaritan province of Assyria<sup>4</sup>.

### **From Samaria to Sebaste**

Little is known about city of Samaria during the Persian period besides a certain governor of the area named Sanballat the Horonite<sup>5</sup> who opposed Nehemiah's rebuilding efforts in Jerusalem. Josephus later records another Sanballat<sup>6</sup> petitioned Alexander the Great for permission to build a Samaritan<sup>7</sup> Temple on Mount Gerizim<sup>8</sup>. According to Roman historian Curtius Rufus, the Samaritans later revolted against Alexander's Governor, and they met the Macedonian avenging force not long after<sup>9</sup>. A cave at Wadi ed-Daliyeh has preserved remains of some 300 Samaritans that fled the city and hid from the Macedonian troops.

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<sup>2</sup> See the dramatic event recorded in 2 Kings 6:25-29.

<sup>3</sup> Shallum was struck down by Menahem (2 Kings 15:14) and Pekahiah was murdered by Pekah (2 Kings 15:25) both events took place in the royal palace of Samaria.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Kings 17:6.

<sup>5</sup> Sanballat I.

<sup>6</sup> Sanballat III, grandson of the previously mentioned individual.

<sup>7</sup> Later called the Samaritans.

<sup>8</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 11.8.2.

<sup>9</sup> Curtius Rufus, 4.8.9-10.

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Amongst their remains there was discovered a papyrus fragment that names "Sanballat governor of Samaria".

Archaeological evidence suggests that Samaria was fortified during the Hellenistic period, possibly because some of Alexander's Macedonian troops were settled there (Rainey & Notley, 2015, pp.176). These fortifications must have further improved the defenses of this once Israelite Capital. The Hasmonean King John Hyrcanus besieged the city during his conquests of the region. He left it to his sons, Aristobulus and Antigonus, to "press vigorously", but it still took them over a year to conquer the city. Apparently, in his rage against the city, Hyrcanus wiped Samaria off the maps<sup>10</sup>. Josephus records that the Roman Commander Gabinius made an effort to rebuild cities damaged during the Hasmonean conquests and Samaria was amongst the list<sup>11</sup>.

By the early Roman period (25 BCE), Herod greatly expanded Samaria in architecture, inhabitants and importance. He renamed his newly found city Sebaste, which is the Greek form of Augustus, in honor of his friend and benefactor that granted him the region of Samaria. Herod constructs a new wall around the city, introduces 6000 new inhabitants, and builds a temple in honor of Augustus (and possibly Roma), on the summit of the city. The Augusteum, is one of three temples that the King built in honor of Augustus, the other two are located at Caesarea and Omrit. While Augustus acted as a reconciler between Herod and his sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, the city that bears Caesar's name would not be able to mend the gap between father and sons. Herod eventually had both his sons strangled here in Sebaste<sup>12</sup>.

### **Sebaste to Sebūstieh**

In the Gospels, Jesus can be seen passing through the region Samaria on multiple occasions. While his interactions with Samaritans are well documented, there is no reason to suggest that he ever made his way to the city, especially knowing of the recent expansion of an imperial cult temple in the city.

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<sup>10</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 13.10.2.

<sup>11</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 14.5.3.

<sup>12</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 16.11.7.

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After the death of Stephen, Philip, possibly hiding in Samaritan territories from Saul's persecution, went into the city of Samaria-Sebaste. During his visit, multitudes of Samaritans came to faith. So much so that the Apostolic leadership, in the form of Peter and John, felt the need to visit the city. As a result of the Apostolic visitation, the holy spirit befell on the multitude that were baptized in Samaria-Sebaste<sup>13</sup>.

Scarce information about Samaria-Sebaste is available after the New Testament. Josephus mentions that 3000 of the "most warlike" men from Samaria-Sebaste joined the Roman effort to subdue the revolt<sup>14</sup>. Unfortunately, their efforts were not enough to save their own city from being sacked by Jewish rebels<sup>15</sup>.

Little to non information is available on Samaria-Sebaste after the Jewish revolt, Eusebius makes a short reference to the site in his *Onomasticon*:

Samaria. A royal city of Israel, Not it and the surrounding area (are called) Sebaste<sup>16</sup>.

Although not much information of physical reality is given, Eusebius seems aware that Samaria is not called Sebaste. In 1838, almost 1500 years after Eusebius, American Biblical scholar Edward Robinson accompanied by Arabist Rev. Eil Smith was the first to arrive in Samaria-Sebaste. In the later publications, Robinson noted that Samaria-Sebaste, along with Shechem-Neapolis, was one of the few sites that were able to retain their Greek designations in Arabic, Sebaste was Sebüstieh and Neapolis was Nablus (Robinson, 1856, pp.201).

18-19th Century Sebüstieh was far from the glory of being the national capital. In 1855, Bostock and Riley published the translated writings of Pliny the Elder, they made a footnote on Sebüstieh stating it was "now occupied by a poor village"<sup>17</sup>. The Harvard excavation team also made a comment on the unsanitary conditions in the village of Sebüstieh (Reisner,

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<sup>13</sup> Acts 8.

<sup>14</sup> Josephus, *War of the Jews*, 2.4.2.

<sup>15</sup> Josephus, *War of the Jews*, 2.18.1.

<sup>16</sup> Eusebius, *Onomasticon* 893/162.12, Notley & Safari Translation, Brill, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> *The Natural History. Pliny the Elder. John Bostock, M.D., F.R.S. H.T. Riley, Esq., B.A. London. Taylor and Francis, Red Lion Court, Fleet Street. 1855.*

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1924, pp.6). Mark Twain visited the site in 1876 and complained that the site was “hot and dusty” (Twain, 1869, pp.397).

## Geography of Samaria

We will now shift our attention to the geography of Samaria. The site of Samaria lies on the west side of the central ridge of the Samaritan hill country approximately 9 KM northwest of Biblical Shechem. Roman Geographer Pliny the Elder records that Samaria-Sebaste was on a hill<sup>18</sup>. The settlement is built upon a westward stretching spur with a summit at 470m above sea level. Deep valleys protect the settlement from the north, west and south, a setting comparable to Jerusalem, the other new capital founded in the same period, albeit Jerusalem was accessible from the north rather than east<sup>19</sup>. The eastern slopes provide the easiest way to access the ancient town, and this is where the modern Palestinian town of Sebastia now lies.

Samaria would stand unbreached twice before the Arameans forces, the much stronger Assyrians were only able to take the city after a 3 year long siege. The Hasmoneans, resorted to reducing the city by encirclement and starvation of its inhabitants, could only take the city after a year long siege. These incidents attest to the commanding defensible location of Samaria, and is no doubt thanks to the strategic hilltop location. Josephus, himself a general and defender of Jotapata, describing Hyrcanus’ conquest of the region, praised Samaria saying:

“So he made an expedition against Samaria which was a very strong city”.  
Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 13.10.2.

2 Kings 6:27 makes reference to a threshing floor in the city, it was probably located at the summit of the hill of Shemer, and possibly served as the hill’s original purpose<sup>20</sup>. The early excavators of Samaria, under the auspices of Harvard University, also made reference to a threshing floor used by the locals from Sebastia. In the published archaeological records of the excavations made during 1908-1910, Reisner commented on the pleasurable westerly winds and fine views towards the Mediterranean Sea on the summit (Reisner, 1924, pp.6).

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<sup>18</sup> Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History* 5.14

<sup>19</sup> See: Tappy, 2014, pp.73. Although Tappy was speaking of the Archaeology of Samaria-Sebaste, he named the city as “Jerusalem’s Elder Sister”.

<sup>20</sup> Again, very similar to Jerusalem.

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Dorsey's study identifies 2 ancient highways, or roads, that pass ancient Samaria. The first of which is a branch of the central north-south highway that connects Shechem, Bethel, Jerusalem and Hebron. This branch travels further north connecting into the Jerezeel valley road network. The road leaves Shechem heading northwest following Nahal Shechem, it makes a northward bend west of Kuma, in the modern city of Nablus. The road passes east of the hill of Samaria and continues north towards Dothan. The second road connects Samaria to the coastal plains. This route follows Nahal Shechem<sup>21</sup> along the modern Nablus-Tulkarm Road, arriving at modern day Tulkarm, Ancient Birat Sorqua (Dorsey, 1987). Not far northwest from Tulkarm on the coast lies the port city of Caesarea, which was also a creation of Herod. Josephus records that Herod entertained Marcus Agrippa for a tour of the Judean Kingdom that took place in 15 BCE<sup>22</sup>. Their first stop was Caesarea and then they made their way to Sebaste, where they must have traveled up the Samaritan hill country via this same route. Similarly, the Jewish rebel force probably took the same ascent on route to sack Sebaste<sup>23</sup>.

### **History of Excavations at Samaria-Sebaste**

The site of Samaria-Sebaste was first excavated under the direction of Schumacher (1908) and Reisner (1909-1910) by the auspices of the Semitic Museum of Harvard University. Reisner, Fisher and Lyon prepared the initial excavation reports and Harvard University Press published them 1924. These initial excavations were massive both in scale of excavated areas and the workers involved. The report records a whopping 400 strong working force were involved at one point of the excavation, and on average around 200 workers worked daily (Reisner, 1924, pp.6). While these early excavations made enormous progress their primitive methodology left much to be desired.

The second phase of excavations took place between 1931 to 1935. This joint expedition was under the direction of John Winter Crowfoot, Kathleen Mary Kenyon and Eliezer Sukenik, the results of which were published in the 3 volumes, *Early Ivories from Samaria* (1938), *The Buildings at Samaria* (1942), and *The objects from Samaria* (1957).

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<sup>21</sup> Known today as Nahal Nablus.

<sup>22</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 16.2.1.

<sup>23</sup> Josephus, *War of the Jews*, 2.18.1.

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The Department of Antiquities of Jordan also carried out some excavations in the 1960s, director Fawzi Zayadine later published 2 reports, *Samaria-Sebaste: clearance and excavations* (1967-1968) and *Coins from Samaria-Sebaste* (1981).

### **The Site of Samaria-Sebaste**

As previously mentioned, the site of Samaria-Sebaste lies somewhat neglected, the minimal development has taken place besides the pavement at the parking lot area. The columns that flank the paved access road to the site was once a colonnaded street. This was probably the Decumanus Maximus, the east-west main street that runs from the west gate through the heart of the city and exits at the east gate. This main street was also probably flanked by shops on both sides. From the street we arrive at the Forum which doubles as the modern parking lot of the site, where a large basilica was also discovered next to the Forum. The dirt footpath from the north corner of the forum leads to the modestly preserved ancient theater. Although we read of Herod's expansion efforts in Samaria-Sebaste, much of what is seen today and mentioned above date to the late 2nd and early 3rd century when the city was expanded once again under the Roman Emperor Septimius Severus (Netzer, 2006, pp.83).

The path brings us to the hellenistic remains of the acropolis of Samaria-Sebaste, mainly the round tower that once protected the upper city, a total of 3 were discovered here, two other ones lie to the east of the hill. Magness describes that the masonry of the round towers of Samaria are distinctly hellenistic, and they were developed as a response to the development of the new siege weaponry, Ballistas (Magness, 2015 pp.70). These towers are probably the best examples of Hellenistic fortifications in all of Israel.

Pass the Theater is the acropolis area that the early Harvard excavations poured much effort into excavating. A monumental staircase was discovered early during the first season, along with a torso of a larger than life marble statue of an emperor figure, presumably Augustus himself<sup>24</sup>, confirming the structure of being the Temple of Augustus.

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<sup>24</sup> The statue is now housed in the garden in front of the building of the Institute of Archaeology of Hebrew University on Mt. Scopus, Jerusalem.

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According to Netzer, the Temple ,orientated from north-south, sat on an elevated platform and had a large forecourt to its north side. The staircase connected the forecourt to the entrance of the temple. This temple was the highest point of the city, and no doubt it would be visible from all directions, including travelers climbing up from Nahal Shechem highway (Netzer, 2006 pp.87).

Surrounding the temple complex is what Netzer calls the “fortified compound”. Intriguingly, a total of eight stepped pools were discovered in this area. Netzer was reluctant to suggest it, but Yonatan Adler recently argued that these were actually Jewish ritual immersion pools (Miqva’ot), more intriguing is the juxtapositioning of distinctively Jewish religious features in pagan environment (Adler, 2021).

The foot path continues through the olive grove and turns south around the staircase of the Augusteum. The structures in the deep pit date to the Iron age/Israelite period. From this period of Samaria-Sebaste was discovered the Israelite period palatial complex, confirmed by the discovery of multiple “Proto-Ionic” capitals, which sometimes are called Israelite Capitals. Two rooms within the palatial complex are of particular interest, the “ivory house” and the Ostracon house.

The so-called “Ivory House”as its namesake, is where a huge cache of Ivory fragments were discovered. Crowfoot published the findings in 1938 under the title *Early Ivories from Samaria*, Apparently over 500 fragments of carved tusks were discovered in total, depicting sphinxes, lions, stags, male and female figures; these intricately carved ivories were inlays that once adorned furniture. Being Phoenician make, these pieces coincide with the biblical description of Israelite king Ahab, who happens to have married a Phoenician princess, the infamous Jezebel:

Now the rest of the acts of Ahab and all that he did, and the ivory house that he built and all the cities that he built, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel? (1 Kings 22:39 )

In the Ostracon house is the location that yielded over 100 inscribed potsherds. These inscribed pieces were administrative notifications concerning shipments of wine and oil(Rainey & Notley, 2015, pp.115). Besides paleographical and philological information, generally speaking the ostracon attested to the administrative importance of Samaria

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during the Iron Age.

Finally, the footpath curves around the southwestern corner of the site, before arriving at the parking lot is a modestly sized Crusader basilica church structure. This church is called the Chapel of the Invention of the Head of John the Baptist, both because of the Byzantine tradition that traces the death and imprisonment of John to this area and the poorly preserved wall paintings in the crypt depicting the beheading of John (Gibson, 2014 pp.69-70).

### **Samaria, neglected gem**

We have hence come full circle around the sites atop the hill that was ancient Samaria-Sebaste, besides the few poles and wires that constitute the pathetic attempt to fence off areas that visitors are not welcome, Samaria-Sebaste remains undeveloped. The archaeologist that dug here were the last people to turn over the stones. On one hand, a modern visitor would appreciate the addition of basic commodities to be developed at the site(i.e. A bathroom), On the other hand, the rustic, rough, unpolished, natural appearance of Samaria-Sebaste presents an unspeakable beauty. In a sense, the modern visitor's experience is not too far off of what those early explorers themselves would have experienced. The dusty and hot environments, the overgrown footpaths, the ancient ruins nestled among the olive trees all contribute to the romantic sense of adventure.

Recently, a friend commented on his trip to Israel, which followed a normal touristic itinerary. Complaining, he stated, that at a point in his trip, he felt like he was visiting a Holy Land Theme Park. Certainly, I thought, "that wouldn't happen if you had Samaria-Sebaste on your itinerary."

Perhaps, I should allow Robinson to speak on behalf of Samaria-Sebaste to convince you of its beauty:

Samaria is one of great beauty. The hill itself is cultivated to the top; and, at about midway of the ascent, is surrounded by a narrow terrace of level land, like a belt, below which the roots of the hill spread off more gradually into

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the valleys. Higher up too are the marks of slighter terraces, once occupied perhaps by the streets of the ancient city (Robinson, 1856, pp. 304).

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