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One Fifth of the Tiny Samaritan Community in Nablus Died in the Plague Epidemic of 1786

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A three-page narrative of the plague epidemic of 1786 and its tragic consequences for the Samaritan community of Nablus have been preserved in MS BL. Or. 2691. This manuscript has been preserved on microfilm number 8437, housed at the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts in the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem. The manuscript contains 42 folios, with Arabic poetry by various authors, including El->Ayyeh himself, found at the beginning and at the end of the manuscript; a commentary on Deuteronomy 32; and a report on the events of the plague epidemic. Many of the poems in this manuscript may be found in *Kitab Al-Tasabich* (sic) (The Book of Commendations), edited and published by Ratson Tsedaqa Hassafarey (Óolon, 1970, 443 pp.). Part of the manuscript was prepared towards the end of the eighteenth century, and the rest was copied at the end of the nineteenth century. The report on the plague epidemic, which is probably incomplete, is annotated and published for the first time in this article. I have added some 61 linguistic observations at the end of the article as well as in marginal notes. As the reader will observe, some of the words in the report have been indecipherable.

The report on the plague epidemic was penned and copied in 1786 in Nablus by the prominent eighteenth-century Samaritan scholar, Ibrâh•m ben Ya>qÿb ben Mur#ân (Ab Sakwa = Sikkuwwa) al-Danf• (known by the nickname El->Ayyeh). As far as we know, this manuscript is the only written source to provide information about El->Ayyeh's year of birth, 1719 (found on folio no. 11r). The manuscript also shows that he was still alive in the winter of 1786. The high priest in that period was Ghazâl (ÿabia) ben Is'âq (1752-1787), a close friend of El->Ayyeh. In 1786 the Samaritans lived in only one place, a site near their holy mountain, Gerizim, in the quarter of Yâsm•nah, southeast of Nablus. They numbered approximately 100 individuals, as indicated by El->Ayyeh ! in this document, not 200 as several modern sources state. The plague epidemic that year caused the death of 4,000 people in Nablus. Among the victims were twenty Samaritans, including men, women and children, nearly one fifth of the entire Samaritan population. Half a century later, in 1837, the same number of deaths occurred among the Samaritans, this time because of an earthquake.

In the eighteenth century Nablus played a central role in the trade and industry of Palestine. The year 1786 was not only a year of plague epidemics in Nablus, it was also a time of severe drought. Food was scarce and extremely expensive. The situation improved, thanks to the arrival in the Jaffa harbour of provisions from the islands of Galite and Malta. Boats were loaded weekly with various foodstuffs, such as wheat, barley, sorghum, lentil vetch, pressed dates, carob, horse-beans, lentils, roasted chick-peas, onion, raisins, dried figs, molasses and rice. El->Ayyeh describes miserable and inhuman conditions: people sold their belongings in order to buy food; some were compelled to eat corpses; there were numerous beggars ("like locusts" in the Arabic description); screaming babies, males and

females were offered for sale on the streets, in the markets and in the alleys, but no one could afford to buy them. A few examples will give an idea of the prices: a jar of olive oil cost 15 goush (20 zlots); a jar of sesame oil cost 12 goush; a jar of honey cost 18.75 goush; a rotl (a pound) of butter was priced at three goush; a pound of each of the following items cost 0.75 goush (the equivalent of 25 mißriyyah): rice, raisins, dried figs, roasted chick-peas, pressed dates, lentils, horse-beans, sorghum. The same scarcity held true for fruits and greens. Finally, the writer mentions that the cats in Nablus were liquidated: they were all eaten by the villagers.

New Samaritan Manuscripts in East Jerusalem

Samaritan manuscripts exist in approximately seventy public libraries around the world. The number of manuscripts can be estimated at over 2,500; the lion's share, some 1,350 manuscripts, can be found in the National Library of Russia in Saint Petersburg. Almost all are fragmentary, and they have been classified into fourteen categories in accordance with their subject matter.

Towards the end of the year 2008, my colleague, Dr. Moin Halloun, a lecturer at the University of Bethlehem, drew my attention to the existence of three Samaritan manuscripts in East Jerusalem. Halloun sent me a copy of these manuscripts early in 2009.

During my last research trip to the Holy Land, Mount Gerizim and Jerusalem (22 March-5 April 2009), I had the opportunity to examine these three manuscripts closely. They are housed at the library of the German Protestant Institute of Archaeology, Auguste-Victoria-Compound (P. O. Box 18 463, Jerusalem 91184, Israel/Palestine; www.deiahl.de). These three manuscripts were donated to the library by the German family of Gustaf Dalman towards the end of 2007.

This Protestant Institute was established by the Evangelical German Church on 19 June 1900, and its first director was the Biblical scholar Gustaf Hermann Dalman, (1855-1941), who came to Jerusalem on 12 November 1902. Dalman, who apparently had good relations with the Samaritan High Priest, Ṣimrān Is'āq, (1889-1980), succeeded in obtaining at least sixteen Samaritan manuscripts from the above-mentioned priest. This transfer of manuscripts from Nablus to Jerusalem took place during the first three decades of the twentieth century.

During my trip, only three Samaritan manuscripts were available at the library of the German Protestant Institute of Archaeology. The other thirteen manuscripts which were at the library in the middle of the 1990s had probably disappeared years before as a result of the re-organisation of the library. Like others, I believed that the manuscripts had been moved to Dalman's Institute at Greifswald University in Germany. A round of e-mail correspondence led to the rediscovery of the manuscripts at the end of April 2009; they

were found by Mrs. Baraba Herfurth, the librarian at the library of the German Protestant Institute of Archaeology in Jerusalem, in some boxes with other old books. They are now in Jerusalem where they are classified as: F 150. Sa 0080000– F 150. Sa 0180200.

The three manuscripts that I examined during my trip are kept in the archive of the above-mentioned library:

1) Kitâb al-Ma>âd (the book of the hereafter, the afterworld) by Is'âq Ab¥ Ibrâh•m b. Fara# (Mar'•v) b. Mâr¥®, known by the *kunya*, Ab¥ al-Óasan al Í¥r•, Av Isda (end of the eleventh century-the beginning of the twelfth century).

2) Kitâb al-Tawba by Ab¥ al-Óasan al Í¥r•. The text is in two languages, Neo-Samaritan Hebrew and an Arabic translation. In fact this manuscript is not about repentance at all, but is a collection of prayers and supplications to be recited during the six working days of the week. No information is given concerning the scribe or the translator

3) Kitâb al-Óawâj• by Ab¥ Sa>•d b. Ab• al-Óusain b. Ab• Sa>•d (thirteenth century, Egypt, the reviser of the Old Arabic translation of the Samaritan Torah). These marginal notes, known in the scholarly world by the term 'scholia', are 63 in number and shed considerable of light on Ab¥ Sa>•d's revision.

In this article a detailed description together with an analysis of these three previously unknown manuscripts are presented. The description of the remaining thirteen (perhaps more?) must await for a future trip to Jerusalem. These sixteen Samaritan manuscripts, consisting of more than 4,000 pages, are so far the only ones to have been discovered in East Jerusalem.

It is not impossible that additional Samaritan manuscripts will be discovered in the Holy Land, not far from the centre of the Samaritans, Mount Gerizim, Nablus.

The Kohen Jacob ben >Uzzi's Letter to Yitshak Ben -Zvi in 1937

This three-page Arabic letter, written in 1937 by the Samaritan high priest Jacob (Ya>q¥b) ben >Uzzi ben Jacob ben Aaron ben Shalma ben Tabia (Ghazâl) (1899-1987), to Yitshak Ben- Zvi, the second president of Israel (1884-1964), is being published and annotated here, translated into Hebrew for the Samaritans of Óolon and others interested in Samaritanism who are not familiar with the Arabic language. This letter is not dated, but it answers a letter written by Yitshak on 5 March 1937, which contained eight questions. These questions concerned one main issue: Ab¥ al-Óasan al-Í¥r•'s famous book, al-~abbâΔ, rendered into Late Samaritan Hebrew b! y Ab¥ al-Óasan b. Hâr¥n b. Salâma b. Ghazâl (1879-1959). Ben-Zvi purchased this copy of al-~abbâΔ in 1936 from the Kohen, Ya>q¥b ben >Uzzi, and it is preserved today at the Yad Ben-Zvi Library in Jerusalem, classified as number 7074. This copy consists of 361 pages. Pages 1 to 290 include the text of al-~abbâΔ;

pages 291 to 361 are a commentary on the Ten Commandments. The written space on each page is 26.5x9 cm.

I came across Ben ṢUzzi's letter at the beginning of the year 1981 while I was engaged in writing brief descriptions in Hebrew of the more than ninety Samaritan manuscripts that are preserved in the Yad Ben-Zvi Library. As many know, Ben-Zvi was interested in Samaritanism as early as 1908 and established very friendly relations with the Samaritans who lived in Nablus and Tel Aviv Jaffa. In the 1920s he intended to live with his wife Rachel in Nablus for half a year in order to investigate several aspects related to Samaritans, but his intention was not realised. His well-known book entitled *Sefer Ha-Shomronim* was published in 1935. It is thus no surprise to find such a relatively large number of Samaritan manuscripts in his personal library.

In addition to the letter presented here I also found the colophon mentioned in it and attached to it. This colophon too is being published here; it refers to two copies of al-ʿabbāḍ copied by the grandfather of Yaḡqḏb ben ṢUzzi in 1867 and 1892.

Correspondence between European scholars (among them, the so-called imaginary brothers of the Samaritans) such as Joseph Scaliger, Robert Huntington and Silvestre De Sacy with the Samaritans in Nablus, Damascus, Gaza and Cairo began at the end of the sixteenth century. This subject needs further investigation despite the studies that have been carried out until today. The correspondence and research visits of Jewish and Arab scholars such as Yitshak Ben-Zvi (1884-1964), Jurji Zaidan (1861-1914) and Mu'ammad Rafiq al-Tamm (1885-1956) with regard to Samaritans and Samaritanism are almost terra incognita.

A Poem in Praise of Moses, the Lord of Mankind, by Ibrāh•m El-ṢAyyeh

This Samaritan Arabic poem (qaṣ•ida) by the versatile and prolific eighteenth-century scholar, Ibrāh•m ben Yaḡqḏb ben Murṣān (Ab Sakwa = Sikkuwwa) al-Danf• (known by the nickname El-ṢAyyeh, c. 1719-1786), is published here and annotated for the first time. As far as we know, this is the longest poem in the Samaritan Arabic literature which emerged in the eleventh century. The poem written in 1194 H./1780 A.D. consists of 417 lines (one line has been added in the margin) in accordance with the manuscript which we utilised. Yet at the end of the manuscript the number of lines is given as 420. This inconsistency may be explained either as a mistake in counting or perhaps as an error by the scribe, who could have inadvertently skipped three lines, probably by starting with the same words (in one or several of the lines 374-401). The year of the poem's composition is indicated in the second hemistich of the last line through numerology, an ancient and well-known practice in Arabic poetry:

ان ي ي ض ا م ل ا ن ي ن س ل ا ل ك
that is to say, 50 + 201 + 943 (ḍāḍ is 800) = 1194 H. (=1780 A.D.)-

The manuscript is preserved at Yad Ben-Zvi Library in Jerusalem where it is classified as number 7019 in the Samaritan collection of manuscripts. This library preserves

approximately one hundred Samaritan manuscripts that Yitzhak Ben-Zvi (1884-1963), the second president of Israel, purchased or acquired from his Samaritan friends and acquaintances in Nablus. A brief handwritten description of these manuscripts prepared by the present writer in Hebrew in 1981 is found in the library. Kâmil âl Isrâ'îl al-Danfî copied the poem in praise of Moses in the year 1931. The poem was customarily recited by the Samaritans on the occasion of *mawlid*, Moses' birthday feast, up until the 1930s and was considered an integral part of the *mawlid*. A Samaritan Hebrew version of the *mawlid* written at the end of the nineteenth century has replaced the Arabic text.

It is hard to call these rhyming lines a "poem" from the artistic and linguistic points of view. Written in a mixture of Arabic, including spoken, middle and literary, the text lacks originality, vision or any poetic insight. As a rule, El-Ayyeh's poetry, in both Arabic and Samaritan Hebrew is characterised by ambiguity. Here the poem is published without any modification, but in the marginal notes, 197 in number, clarifications, comments and corrections have been added. Words followed by a question mark mean that could not be deciphered them. No doubt other manuscripts which include this poem can cast some light on these ambiguities.

With regard to content, the poem revolves around two major themes. One is a short survey of Moses' life and deeds in the thirteenth century B.C.; the other is a description of Moses' personality with a plethora of qualifications and epithets. The four books of the Torah with the exception of Leviticus serve as background for this information. Belief in Moses as the only prophet and the greatest one is one of the five pillars of the Samaritan faith. Ibrâhîm El-Ayyeh says that Moses' traits and characteristics are countless, like grains of sand and drops of water in the sea. He adds that the universe and paradise have been created for Moses' sake. Among the epithets attached to Moses are the following: the chosen, the full moon, the lord of messengers, the crown of the world, God's messenger, the noblest angel, the trustee of God's house.

When this study was ready for publication, I received another copy of the poem from Mr. Binyamim Tsedaka of Óolon. This version included in an Arabic book in honour of Moses' birthday was copied by the high priest Nâḥî ben Khaḏîr ben Is'âq (1880-1961). and consists of 419 lines, not 421 as is stated at its end. The manuscript was owned by the priest >Azqayyah (Óizqiyah, >Azmi) and his nephews in Nablus and was kept in the house of Mÿsa Ghaith, the son of the high priest, Levi (Libi) ben Avija> (d. 2001). Generally speaking the first version of the poem housed at the library of Yad Ben-Zvi is superior to this later one. Yet this new version shows the correct readings in several cases, and as a result the number of question marks is fewer. Moreover, a list of the variants of these two versions is presented at the end of this study.

In order to prepare a critical edition of this poem more manuscript sources are needed. Any information about such sources especially from the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim and Óolon would be very welcome.

Research into Samaritan Arabic poetry is still scarce. An anthology of poetry on Moses, for instance, would be much-needed contribution.

A Sample of Samaritan Tales

An Arabic translation of twenty-one Samaritan tales written in modern Hebrew is presented here along with annotations. These tales were published a decade ago in a volume entitled: *The Samaritans: Cooking, Traditions and Customs*, written and photographed by Dan (Dantsu) Arnon. The volume also contains forty-three recipes by Batia Tsedaka and her sister Zippora Tsedaka. Tel Aviv 1999 (in Hebrew). The tales were narrated by twelve Samaritans including Ratson Tsedaka (1922-1990) with six tales, *Íabr• b. Ismâ>•l al-Danf•* with two tales, and Tsedaka b. Is'âq al-Kâhin, with one legend. Among these storytellers there is only one woman, Batia Tsedaka (1925-2010), with one tale.

The last legend, entitled “Baba Rabba and the Copper Fowl”, is anonymous. These relatively short legends were orally transmitted from generation to generation. The oldest dates back to the fourth century A.D. and the most recent comes from the last century. As far as we know, these tales were neither recorded nor written down in phonetic transcription. Twelve such Samaritan legends were published by Ratson Tsedaka and Dr. David Noy in Haifa in 1965. In addition there are 100 stories preserved in the archive of popular stories at the library of Haifa University.

Among these legends, mention can be made of the following titles: >Aqbon, Germon and a baby in the basket (4th century); the pain of learning the Torah; a sack of raisins; joy at the end of the summer; Ab¥ Fâris drives away an evil spirit; a big spoon for many mouths; the miracle of the Passover sacrifice; and the clay pot of oil will remain; this is a meal and this is its reward; the ring; the hand raised up in the sea; the magician and the Kohen and the miracle of the lamb.

In addition to the twenty-one legends with happy endings, I included one more. Its title is “The nun daughter of the High Priest >Amram”. The oldest source of this tale is a history book by Ab¥ al-Fat' ben ab• al-Óasan al-Sâmir• al-Danaf• from the fourteenth century. A manuscript of this chronicle copied by Ab¥ al-Óasan b. Ya>q¥b in 1932 is at my disposal. The publication of this tale is based on this source (pp. 92-96). The reader will easily discover that this legend is written in Middle Arabic.