



Religious Identity of Diaspora Samaritan in Thessaloniki

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Introduction

The Jews maintained a unique identity despite a long history of persecution. Especially in AD 70, as a result of losing the Second Temple, many Jews were scattered all over the world. Therefore, they rebuilt the community using the synagogue as their base. The Samaritans were also forcefully separated by the Roman army and scattered in the same period. Among them were those who converted to Christianity, and areas where Jews, Samaritans, Christians, and pagans coexisted also came into existence. Thessaloniki was one of them (see Fig. 1). This phenomenon offers an important insight into our understanding of how religious minorities form their own identities in societies with different thoughts and cultures. Based on this background, I focus on the Samaritan inscription discovered in Thessaloniki and analyze their religious identity. Although most of these sentences were in Greek, some were written in Samaritan Hebrew and have been the subject of discussion by many researchers (Pelekides 1955*; Lifshitz & Schiby 1968; Purvis 1976). Researchers have analyzed them linguistically and believe that they were inscriptions made during the fourth and sixth centuries.

* Since I have not obtained Pelekides 1955 (Pelekides, S. ‘Περὶ μιας στηλης’, Πραγματοῦν τοῦ θ̄ διεθνoῦς Βυζαντινολογικοῦ Συνεδρίου, Thessaloniki, 1955, 408), I referred to Noy 2004 (Noy, D. *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis I: Eastern Europe*, Tübingen, 2004, 100-105).

Background

Thessaloniki, one of Macedonia's most prosperous cities, was an important commercial city connecting Rome and the Middle East. Some researchers note that there were Jews in Thessaloniki even before the birth of Christ. However, some documentation definitely appeared in the New Testament period. In the New Testament, it is stated that Paul visited the synagogue of Thessaloniki and propagated Christianity to the Jews (Act 17.1-9). Thereafter, due to continuous fighting with the Roman army and subsequent expulsion from Palestine, many Jews would have stayed on there. Thessaloniki was indeed a multi-ethnic society.

Samaritan dedicatory inscription with the text of *Num* 6.22-7

This inscription was discovered near the Church of Panagia Chalkeon. Pelekides states that this was once a Jewish or Samaritan residential area (Pelekides 1955). According to Moutsopoulos, there was a synagogue near this residential area until 1919 (Moutsopoulos 1995). Therefore, there is no doubt that the surroundings are derived from Jews or Samaritans. Below is the discovered inscription text. As in Noy 2004, I would like to compare the Num 6.22-7 part with the original text of Septuaginta.

<Text>
כרוך אלהינו לעולם
καὶ ἐλάλησεν Κ(ύριο)ς μετὰ
Μουσῇ λέγων λάλησον
τῷ Ἀαρὼν καὶ τοῖς υἱοῖς αὐτ[οῦ]
λέγων οὕτως εὐλογή[σετε]
τοὺς υἱοὺς Ἰ(σρα)ήλ εἴπατε αὐτοῖς
εὐλογήσαι σε Κ(ύριο)ς καὶ φυλάξει
σε ἐπιφανεῖ Κ(ύριο)ς τὸ πρόσωπον
αὐτοῦ πρὸς σε καὶ ἀγαπήσει σε
[ἐ]παρεῖ Κ(ύριο)ς τὸ πρόσωπον αὐ-
τοῦ πρὸς σε καὶ ποιήσει σοι εἰ<ρή>-
νην καὶ θήσεται τὸ ὄνομά
μου ἐπὶ τοὺς υἱοὺς Ἰ(σρα)ήλ κάγω
εὐλογήσω αὐτούς
כרוך למוש
עִים Θεός εὐλογία Σιρικίω τῷ
ποιήσαντι ἅμα συνβίω
κὲ τέκνοι<ς> αὐῆι Νεάπο
λις μετὰ τῶν φιλόντων

<Septuaginta>
(Samaritan Hebrew)
Καὶ ἐλάλησεν κύριος πρὸς
Μωυσῆν λέγων Λάλησον
Ααρων καὶ τοῖς υἱοῖς αὐτοῦ
λέγων Οὕτως εὐλογήσετε
τοὺς υἱοὺς Ἰσραηλ λέγοντες αὐτοῖς
Εὐλογήσαι σε κύριος καὶ φυλάξει
σε, ἐπιφάναι κύριος τὸ πρόσωπον
αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ σὲ καὶ ἐλεῆσαι σε,
ἐπάραι κύριος τὸ πρόσωπον αὐ-
τοῦ ἐπὶ σὲ καὶ δόξῃ σοι εἰρήνην.
νην καὶ ἐπιθήσουσιν τὸ ὄνομά
μου ἐπὶ τοὺς υἱοὺς Ἰ(σρα)ήλ καὶ ἐγὼ Κύριος
εὐλογήσω αὐτούς
(Samaritan Hebrew)

<Translated by Noy 2004>
(Samaritan Hebrew) Blessed be our God forever!
(Greek *Num* 6.22-7) And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying:
“Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying: so you shall bless the
sons of Israel. Tell them: the Lord will bless you and protect
you. The Lord will reveal his face to you and favour you. The
Lord will lift up his face to you and make peace for you. And
my name will be placed upon the sons of Israel and I will
bless them.”
(Samaritan Hebrew) Blessed be His name forever!
(Greek) God is one. A blessing to Sirikios who has made (this
plaque/the donation?) with his wife and children. Prosper,
Neapolis, with those who love you!

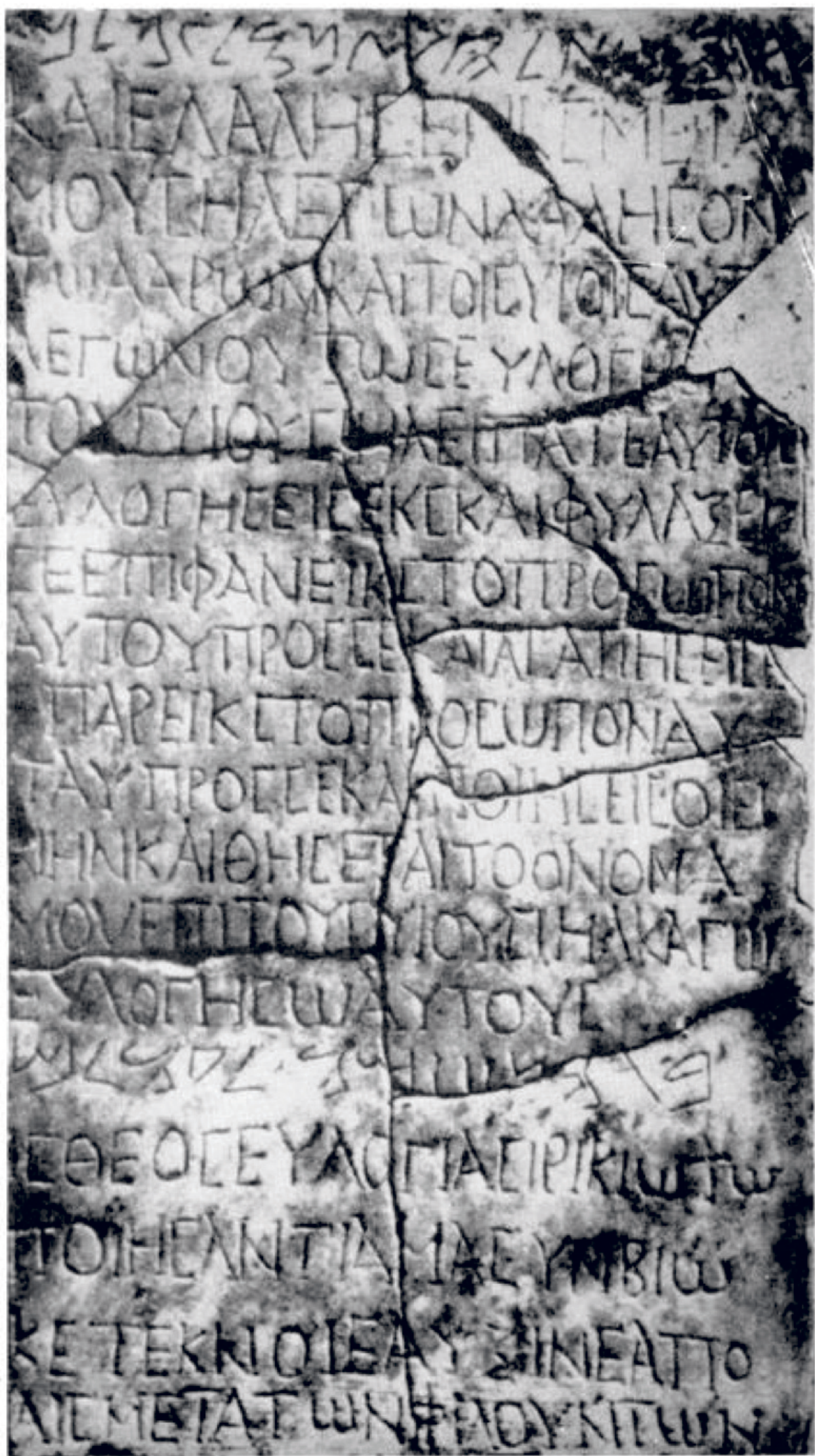


Fig. 2 Original inscription Noy 2004, Mac17.

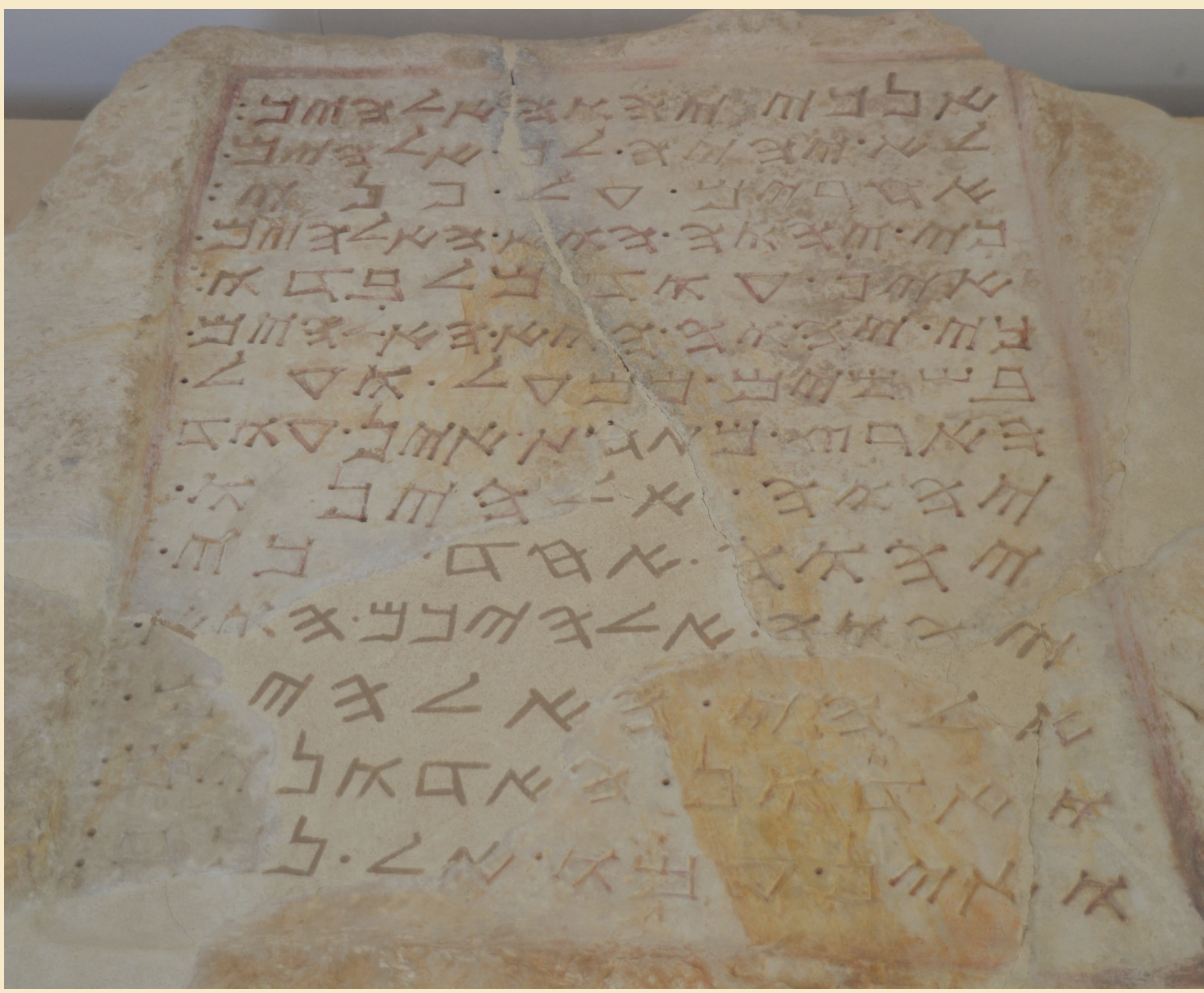


Fig. 3 The Samaritan Inscription from Mt. Gerizim

Now on display in the Good Samaritan Inn Museum (Photo by Fujisawa)

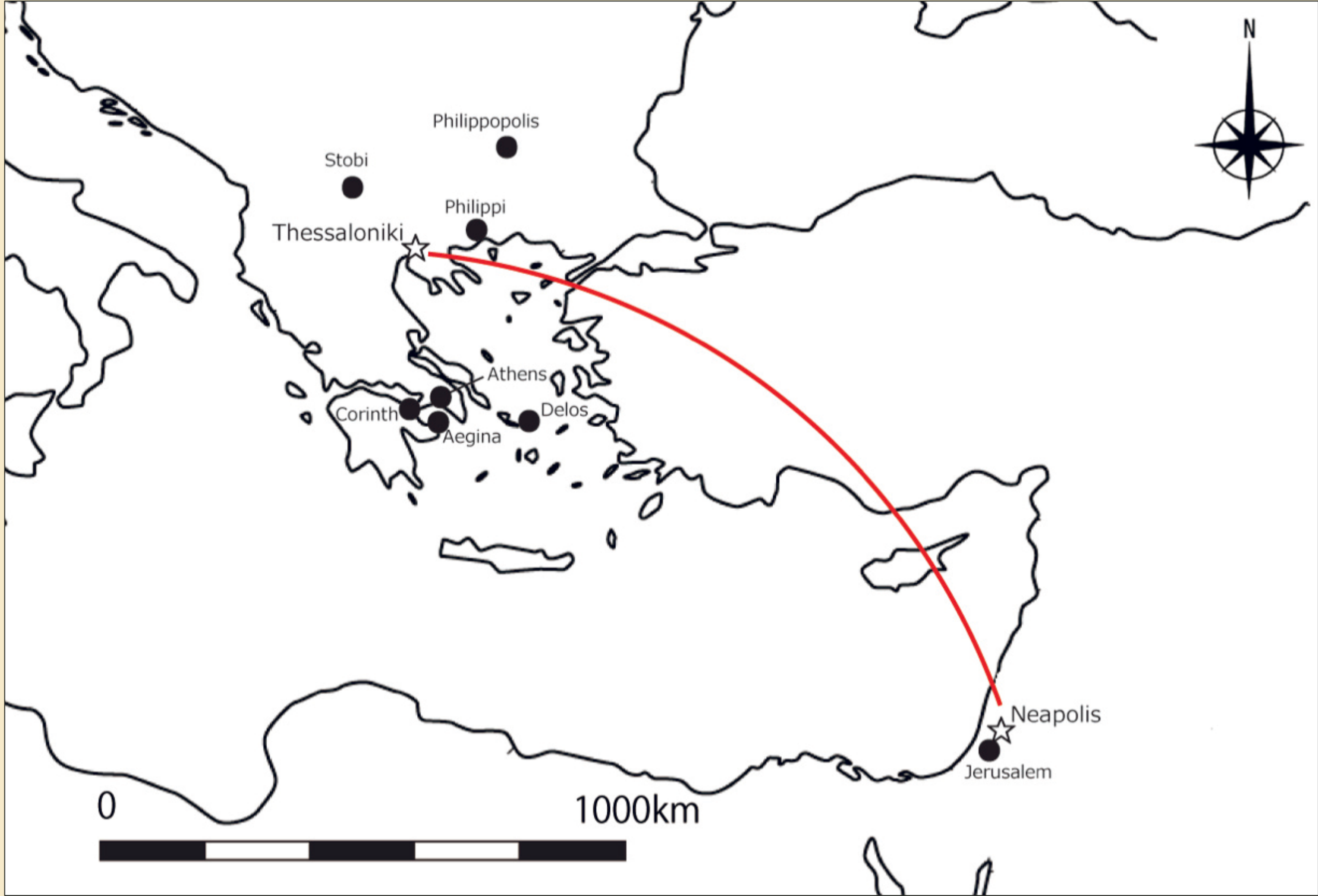


Fig. 1 Map: Thessaloniki and Neapolis

It is not easy to distinguish between the Samaritans and Jews archaeologically. Although Samaritans were different from Jews in that they followed the Samaritan Pentateuch (equivalent to the Jewish Torah), both had a lot in common both linguistically and culturally. There are two reasons researchers thought that the inscription was by Samaritans. The first one is the presence of a particular term. The description of Numbers was partly different from Septuaginta but came from the Samaritan Pentateuch (Lifshitz and Schiby 1968). The second is to do with a person named Sirikios. Sirikios was from the Samaritan sanctuary, Neapolis. Neapolis (now Nablus) was a place that was renamed by Titus after the First Jewish War, but appears as Shechem in the Hebrew Bible (Gen. 11. 6). Subsequently, Romans, Jews, and Christians also lived here, making it a multi-ethnic society, but the Samaritans were its main citizens since ancient times. Initially, lines 1 and 15 were written in Samaritan Hebrew (see Fig. 2, the translation is written in Hebrew). It is the same lettering as the Samaritan inscription excavated from Mt. Gerizim and its features are clearly shown (see Fig. 3 and 4).

To date, the Jewish inscription has been confirmed in many areas of the Mediterranean world. However, there are few cases of Samaritan inscriptions. During their lengthy tenure in the Greek cultural sphere, they became familiar with that culture, while on the other hand they also partially acquired or recognized the Samaritan language. Since the time of the Roman rule, Neapolis was also evolving into a multilingual society, but the Samaritan language was supposedly inherited. As Christianization advanced in the fifth and sixth centuries and the huge church hall was built on Mt. Gerizim, its tradition shrunk but the inscription contains a message of adoration to the sacred place of Diaspora Samaritans. Is it not due to this particular reason that the Numbers were chosen?

About the Samaritan synagogue

Pelekides insisted that Sirikios was the builder of the synagogue (Pelekides 1955). Certainly, this is a possibility. However, in general, Samaritans built synagogues in the suburbs, while on the other hand Jews customarily built theirs in the center. Therefore, it may be difficult to conclude that the inscription is evidence of the synagogue's existence in Thessaloniki.

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Fig. 4 The Samaritan and Hebrew alphabets
Barag 2009, Fig. 12.7