

# The Anti-Samaritan Attitude as Reflected in Rabbinic Midrashim

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**Abstract:** Samaritans as a group within the ranges of ancient ‘Judaisms’ are often mentioned in Talmud and Midrash. As comparable social-religious entities, they are regarded ambivalently by the Rabbis. First, they were viewed as Jews, but from the end of the Tannaitic times, and especially after the Bar Kokhba revolt, they were perceived as non-Jews, not reliable about different fields of Halakhic concern. Rabbinic writings reflect on this change in attitude and describe a long ongoing conflict and a growing anti-Samaritan attitude. The article analyzes several dialogues between rabbis and Samaritans transmitted in the Midrash on the book of Genesis, *Bereshit Rabbah*. In four larger sections, the famous Rabbi Me’ir is depicted as the counterpart of certain Samaritans. The analyses of these discussions try to show how rabbinic texts avoid any direct exegetical dispute over particular verses of the Torah, but point to other hermeneutical levels of discourse and rejection of Samaritan claims. These texts thus reflect a remarkable understanding of some Samaritan convictions, and they demonstrate how rabbis denounced Samaritanism and refuted their counterparts. The Rabbi Me’ir dialogues thus are an impressive literary witness to the final stages of the parting of ways of these diverging religious streams.

**Keywords:** Samaritans; Ancient Judaism; Rabbinic Literature; Talmud; Midrash

The attitudes towards the Samaritans (or *Kutim*<sup>1</sup>) documented in rabbinical literature (Talmud and Midrash) have repeatedly been examined.<sup>2</sup> Often a certain change in the attitude of the rabbis was noted and classified in various models of the historical development of the relationship.<sup>3</sup> While in the Mishnah, Tosefta<sup>4</sup> and in the Talmudim Rabbinic attitudes towards Samaritans have been studied frequently, it

is noteworthy that the Midrashim in terms of their position vis-à-vis the Samaritans have so far not been systematically investigated. Midrashim here refers to rabbinical biblical commentaries, especially those dated between the 3rd and 5th centuries, i.e. the time of the Amoraim. They form a manageable but hardly definable group of rabbinical texts.

The individual passages dealing with or mentioning Samaritans have indeed been taken into account since the first scientific investigations and studies on Samaritans, from Israel Taglicht and Gedalyahu Alon to Lawrence Schiffman.<sup>5</sup> They were, however, mostly read as evidence of the history of the Halakha, independent of their specific literary context, and the peculiarities of the literary works in which these texts were handed down were only marginally considered.<sup>6</sup> In the following, the investigation of some Midrashim from the Amoraic period (roughly 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries) is initially guided by the observation that relatively few mentions of Samaritans can be found in the Halakhic midrashim, the beginnings of which are dated to the Tannaitic period. These 'early' Midrashim, i.e. both Mekhiltot on Exodus, Sifra on Leviticus and Sifre on Numbers and Deuteronomy, reflect a conspicuously low interest in an explicit confrontation with the Samaritans or Samaritan beliefs. Compared to the numerous references to Samaritans in Mishnah and Tosefta, this finding is all the more remarkable, and it can probably not be explained solely by the fact that the Halakhic Midrashim were primarily oriented towards the interpretation of legal sections of the Pentateuch.<sup>7</sup> The dispute with the Samaritans could have found a particularly good basis for criticism of the Samaritan text tradition and interpretation in the halakhic text

passages in the Torah. But only later Aggadic Midrashim take up rabbinic Torah exegeses regarding the Samaritans.

### Samaritans in Midrashic Literature

However, if one looks at the relevant texts in which Samaritans are mentioned, it soon becomes clear that they are not given much attention in the classical Amoraic Midrashim either. Compared to other groups mentioned in the halakhically defined world of rabbis, Samaritans are not mentioned more frequently. Statistically, they are mentioned in the *Talmud Yerushalmi* and in the *Bavli* far more often than in all known Amoraic Midrashim combined. If one ignores the later Midrashim compiled in the Middle Ages, such as the *Yalkut Shimo'ni* (13<sup>th</sup> century) and the Yemenite *Midrash ha-Gadol* (13<sup>th</sup> century), it follows that Samaritans with their different names such as Kuti or, in Aramaic, 'Kuta'e' or 'Shomroni' or 'Shamrai' are mentioned more frequently, especially in three Midrashic works from the Amoraic period: In the great midrash to the Book of Genesis (*Bereshit Rabbah*), in the midrash to the Song of Songs (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah*) and in the midrash to the lamentations of Jeremiah (*Ekhah Rabbah*), which takes on numerous parallel traditions.

In Midrash *Leviticus Rabbah* on the book of Leviticus, there is only one explicit reference to Samaritans<sup>8</sup>, and the outcome of the analyses of the so-called homiletic midrashim, which more recent research calls anthology midrashim<sup>9</sup>, is not much more telling either: In

*Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana*, Samaritans are mentioned in four places<sup>10</sup>; in *Pesiqta Rabbati*, on the other hand, there is only one occurrence.

Building on this overview, the passages in the aforementioned Midrashim can be divided into texts that have parallels in the Mishnah, Tosefta, and / or in the Talmudim, and into texts that have no parallel. All those texts that are only documented in one of the works mentioned are particularly interesting. It can be assumed that they are the most likely to reveal the attitude of the author or editor towards the Samaritans and how he judged them halakhically. Among these singular texts, a distinction can be made between those texts that relate to the Tannaitic period, mention a Rabbi from the Tannaitic period, or due to their context, can be regarded as a Tannaitic tradition, and those from a later period. In addition, a distinction can be made between Tannaitic traditions in early and late Amoraic midrashim, i.e. between all those passages found in *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* and those found in the Midrashim *Shir ha-shirim* or *Qohelet Rabbah*.<sup>11</sup> Without entering into a discussion of the current research situation with regard to the dating of rabbinical texts in general and the examined midrashim in particular, it should be pointed out that a literary analysis and historical evaluation of the Samaritan positions in the midrashim is highly complex. In the following, I would like to restrict myself to a special group of texts, even if the findings in other works and in the rest of the rabbinical literature must always be taken into account.

## The Rabbi Me'ir Dialogues

A special group among the Samaritan passages in the Amoraic Midrashim are all those traditions that deal with conversations between Rabbi Me'ir and a Samaritan. These texts can be found above all in the compilation *Midrash Genesis Rabbah*, which was probably edited in the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century and has already attracted the interest of several researchers. For a long time these texts were read like reports of actual religious conversations, and Rabbi Me'ir was subsequently given a large share in expressing the rabbi's attitude towards Samaritans.<sup>12</sup> And even if one does not consider these aggadic stories as historically accurate, it remains noteworthy that no other rabbinical authority is portrayed as being in dialogue with Samaritans apart from this legendary student of Rabbi Yishma'el and Rabbi 'Aqiva.<sup>13</sup> My primary interest in these dialogue texts is, however, not the question of whether these scenes actually took place, but how the rabbis used these dialogues in their strategy to confront Samaritan beliefs and what role the Samaritans played in the shaping of rabbinic doctrines during the Amoraic period.

Which Halakhic position towards the Samaritans can be perceived behind the texts? How did the anti-Samaritan polemic unfold? What role does the reference to the name Rabbi Me'ir play in the argument?

In a longer section in *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* the creation of heaven (*Raqia'*) is discussed. In a three-part dialogue, an exegesis of Genesis 1:7 is discussed with an anonymous Samaritan, especially the

sentence: ‘... and separated the water which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse.’<sup>14</sup>

*Bereshit Rabbah 4,4 (ed. Theodor/Albeck, 27)*

A Samaritan (*Kuti*) asked Rabbi Me’ir: ‘Is it possible that the upper water is suspended by (God’s) word?’

Said he to him: ‘Yes.’ And he asked him to bring him a water clock<sup>15</sup>.

(He filled it with water and) placed a gold plate upon it,<sup>16</sup> but the water did not stand still in the funnel.

But as soon as he put a finger upon (the opening of the funnel), the water stood still.

He objected: ‘But you have put your finger there.’

He said to him: ‘If my finger stays the water, though I am but flesh and blood, how much more so the finger of the Holy one blessed be he!’

Hence the upper waters are suspended by (God’s) word. What is remarkable about this passage is not the direct free dialogue between a famous scholar and an anonymous person. Similar dialogues can be found in the entire rabbinical literature, be it with ‘*Ame ha-Aretz*’ or with matrons and other female protagonists. What is unusual about the reasoning in this section – and this is especially to be noted in comparison with similar dialogues in the Talmudim – is that an exegetical problem, namely how to present the heavenly festivals and their structure, can be explained by a symbolic hydromechanical test arrangement. The observation of a physical phenomenon, the effect of the ambient pressure on water, becomes the hermeneutical key to the explanation of a symbolic biblical expression. One can conjecture whether the indicated experimental arrangement is based on more

precise knowledge of the contemporary non-Jewish literature on hydrology and pneumatics. Similar tests are attested in quotations from a work called *Pneumatica* written by the Greek scientist and mathematician Heron of Alexandria and mentioned in the writings of Philo of Alexandria.<sup>17</sup> Heron lived in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. His work and the hydromechanical test arrangements described in it, including their physical and philosophical explanations, could therefore have been known to Palestinian rabbis.<sup>18</sup> The starting point of the discussion with the Samaritan, however, is not a physical, but an exegetical problem. Which difficulty in the biblical text motivated the question of the Samaritan in detail remains unclear at first. From the context of the section in *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* it is only clear that the rabbis knew an interpretation of the verses that the Samaritans may have rejected because of a decidedly anti-anthropomorphic tradition of interpretation and the reluctance to speculate about the works of creation based on it.<sup>19</sup> Evidence for this in the Samaritan tradition can only be found in a text that was compiled much later than the rabbinical midrash.<sup>20</sup> There is little speculation in early Samaritan writings about the creation and arrangement of the heavens. It is therefore not possible to reconstruct with certainty which cosmological ideas the Samaritans held at the time this midrash was written. Only in works to be dated much later, the idea of seven heavens, for example, is attested.<sup>21</sup> But that does not seem to be the point here. Rather, the biblical formulation, according to which heaven 'is suspended' by God's word is problematized. However, this is probably not to be understood as a reference to philosophically inspired speculations about the hylic world-sphere of water. It seems

that the interpreter in the Midrash initially only wanted to explain the biblical figure of speech, which could give rise to misunderstandings and overly literal interpretations. On the rabbinical side, the idea of preserving the world through God's word might help to understand this passage. A common motif in rabbinical literature is the idea of God's life-giving speech, especially supported by the idea that the world was created through the ten words, the Decalogue, with its ten pronouncements.<sup>22</sup>

Another explanation for this remarkable reflection in the Midrash may have been the then unanswered question of where the rain comes from, from which heaven it starts to fall and how the rain originated there. This explanation can be supported in this context by a section in *Bavli, Ta'anit* 10a, which deals with rain fasting and the question of how rain clouds are formed. The same view as here in *Bereshit Rabbah* is ascribed there to Rabbi Yehoshua': The upper waters float above the earth by means of a divine pronouncement. The 'fruit of the pronouncement' is the rainwater, which can be proven with reference to Psalm 104:13: *You water the mountains from Your loft; the earth is sated from the fruit of Your work.*<sup>23</sup> While the first section of the passage in *Bereshit Rabbah* deals with a problem of interpretation in a verse of the Book of Genesis, i.e. in the Torah, which both Samaritans and rabbis regard as authoritative, the section immediately following turns to a prophetic text, i.e. a part of the Hebrew Bible that was not recognized by the Samaritans.<sup>24</sup> From here on Samaritan polemics about the rabbis and their canon play a more prominent role than in the first section of the Midrash:



*Bereshit Rabbah 4,4 (ed. Theodor/Albeck, 27-28)*

Said he to him: 'Is it possible that He of whom it is written: *For I fill both heaven and earth* (Jeremiah 23:24) spoke to Moses from between the two staves of the Ark?'<sup>25</sup>

Said he to him: 'Bring me a magnifying mirror (מראות גדולות)'. He brought it.

He said to him: 'Look at your reflection.' And he saw it large.

(Said he to him): 'Bring me a diminishing mirror.' He brought it.

'Look at your reflection.' He did so and saw it small.

Said to him (Rabbi Me'ir): 'If you, who are but flesh and blood, can change yourself at will, how much more so He at whose word the world came into existence! Thus, when he so wishes *do I not fill both heaven and earth*, while when he wishes, he speaks to Moses from between the staves of the Ark.'

Again, the position ascribed to a Samaritan is not invalidated by written evidence, but by scientific observation. A test arrangement with differently curved mirrors enables an observer to perceive himself as changing, larger or smaller.<sup>26</sup> The different experience of given points of view is compared with the experience of God's omnipotence which was, therefore, able to speak to Moses in a relatively small space. As already indicated, the experimental set-up described here is reminiscent of discussions by ancient pagan scientists, such as Heron who in his work *Catoptica* also refers to mirrors and their different optically perceptible magnification effects.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, this text is not about the Samaritan reading tradition of Numbers 12 in which the reading במראה instead of ומארה is transmitted. According to rabbinical understanding, this would have implied that Moses' vision of God was only indirectly possible.<sup>28</sup> But the parable with the differently shaped mirrors shows that God can speak in large and small rooms, i.e. also

prophetically as in the book of Jeremiah. Through an observation that can be verified with the physical senses, the exegetically questionable argument of the Samaritan is reduced to absurdity.<sup>29</sup>

Two concerns seem to form the background to the Samaritan question: First of all, the question of the relevance of the Book of Jeremiah which the Samaritan suspects of a theologically inappropriate language; and second, the reference to the rank of the temple, represented here by the tabernacle which, according to Samaritan tradition, did not find its legitimate place on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem but on Mt. Gerizim. In a note following the section translated above and attributed to an unknown Amora, Rabbi Ḥanina or Anina bar Rabbi Susai<sup>30</sup>, this idea is then elaborated:

Rabbi Ḥanina bar Susai (said): At times the world and its fullness cannot contain His glory, yet at times He speaks to man from between the hairs of his head, as it is written: And the Lord replied to Job out of the *se'ara* [tempest/hair] (Job 38:1) – which means from the hairs of his head.<sup>31</sup>

This text is echoed in different contexts in *Pesiqta Rabbati* 47 (190a) and *Midrash Shemot Rabba* 3:6 as well as in the Talmud Bavli (bBava Batra 16a; bNidda 52b). Originally, it seems to have been an explanatory gloss, which has been inserted into the dialogue transmitted in *Bereshit Rabbah*. The note is not of direct importance for understanding the preceding conversation. But because the book of Job was not recognized by the Samaritans, it contains an additional point against the assumption of the Samaritan and supports the idea that God can also speak to people from small spaces without spatial limitations.

The longer dialogue is also structured differently by the gloss. And immediately afterward another objection by the Samaritan is introduced by the redactor of the Midrash:

Said he (the Samaritan) to him: 'Is it possible that *The river of God is full of water* (Psalm 65:10) since the six days of Creation and it has not been diminished at all: it is incredible.'

He said to him: 'Go in and bathe, and weigh yourself before you enter and after you have gone in'.

He went and weighed himself, and his weight had not diminished at all.

He said to him: 'Now all that perspiration, did it not ooze from you?'

He answered: 'Yes'.

Said he to him: 'Then, if your fountain (of perspiration) did not in any way diminish, though you are but a mere mortal, how much more is this true of a fountain of the Holy One, blessed be He! Hence *The river of God is full of water* (Psalm 65:10) since the six days of Creation and it has not been diminished at all.'

The section starts with the already remarkable description that rabbis and Samaritans went to the same steam baths and knew the same sweating techniques for cleaning the skin as the pagan cultures around them. Numerous texts in rabbinical literature show that the rabbis highly valued the bathing system cultivated by the Greeks and Romans, and a famous saying in the Talmud Yerushalmi states that one should not settle in a city where there is no bath-house.<sup>32</sup> The detailed narrative framework thus fits well with an attitude that is open to Greco-Roman bathing culture which was also shared by Samaritans living in cities.

In terms of content, the passage again refers to the Samaritan criticism of a part of the rabbinical Bible canon. The Book of Psalms

with its numerous references to the Jerusalem sanctuary must have appeared particularly problematic from a Samaritan point of view. The mention of a Psalm verse in this context may again be understood as a reference to the issue of 'Jerusalem or Gerizim'. The author of the Midrash refutes the alleged Samaritan criticism of the Psalm verse, which apparently contradicts human experience, by referring to sweating in the steam bath and the assumed but immeasurable loss of fluid. A medical explanation for the observation of the non-measurable weight loss through sweating is easy to give from today's point of view. It was not so easy for ancient people, especially since little reliable information was available about the formation of sweat and the balance of body fluids. The attempt described could therefore be used as a plausible explanation for the contradicting statement of the Psalm verse.

A correlation of water on the first days of creation with the fluids of the human body is reminiscent of a pre-Socratic idea which was ascribed by Aristotle to Empedocles of Akragas (490-430 B.C.). According to this author, the sea could be interpreted as the sweat of the earth.<sup>33</sup> Even Aristotle thought this view was ridiculous despite the fact that the sea was salty like the sweat of man. The author of this midrash seems to have accepted the comparison of the water of the ocean with human sweat as it was known in contemporary philosophy. It appears that only against this background the strange explanation by an analogy between primordial floods and sweat can be understood. Otherwise, it has no basis in biblical or rabbinical cosmology.

Thus, the associative relation of creation, water, and sweat in this midrash seems to have been taken up from the pagan context. The

midrash itself deals first of all with the interpretation of the underlying verse from the book of Genesis. The literary framework is the confrontation with a Samaritan who, like Empedocles by Aristotle, is convicted of ignorance and made ridiculous. The rabbinic criticisms of the Samaritans that can be seen in the background of the dialogue are mainly two: They reject the various parts of the rabbinically legitimized canon of the Tanakh, and they do not follow rabbinic Torah exegesis. Therefore, they seem to be refutable only through scientific observation similar to that of the Greek philosophers and natural scientists. Rational knowledge based on natural laws is presented as the only reasonable argument that can be conveyed to the Samaritans. But all these remarks serve the only purpose to ridicule their cosmology. All in all, these dialogues are a clear indication of the religious parting of the ways at the time they were created: The Samaritans are no longer seen as part of a common Jewish people or entity. The discussion with the 'other' is thus only conducted speculatively - that is, no longer with real dialogue partners, but in a framework in which the basic halakhic decisions have already been taken.

For this reason, there is hardly anything left of the specific religious views of the Samaritans in the texts in *Bereshit Rabbah* (as in other Midrashim). Just as Samaritans are not properly described, their teachings are not explained or quoted in greater detail. As in other rabbinical traditions, they appear here as anonymous representatives of a doctrine that serves as the background for the rabbis' self-definition. Following the literary frame in the dialogues with Rabbi Me'ir they are

always portrayed as the inferior dialogue partner, almost on a par with non-Jews; but despite all misunderstandings, in the end they recognize the superiority of their rabbinical counterpart. It is therefore less the polemic against the Samaritans than the concern to demonstrate one's exegetical superiority that seems to have been the interest of the authors of such midrashim. Samaritans are portrayed as knowing the Torah, but they cannot interpret it correctly, especially since they reject or ignore the other parts of the biblical canon of the rabbis and their intertextual interpretation methods.

The demonstration of rabbinic superiority and the question of the correct understanding of the Samaritan Torah plays a central role also in another dialogue with a Samaritan leader. Based on the exegesis of Genesis 28:22, the fundamental dissent between Samaritans and rabbis is introduced again as a frame of reference for the interpretation of a certain verse from Torah – in this case, the correct interpretation of the commandment to release the firstborn according to Exodus 34:20. The following sentence is put into Jacob's mouth in the Book of Genesis (28:22): *And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God's abode; and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You.* This verse according to the Masoretic tradition points to one of the central issues between Samaritans and rabbis. Where was the place of the true house of God, and for whom was tithing to be paid?

*Bereshit Rabba 70,7 (ed. Theodor/Albeck, 803-805)*

*And this stone . . . (Genesis 28:22):*

A principal (of the Samaritans)<sup>34</sup> asked Rabbi Me'ir: 'With what is the firstling of an ass redeemed?'

He answered him: 'With a lamb', for it is written, *but the firstling of an ass you shall redeem with a lamb* (Exodus 34:20).

He said to him: 'But what if one has no lamb?'

Said he to him: 'Then with a goat.'

He said: 'Whence do you know this?'

(It is written): *You may take it from the lamb or the goats* (Exodus 12:5).

Said he to him: But this (verse) refers to Pesah?

He answered him: A goat too is called a lamb. How do we know it? Because it is written: *These are the animals that you may eat: the ox, the lamb, and the goat* (Deuteronomy 14:4).

Thereupon he arose and kissed his head.

Although this is only hinted at, the Samaritan's reaction described in the final sentence of this section is to be understood as an acknowledgment of the rabbinical interpretation of Deuteronomy 14:4 and thus also of Exodus 34:20. This understanding liberally expounds the commandment and contradicts the more literal exegesis of Exodus 34:20 as proposed by the Samaritan. However, the description of his affectionate reaction only suggests his immediate approval of this interpretation. The background for the entire scene and the exegetical disagreement addressed therein is likely to be a different understanding of Deuteronomy 14:4. Instead of *וְזֵאת הַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר תֹּאכְלוּ שׁוֹר שֶׁהָכֶבֶשִׂים וְשֶׁהָעִזִּים* in the Masoretic (rabbinical) text, the Samaritan Pentateuch (according to Ms Shechem 6) reads like the older Greek translation in the Septuagint and the Latin Vulgata: *וְזֵאת הַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר תֹּאכְלוּ שׁוֹר וְשֶׁהָכֶבֶשִׂים וְשֶׁהָעִזִּים*.<sup>35</sup> The short list of specific sacrificial animals in this sentence was formulated by *waw-*

*copulativum*. The later text tradition, as transmitted by the rabbis, understood the list only as a general list of sacrificial animals.

The hermeneutics developed in the school of Rabbi ‘Akiva suggested a reading which, by including the lamb and the billy goat, made it possible to pragmatically interpret this commandment. As the conclusion of the piece suggests, the Samaritan seems to have accepted a conjecture of the biblical text that may have been introduced by the rabbis. The reaction of the Samaritan, a kind of kiss of homage on the head of the rabbi, is remarkable in this context. This gentle sign of acceptance of a change in the Torah text might reflect how the rabbis perceived their role in the underlying dispute about the correct text of the Torah.<sup>36</sup>

Against the background of the Samaritan's knowledge of the Torah assumed in this Midrash – a Samaritan, who even knows how to point out that the commandments in Exodus 12 refer solely to the Pesah festival – this description corresponds to the rabbinical concern to depict the Samaritans as inferior. The rabbis assume that the Samaritan Torah tradition is deficient. The claim made by the Samaritans that they preserved the Torah more precisely than the Jews contradicts rabbinical pragmatics in dealing with the commandments. Ultimately, they must agree with the rabbinical interpretation and pay homage to this eminent representative of the school of Rabbi ‘Aqiva.

In the immediately following section in *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* this idea of the election is underlined. Through the motif of the ‘firstborn’ it is associated with the previous section and justifies the rabbinical understanding of Genesis 28:22 in more detail. This section



has an almost literal Aramaic parallel in *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana* 10:6 (ed. Mandelbaum 167), without having to decide which version is more original<sup>37</sup>:

Rabbi Yehoshua' from Sikhnin<sup>38</sup> (said) in the name of Rabbi Lewi:

A Samaritan (Kuti) asked Rabbi Me'ir and said to him: 'Do you not maintain that Jacob was truthful (אמיתי)?'<sup>39</sup>

He replied: 'Certainly!'

He said to him: 'And did he not say thus: *And of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You* (Genesis 28:22)?'

'Yes.'

(Said the Samaritan): 'And so he has separated the tribe of Levi, which is one in ten. But why did he not separate a tenth of the two remaining tribes?'

He said to him: 'Were there then only ten tribes? Surely there were fourteen, for it says: *Ephraim and Manasseh even as Ruben and Simon shall be mine* (Genesis 48:5)'.<sup>40</sup>

Said he to him: 'Then the difficulty is all the greater. If you add water, you must add flour.'

[Said he to him]: 'Will you not admit that there were four matriarchs?'<sup>41</sup>

He said: 'Yes!'

He said<sup>42</sup>: 'Then deduct the four firstborns of the four matriarchs from these (fourteen), since the firstborn is holy, and what is holy does not exempt what is holy.'

Said (the Samaritan) to him: 'Happy the people in whose midst you dwell.'<sup>43</sup>

The accusation of the Samaritan formulated at the beginning of the passage handed down in the name of the well-known Palestinian Amora Levi in the form of a question aims at the fact that Jacob was not reliable with regard to the promises transmitted by him. To the

rabbis, on the other hand, the ambiguous question seems to presuppose that Jacob had not cheated on Esau and Laban.

The Samaritan tries to refute this by referring to Jacob's promise in Genesis 28:22 to tithe the produce God has given to him. The question raised refers to a fictitious allegation by the Samaritan that Jacob after all did not act as he promised. Could he exempt the tribe of Levi, the tribe of priests, from tithing? Could he not have omitted two other tribes too?

To understand this line of argument, it is necessary to recall the order in which the tribes of Israel are to be counted and to consider which electoral claim could be derived from it. According to rabbinical tradition, the tribes Ephraim and Manasseh, which stand for the tribe of Joseph, can each be counted as one tribe if Levi is not counted among the twelve tribes. When Levi is counted as the tenth tribe, Ephraim and Manasseh are considered one tribe.<sup>43</sup> If Ephraim and Manasseh are each counted as one tribe, Jacob should have demanded a separate tithe from each of these two tribes. Then, according to the rabbinical interpretation of Genesis 48:5, as many as fourteen tribes must have existed. The Samaritan agrees with this way of counting, as he could see Ephraim's (Joseph's) privilege strengthened. In this case, Jacob would have had to set aside a larger amount of tithe, which is underlined here in the argument by the saying: Just as the amount of water must be kept in the correct proportion to the amount of flour to knead dough from it, so the amount of dough must be proportionate to the amount of what one is tithing. Rabbi Me'ir's following answer takes the Samaritan's reflection to absurdity.

Now he refers to the four matriarchs whose firstborns were considered to be holy and thus must be regarded as exempt from tithing. Jacob's promise to tithe everything would therefore only affect eight sons - either counted from Simeon to Benjamin, who was still in his mother's belly, or from Simeon to Levi.<sup>44</sup> If one calculates the order of the sons of Jacob, the argument of the Samaritan is refuted. Levi appears to be giving the tithe to whom it rightly belongs and who is the legitimate representative of Israel.<sup>45</sup> Given such sublime calculations, the Samaritan has no choice but to recognize Rabbi Me'ir's exegetical competence. The narrator underscores this by ascribing a blessing to him which expresses his devotion to Rabbi Me'ir.<sup>46</sup>

This veneration stands out all the more because Rabbi Me'ir is not portrayed in all dialogues with Samaritans as the undisputed authority concerning the origin and status of the Samaritans.

An Aramaic passage from *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah*, which is possibly taken from a different source than the Hebrew sections dealt with above, describes how Rabbi Me'ir addresses a Samaritan rather than the other way around. This Samaritan is not referred to here as 'Kuti', but as 'Shamrai', Samri(t)an – a detail which might hint at an exegetical punchline in the following exegesis of Genesis 46:8-13:

*Bereshit Rabbah* 94,7 (ed. Theodor/Albeck, 1178–1179)

*These are the names of the sons of Israel, who came to Egypt etc., and Issachars sons* (Genesis 46:8-13).

Rabbi Me'ir saw a Samaritan (*Shamrai*) and asked him: 'Whence are you descended?'

He replied: 'From Joseph.'

Said he to him: 'No!'

'Then from whom?'

Said he to him: 'From Issachar.'

Said he to him: How do you know this?

Said he: It is written: The children of *Issachar are Tola, Fua, Yov and Shimron* (Genesis 46:13) – the last-named referring to the Samaritans (*Shomronim*).

Thereupon he went to the Patriarch<sup>47</sup> and said to him: A Jewish teacher<sup>48</sup> had told me an astonishing thing, and this puzzles me.

Said he: 'What is it?'

He asked (me): 'Whence are you descended?' I replied: 'From Joseph.'

But he told me: 'From Issachar', as it is written: *The children of Issachar are Tola, Fua, Yov and Shimron* (Genesis 46:13).

He explained to him: By your life! He has excluded you from (the tribe) of Joseph and yet has not brought you in to Issachar.'

A genealogical connection of the Samaritans with the progenitor Joseph is already mentioned by Josephus (Ant. 9, 291; Ant. 11, 341)<sup>49</sup>, and it is also documented by Christian authors (see, for example, Origenes, Comm. in John XIII, 26).<sup>50</sup> The Midrash section takes up this genealogical motive and adds to it a clear anti-Samaritan intention. As Rabbi Me'ir's answer suggests, the legitimate descent of the Samaritans from Joseph can be refuted by referring to the list of Jacob's children and grandchildren in Genesis 46. The association of the Samaritans with Issachar implies an additional abuse, since this tribe is one of the ominously perished tribes of Israel and in Genesis 49:14 it is also compared with a donkey.<sup>51</sup> Rabbi Me'ir's argument is based on a kind of *Al-tiqre*-Midrash ('do-not-read-this but-that-Exegesis') based on a philological interpretation of the name. Accordingly, the name

‘Shimron’ mentioned in Genesis 46:13 can be read ‘Shomron’, thus referring to the Samaritans or Samaria. This interpretation of the consonants deviates from the Masoretic vocalization, but it was possible because, as is well known, the vocalization of the biblical text remained fluid for a long time and was only determined by the Masoretes in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>52</sup> Thus, this interpretation could serve as an argument for referring the name of one of the sons of Issachar to the Samaritans.<sup>53</sup> Whether it was decisive for the author of the Midrash remains at first unclear.

It is noteworthy that here the Samaritan turns to a supposedly higher authority, a Samaritan patriarch. Apart from this one time, there is no mention of a Samaritan patriarch in rabbinical literature and the passage has consequently always been critically assessed in research.<sup>54</sup> In the context of the narrative it is important that the exegesis of the famous rabbinical scholar must be questioned by the Samaritan. The answer he receives from the higher authority, however, is even more discouraging. The Patriarch points out to him that the Samaritan not only has no evidence that the Samaritans are descended from Joseph, but also that they were not even brought up by Issachar. The final sentence attributed to the patriarch is to be understood in such a way that Samaritans cannot be descendants of Joseph or Issachar because they were not present when the Jews left Egypt nor when they entered the country.<sup>55</sup>

This passage from *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* thus demonstrates in an exegetical context what occasionally still appears to be ambivalent in other early Tannaitic texts: The Samaritans are initially regarded as

reliable in some border issues of the Halakha, but then proven to be non-Jews in every respect. In the eyes of the author of this midrash they are just as much ‘Kutim’ as in the Talmud Yerushalmi where a comparable decisiveness can be traced in the halakhic assessment of dealings with Samaritans.<sup>56</sup> The point of this section is that they owe their existence to a completely different story, not explicitly mentioned here. The explanation proposed by Rabbi Me’ir does not go far enough because they cannot even be descended from Issachar. They do not belong to the descendants of the Ten Tribes, but are descendants of those non-Jewish immigrants from Kuta mentioned in 2 Kings 17:24-41. Consequently, they have no share in the genealogy of the people of Israel as developed in Genesis 46:8-13.<sup>57</sup>

### *Summary and Outlook*

The Samaritan dialogues in *Bereshit Rabbah* are designed in keeping with the narrative technique in Amoraic Midrashim. None of these texts can therefore be interpreted as a historical report about a ‘religious conversation’ actually held. This does not mean that such discussions could not have taken place. Contacts between Samaritans and rabbinical Jews are documented in many sources. The impression that the Midrash texts provide, however, is misleading in view of the rabbinical decisions concerning the halakhic status of the Samaritans. The latter was decided long before these texts were drafted, and it is undeniable that in Amoraic times Samaritans are regarded as non-Jews. The ‘dialogues’ dealt with here must be understood as literary dialogues that served rabbinical interests and were primarily designed for the interpretation

of the underlying Biblical verse. The halakhic position of the rabbis towards the Samaritans was already clear at the time of writing: The Samaritans are not to be regarded as part of the Jewish people; their ancestry is doubtful. *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* is thus in line with the Talmud Yerushalmi, but justifies the exclusion of the Samaritans differently and more pointedly, as, among others, by referring to pagan scientific and philosophical worldview.

Literary strategies similar to those used in the Samaritan dialogues can be found in the descriptions of conversations with non-Jews and 'Am ha-Aretz. Examples are the discussions of the relevance of certain Sabbath laws and the importance of circumcision. Comparable to other dialogue partners in *Bereshit Rabbah*, Samaritans appear as aggadic chimeras. In contrast to non-Jews, however, Samaritans are portrayed as knowing the Torah to a certain extent. In this context, however, the Torah knowledge of Samaritans is not decisive. Here the Samaritan is assigned to the role of a pre-Socratic who had to deal with Aristotle. The remarkable experimental arrangements and explanations of nature which seem to rely on pagan philosophical strategies emphasize the rabbinical claim to superiority. Even if only observations that are accessible to the common mind are accepted as arguments, they have to give way in the controversy.

The choice of Rabbi Me'ir as the main adversary of the Samaritans in *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* was certainly not a random choice. Unlike the accounts in *Midrash Devarim Rabbah*<sup>58</sup> where Rabbi Yonatan is confronted by a Samaritan as a passive interlocutor, Rabbi

Me'ir in *Bereshit Rabbah* is depicted as acting on his own initiative when he addresses a Samaritan. This Tannaitic rabbi was undoubtedly a leading figure of the early rabbinical movement and was therefore particularly suitable to serve as the literary adversary for the anonymous Samaritans. His decisions about Samaritans, handed down in early rabbinical traditions, formed the appropriate halakhic background for the fictional dialogues about exegesis which primarily served the aim of reinforcing his identity.<sup>59</sup> The frequently made assumption that a decisive change in the relationship between the rabbis and the Samaritans only occurred during Rabbi Me'ir's lifetime cannot be proven on the basis of the midrashic dialogues in *Bereshit Rabbah*.

The analyses of the Midrashim examined here thus complement the ambivalent picture that was reconstructed on the basis of some other Palestinian sources: Only in the Babylonian adaptations of Palestinian traditions about the Samaritans the role of Rabbi Me'ir was particularly emphasized.<sup>60</sup> Comparable traditions from the Tannaitic period in which Rabbi Me'ir is mentioned or an anonymous opinion is assumed to be his are formulated more cautiously. This fits with the above observations on the texts in *Bereshit Rabbah*. It was the editor of the Midrash who introduced Rabbi Me'ir's clearly anti-Samaritan stance into the texts. Only at this stage of literary redaction the 'Shomronim' became Kutim, i.e. a rabbinical group of 'others'. This group was not only denied any genealogical connection to the Jewish people, but its halakhic status was no longer debatable or ambivalent. The Samaritan dialogues in *Bereshit Rabbah* analyzed above thus transmit a negative image of Samaritans which only served the interests of their authors and



redactors. In this respect, the Samaritans played a negative role in the formation and differentiation of rabbinical Jewish identity.

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<sup>1</sup> On this pejorative designation of Samaritans as Kutim in Rabbinic literature, which means descendants from the place called Kuta in Babylonia (cf. 2 Kings 17:24; Josephus, Ant. IX 290), see Lehnardt 2002, 139 note 2.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the overview provided by van der Horst 2003, 39–44.

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘Amoraic Midrashim’ is to be understood as an auxiliary term. The dating of the corresponding works in Amoraic times and their literary development is much more complex. The point here is merely to indicate that the examined texts can be distinguished from the earlier Halakhic (or ‘Tannaitic’) Midrashim. See on this also Stemberger 2011, 264–265, and further on Reizel 2011, 105–145.

<sup>4</sup> See on *Mishnah* and *Tosefta* Bernasconi 2009.

<sup>5</sup> See Taglicht 1888; Alon 1977; Schiffman 1985; 2012. See also Hershkovitz 1940; Churgin 1945; Heinemann 1974, 91–102.

<sup>6</sup> Compare Billerbeck / Strack 1994, 558–560; Zangenberg 1994, 109; 126–128. – On the methodological question, see also the studies by Lavee 2010a; 2010b; see also Ophir / Rosen-Zvi 2018, 185–192. While I would agree that some parallel traditions transmitted, for example, in the Talmudim and in certain Amoraic Midrashim, should be interpreted together, I still hold on to the claim (like G. Stemberger) that certain rabbinical writings reflect specific redactional interests in their specific way of transmitting older aggadic material.

<sup>7</sup> For the only text in question see *Sifre Bemidbar* 112 (ed. Horovitz/Rabin, 122), where the question of the resurrection is at stake. In this text certain *Sifre Kutiim*, ‘books of the Samaritans’, are mentioned. Two textual witnesses read however ‘Minim’ (i.e. Heretics) instead of the word ‘Kutim’. The reading ‘Minim’ is now accepted by Kahana 2011 vol. 1, p.14, as the more reasonable *varia lectio*. In another short text in *Sifre Devarim* 331 (ed. Finkelstein, 381) Kutim are differentiated from Minim. However, also this passage is problematic since it has been preserved incomplete and must be conjectured on the basis of a parallel in *Midrash ha-Gadol*. In *Mekhilta Mishpatim* 12 on Exodus 21:35 the cattle of a Samaritan are mentioned as exempt from the provision due to the formulation ‘shor ish’, besides the ox of a stranger and that of a proselyte.

<sup>8</sup> See *Midrash Wayiqra Rabbah* 5,8 (ed. Margalioth, 123). See on this passage Hasan-Rokem 2003, 42–48.

<sup>9</sup> See Visotzky 2011, 19–31. However, with Stemberger 2011, 270, we stay here with the common name of this literary genre.

<sup>10</sup> See on this Lehnardt 2018.

<sup>11</sup> For dating of the time of redaction of these works see Stemberger 2011. On another dialogue mentioning Rabbi Me’ir and a Samaritan in *Midrash Qohelet Rabba* 5,11 (ed. Hirshman 308–310), compare bSanhedrin 90b, see Lehnardt 2010, 183–185.

<sup>12</sup> See already Frankel 1855, 167–168, 210f; Bacher 1882, 159; see also Blumenthal 1888, 84 and 118–123.

<sup>13</sup> See Hyman 1987, vol. 3, 865–866.

<sup>14</sup> See J. Theodor / Ch. Albeck (eds.) 1965, vol. 1, 27. For the translation of the texts see Freedman, 1983, and see also [https://www.sefaria.org/Bereishit\\_Rabbah.4?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Bereishit_Rabbah.4?lang=bi).

<sup>15</sup> See Krauss 1899, vol. 1, 116: אַרְפֶּכֶס can be derived from προόγος. On the correct reading of this word see also Theodor 1893, 12. Presumably, an ‘infundibulum’ is meant here, a narrow funnel like the one used to fill in milk. Cf. Rich 1862, 326.

<sup>16</sup> I.e. on the upper opening.

<sup>17</sup> See Heron Alexandrinus, *Opera*, vol.1 with translation in Heronis Alexandri 1693, 20f.

<sup>18</sup> On the discussion of philosophical problems comparable to the rabbinical use of physical experimental arrangements see, for example, Tyberg 2005, 204–225.

<sup>19</sup> See Montgomery 1907, 207ff.

<sup>20</sup> See Macdonald 1964, 131.

<sup>21</sup> See Macdonald 1964, 132f.

<sup>22</sup> See *Mishnah Avot* 5,1; bRosh ha-Shanah 32a; bMegilla 21b. – For the background see Urbach 1987, vol. 1, 213; Goldberg 1997, 164f. For Samaritan ideas of creation in later texts see Bowman 1977, 1–36.

<sup>23</sup> Compare *Midrash Tehillim* on Psalm 19:4 (ed. Buber, 83a).

<sup>24</sup> On Samaritan attitudes towards the Prophetic books (*Nevi'im*) see, e.g., Dexinger 1993, 193.

<sup>25</sup> See Exodus 25:13.

<sup>26</sup> To interpret the phrase מראות גדולות compare Exodus 38:8 and the commentary *Matnot Kehuna* by Rabbi Y Issachar Baer ben Naftali ha-Kohen on *Bereshit Rabbah*. See also the remarks by Judah Theodor in his *Minhat Yehuda* on the passage. Billerbeck, <sup>10</sup>1994, 559 translates with ‘Vergrößerungsglas’. However, what is meant is real mirrors, the use of which is mentioned in many places in rabbinical literature. See Rosenzweig 1905, 122–123.

<sup>27</sup> See Heron Alexandrinus, *Opera* vol. 2,1: Mechanica et catoptrica, and see on this also Tyberg 2005, 217.

<sup>28</sup> See Tal / Florentin 2010, 443. – Compare also the interpretation of this verse in *Wayiqra Rabbah* 1,14 (ed. Margaliut, 31), where with reference to Ezekiel 43:3 nine mirrors are mentioned which helped the prophets to look out into the future. Moses, according to Numbers 12:8, had only one mirror. See on this also Midrash Tanhuma Tzaw 13 (192b).

<sup>29</sup> See on this the remarks of the medieval Jewish philosopher Yosef Albo (died 1440), *Sefer Ikkarim*, 251 (chap. 9).

<sup>30</sup> According to Ms Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica 30. See also the *variae lectiones* in the edition of Yuda Theodor, 28. Compare also the quotation of this passage in Yalkut Shim‘oni Jeremiah 23 § 306 (414a; ed. Hyman/Shiloni, 457), mentioning Rabbi Abba bar Sissi. See also Yalkut Shim‘oni Iyov 38 § 923 (510b): ‘Ravina bar Sissi’.

<sup>31</sup> *Sa‘arot rosho* – a difficult word game, not to be translated.

<sup>32</sup> See yQiddushin 4,12 (66d); bSanhedrin 17b, and see Krauss 1910 (1966), vol. 1, 208–233; Jacobs 1998, 219–312 (with additional literature).

<sup>33</sup> See Aristoteles, *Meteorology* II 353 b12-14; 357 a24-28; and see also Diels 1906, 163 (Emp. Frag. 59); Geoffrey 2001, 331.

<sup>34</sup> On the meaning of the word אַמָּם see Mirkin, <sup>5</sup>1992, 102: following the old printed editions he reads עֹבֵד כּוֹכָבִים (star worshiper). Ms Oxford of this Midrash reads אַמָּן, ‘artist’; Ms Vatican 30 and Editio princeps 1545 read גּוֹי, ‘non-Jew’. Probably a priestly leader or the high priest of the Samaritans is meant. Already Se‘adya Ga‘on translated in his Tafsir כהן, ‘priest’, with the Arabic term إمام, אַמָּם, *Imam*.

<sup>35</sup> See Florentin / Tal 2010, 565. See also Tal 1981, vol. 2., 346 ad loc.

<sup>36</sup> To this kind of kiss as an expression of blessing and homage see *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* 70,12 (ed. Theodor/Albeck 811), and see Löw 1921, 273.

<sup>37</sup> See also the parallel texts in Midrash Tanhuma Re‘e 14 (322a); Tanhuma (Buber) Re‘e 12 (12b); and see also Yalkut Mekhira Michah 7:20 (ed. Greenup, 65–66).

<sup>38</sup> On this rabbi and the place name see Reeg 1989, 458–459. On Lewi as teacher of his sayings see Bacher 1896 (1992), vol. 2, 302. In the parallel the name of the Rabbi is not mentioned.

<sup>39</sup> In the Editio princeps from Venice and in a Yemenite manuscript the following is added: ‘As it is written: *You will keep faith with Jacob* (Micha 7:20).’ See also *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 10:66 (ed. Mandelbaum 167), where in addition the Aramaic term קִישָׁט instead of אַמִּיתִי is inserted.

<sup>40</sup> See also bBekhorot 53b; *Pirke de-Rabbi Eli‘ezer* 37 (ed. Börner-Klein 470).

<sup>41</sup> It remains not clear who is the grammatical subject in the sentence: Yehoshua‘ from Sikhnin or Rabbi Me‘ir? Wünsche 1880 (1993), 339 adds here the name ‘Josua’. He paraphrases according to the underlying *Al-tiqre*-Midrash on Proverbs 6:20: ‘Do not forsake your mother’s teaching [*immatekha*] – (do not read *immekha* but) *umatekha* [your people].’

<sup>42</sup> This is translated differently by Theodor in his commentary *Minhat Yehuda*: ‘Hail your people, what is there under them?!’ I.e., what Torah and wisdom there is in Israel. But see also the parallel in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahane* 10:6 (ed. Mandelbaum 167): ‘Praised be your people that they have someone like you.’

<sup>43</sup> See *Midrash Tanhuma Wa-yehi* 15 (79a).

<sup>44</sup> See *Pirke de-Rabbi Eli‘ezer* 37 (ed. Börner-Klein 470). And see on this also the remarks by Grünbaum 1893, 147.

<sup>45</sup> See Brüll 1879, 130, who summarizes the whole paragraph.

<sup>46</sup> See, e.g., bEruvin 18b.

<sup>47</sup> According to Krauss 1910 (1966), vol. 2, 100 the word אַפּוֹטָרְכָא can be derived from the Greek ‘Toparch’. Theodor and Wünsche translate with ‘Patriarch’. The relative pronoun דִּידִהוֹן, ‘yours’, is probably related to a Samaritan dignitary. See on this Bacher 1890, 188, and see also Kohut (ed.) 1878, vol. 1, 212 s. v., who translates into German ‘Kirchenoberhaupt der Samaritaner’.

<sup>48</sup> Some textual witnesses have סַבְהוֹן דִּיהוּדָא, ‘one of the elders of the Jews’. *Midrash ha-Gadol Bereshit* 46:13 (ed. Margaliot 778) cites this passage and reads כַּהֵנָּה דִּיהוּדָא, ‘one of the Jewish priests.’ Whether the use of a Greek title for a Samaritan scholar in this text reflects contemporary Samaritan usage remains unclear. Perhaps this wording expresses simply the author’s interest in using a foreign word. See on this also Emanuel Löw’s remarks in: Krauss 1910 (1966), vol. 2, 620, and see also Hirshman 2010, 21–34, especially 23.

<sup>49</sup> See Pummer 2009, 68–73.

<sup>50</sup> See Pummer 2002, 71. See also Hall 1993, 138.

<sup>51</sup> See *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* 14:17 (ed. Theodor/Albeck, 1222).

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<sup>52</sup> See also the reading in the Samaritan Targum in Tal 1981, vol. 1, 198: ‘Shamron/shamrun’; Targum Yonatan on Exodus 46:13 (ed. Clarke, 58).

<sup>53</sup> On the Aramaic name Shamrai (שמריי) in a different context compare *Bereshit Rabbah* 81:3 (ed. Theodor/Albeck, 974). There the term Shamrai is used without any special connotations.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Kippenberg 1971, 140, who refers to the Samaritan scribe mentioned in yAvodah Zarah 5,4[3] (44d).

<sup>55</sup> According to Mirkin <sup>5</sup>1992, 153. See also Zsengeller 2011, 425 Anm. 41.

<sup>56</sup> See Lehnardt 2002.

<sup>57</sup> See on this the methodological observations by Alon 1977, 354; Stern 1994, 99–105; Magen 2008, 71–75; see also Schiffman 2012. –On a similar anti-Samaritan interpretation referring to genealogical details see *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* 37,1 (ed. Theodor/Albeck 344) and see on this also Bohak 2001, 301–303.

<sup>58</sup> Compare *Midrash Devarim Rabbah* 3,6 (106a) and the slightly different version in *Midrash Debarim Rabbah* (ed. Lieberman, 79). A Samaritan tries to convince Rabbi Yonatan about the chosenness of Mount Gerizim, since according to his view the top of this mountain had not been covered by the primordial floods. See on this episode Heinemann 1974, 95.

<sup>59</sup> See, e.g., tDemai 5,21 (ed. Lieberman, 92–93); tAvodah Zarah 2,4 (ed. Zuckerman, 462); bAvodah Zarah 20b; tAvodah Zarah 3,12 (ed. Zuckerman, 464).

<sup>60</sup> See Hamitovsky 2009, concerning bBava Qamma 38b und bHullin 5b-6a. On bHullin 6a see also Lehnardt 2012, 297.