

## The Sanctuary and Holy Vessels in Samaritan Art<sup>1</sup>

By James D. Purvis of Boston University

I have had occasion in two recent studies to comment on depictions of the tabernacle and holy vessels in Samaritan art.<sup>2</sup> The first publication, in the twentieth anniversary edition of *Aleph-Beth* (1992), was a descriptive study of two tabernacle drawings in the Boston University library, one by the Samaritan high priest Jacob ben Aaron (1840-1916), and the other by his grandson, Jacob ben Uzzi (1899-1987).<sup>3</sup> This article also included observations on two previously published tabernacle drawings: a sister-drawing by Jacob ben Aaron,<sup>4</sup> and a chart by Abisha ben Pinhas (1881-1961).<sup>5</sup> The second publication (1994) was entitled "The Tabernacle in Samaritan Iconography and Thought".<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to summarize what now appear to be the significant conclusions of these studies and to offer additional observations. I have summarized these conclusions and observations in a set of six remarks. The first three remarks concern the tabernacle drawings and Samaritan art.

### The Tabernacle in Samaritan Art: Three Conclusions

Firstly, the Samaritan drawings of the tabernacle and vessels are representative of an historic artistic tradition. Although the particular drawings I examined are from the early twentieth century, older drawings are known from as early as the seventh century.<sup>7</sup> Also belonging to the same iconographic tradition are drawings of the tabernacle and vessels found on metallic torah-cases and plaques and on cloth synagogue hangings.<sup>8</sup> It was clearly stated in the initial publication of one of Jacob ben Aaron's drawings that his was a copy of a drawing found on the case of the holy scroll in Nablus.<sup>9</sup> That this was a fact is confirmed by a pen and ink sketch of the drawing on the Torah case made by the Rev. Samuel Manning in 1873.<sup>10</sup> Similar illustrations on synagogue hangings date mostly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but one is known from as early as the sixteenth<sup>11</sup>. In addition, there are vessel-motifs that appear on Samaritan lamps and mosaic synagogue floors as early as Byzantine times.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, these drawings constitute virtually the only statement of graphic, representational art in the history of the Samaritan community. There is no other developed artistic tradition among the Samaritans apart from the drawings of the tabernacle and vessels. There are, for example, no illuminations in Samaritan manuscripts, although text-columns are sometimes manipulated to create ornamental designs. Marriage contracts contain only geometric or stylized floral decorations, unlike the developed artistic tradition of Jewish ketuboth.<sup>13</sup> As A. D. Crown has noted (surprisingly without reference to the tabernacle drawings), "there are no traditional Samaritan artists. Samaritan art is restricted to the preparation of manuscripts in artistic forms, and early motifs on artifacts, coins, lamps, synagogue mosaics and sarcophagi".<sup>14</sup> To these few examples it is necessary to add, drawings of the tabernacle and vessels.

As an example of the manipulation of text-columns to create designs, Crown cites a Samaritan Torah scroll in the University of Sydney library with suggestive representations of the ark, mercy seat, table of show-bread, menorah and altar.<sup>15</sup> The scribe was Jacob ben Ozzi, the same Jacob ben Uzzi (ben Ezzi in Samaritan pronunciation) who rendered the tabernacle drawing we published in *Aleph-Beth* 20(1992). Therefore, Crown's statement that there are no traditional Samaritan artists needs to be modified: Jacob ben Uzzi was a Samaritan and an artist, whether through pen and ink sketches or through the manipulation of text-columns. And certainly a point which needs to be stressed is that the traditional subject of Samaritan art was the tabernacle and vessels.

Thirdly, the drawings present a distinctively Samaritan view of the sanctuary and vessels. These drawings are Samaritan not simply because they were prepared by Samaritans, but because they present, graphically, the Samaritan claims concerning the sanctuary. They were not executed to give, simply, a picture of the tabernacle, but to make a statement about that shrine according to the Samaritan view of its significance and history. I have argued that it is this fact which explains why these

drawings were acceptable in a religious community which was otherwise extremely restrictive in what it allowed in iconography.

The Sanctuary and Holy Vessels in Samaritan Art It is significant that the three artists of the drawings we have investigated were all, at one time, high priests of the community.<sup>16</sup> The drawings served a didactic function appropriate to the educational role of the priesthood: they instructed Samaritan laity in the distinctive Samaritan views of the sanctuary.

In what specific ways are these drawings distinctively Samaritan? How do they set forth typical Samaritan teachings? I note three features.

The legend on the curtain separating the holy place from the holy of holies. The two sections of the tent are separated by a curtain with a legend giving the names of eight priests (listed in four pairs) called "the keepers of the holy tabernacle": Aaron and Eleazar, Ithamar and Pinhas, Abisha and Shashai, Bahki and Uzzi. These were the high priests who, according to the Samaritan view, were the keepers of the shrine from its inception until the tragic time of the schism of Eli, when the tabernacle was said to have been hidden away in a cave on Mt Gerizim because of God's displeasure. This is made clear in the (Gaster-Robertson) sister-drawing by Jacob ben Aaron, who added to the priest-list the words: "And in the days of Uzzi the Lord hid the tabernacle; may the Lord restore it to us". A similar statement appears in the curtain-text in the drawing by Abisha ben Pinhas. This is the same affirmation which is found in the Samaritan chronicles and priest-lists under the account of the pontificate of Uzzi.<sup>17</sup>

What is affirmed in the curtain-text is that the sanctuary which is depicted is the tent shrine, which had a functional history only during the pontificates of these priests, from Aaron to Uzzi. This is the sanctuary, with its vessels, whose design was given by God to Moses, which was constructed in the wilderness, and which was set up on Mt Gerizim by Joshua. This is the sanctuary which was hidden away at the end of the pontificate of Uzzi, and which will remain hidden until its location is revealed by the eschatological agent who will restore the age of divine favor through its restoration. This is the one and true sanctuary of Israel and these are its vessels.

It is known that the high priest Jacob ben Aaron prepared one of his tabernacle drawings for a non-Samaritan audience-the drawing now in the W. E. Barton collection of the Boston University library, first published by Barton in 1907 to accompany an article by priest Jacob on Samaritan eschatology<sup>18</sup> Barton had only two comments on the drawing: that it was a copy of the illustration "on the case of the holy scroll", and that the picture depicted "symbols of the temple furniture to be restored by the messiah". This indicates that Jacob gave Barton the drawing for the specific purpose of illustrating Samaritan teaching on the role of the Taheb (the title of the Samaritan messiah) in the restoration of the sanctuary at the end-of-days.<sup>19</sup>

The Samaritan tabernacle drawings are, then, of the historic, hidden, and eschatological sanctuary of Israel-the Gerizim shrine, which was and will be and is even now hidden away, with all its vessels great and small.

A second point is to be noted: the depictions of the rods of Moses and Aaron as cultic relics and the inclusion of the jar of manna. The modern Samaritan tabernacle drawings agree in placing the budding rods of Moses and Aaron within the holy of holies, on each side of the ark.<sup>20</sup> The placement of the rod of Aaron agrees with Numbers 17:25 (17:10 in English): "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Put back the rod of Aaron before the testimony, to be kept as a sign for the rebels, that you may make an end of their murmurings against me, lest they die.' Thus did Moses; as the Lord commanded him, so he did".<sup>21</sup> Why the inclusion also in these drawings of the staff of Moses? Probably because in the biblical story, the placing of Aaron's rod before the ark signified his special authority as priest against any usurpers of his prerogatives.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the inclusion of the rod of Moses in the Samaritan depictions there will never be another. He was also the model of their eschatological figure, the Taheb.

A related feature (in the drawings by Jacob ben Aaron) is the placement of the jar of Manna in the holy place, immediately before the ark. This agrees with Exodus 16: 33-34: "And Moses said to Aaron, 'Take ajar, and put an omer of manna in it, and place it before the Lord, to be kept throughout your generations.' As the Lord commanded Moses, so Aaron placed it before the testimony, to be kept".<sup>23</sup>

The placement of the rod of Moses and the pot of manna in conspicuous places in Jacob ben Aaron's drawings has eschatological significance. According to the Samaritans, the legitimacy of the Taheb will be attested by his being in possession of Moses' rod and a portion of the manna when he comes to undertake the work of the uncovering the hidden sanctuary.<sup>24</sup>

A third point of remark concerns the fire on the altar. Not only are the tent and the vessels hidden, but the fire is as well. This is, I maintain, the reason for the depiction of fire on the altar in the drawings: as

the tabernacle and holy vessels have been hidden away, so too has the sacred altar-fire. We may compare here Jewish traditions on the hiding of the vessels. In Jewish tradition, the hiding of the tent, ark, and sacred vessels is most frequently attributed to Jeremiah, sometimes involving Baruch. A distinct though related tradition concerns the hiding of the sacred fire of the altar by the priests of the Jerusalem temple. For example, 2 Macc 1:18-35 reports the secreting away of the sacred fire by the priests in a dry cistern, the finding of that fire (in a naphtha-like substance) by the descendants of those priests, and the restoration of the ancient fire to the second temple by order of Nehemiah. (It is Nehemiah and not Zerubbabel who is credited in this particular story with building the second temple and altar.)

Why this interest in the fire as well as the vessels? In the case of the Jewish tradition, what is stressed in the story is the finding of that fire and its use in the inaugural service of the second temple. It was that fire which assured the legitimate continuity between the cultus of Solomon and that of Nehemiah. In contrast to the story of the hidden fire, the Jewish stories of the hidden vessels stress that they have not yet been found, and will not be until the eschaton, described as that blessed future time when "God gathers his people together and shows his mercy" (2 Macc 2:7), or, as the time Jerusalem will be "restored forever" (2 Bar 6:9), or, as the time of the "coming of the beloved one" (4 Bar 3:11).

The Samaritan traditions of the hidden tabernacle vessels have both similarities to and differences from the Jewish traditions of the hidden temple vessels, the articulation of which need not detain us here. But what should be noted concerning the hiding and restoration of the holy fire, is that, as in the Jewish tradition, so too in the Samaritan, what is stressed is the authenticity of the latter-day sanctuary and its continuity with the ancient cultus.<sup>25</sup>

The tabernacle occupied, then, a central place in Samaritan theology as the once and future, true sanctuary of Israel-against Jewish claims of the sanctity of Jerusalem and its temple. For a generally aniconic religion, pictures of the tabernacle and vessels were accepted as proper vehicles of theological statement. Through these, the Samaritans were able to represent not only their own peculiar view of the sanctuary, but the major tenets of their religion as well. These included the significance of the law (the tablets of which were contained in the ark of testimony), Moses as the one true prophet of Israel, Aaron and his legitimate successors as the authentic priesthood, and the Mt Gerizim tabernacle as the authentic holy place, the sacred center.

### Samaritan Representations of the Vessels: Three Observations

My next three remarks relate specifically to the representation of the vessels by Samaritan artists.

Firstly, some Samaritan representations of the vessels-what they were, how they looked-differ from traditional Jewish views. I note as one example the following case: Jacob ben Aaron depicts two pairs of double-handled vases or pots, labeled  $\hat{\imath}\text{æ}\text{ø}\text{-}$  and  $\hat{\imath}\text{æ}\hat{\imath}$  (mizraq and mazleg), showing one pair on each side of the altar. These vessels are mentioned in Exodus 38:3 as among a category of implements belonging to the altar, but are usually translated "basins and forks": He made all the utensils of the altar, the pots, the shovels, the basins, the forks, and the firepans; all its utensils he made of bronze (NRSV).

The mizraq is mentioned frequently in biblical Hebrew as a bowl or basin. But the mazleg (or mizlagah) is usually identified as a fork or fleshhook, (as, for example, 1 Sam 2:13-14, where a three-pronged fork appears to be indicated).<sup>26</sup>

Some Samaritan depictions are in agreement with Jewish traditions. For example, as previously noted, the Rev. Samuel Manning published in the late nineteenth century a pen-sketch of the drawing of the tabernacle and vessels depicted on the metal Torah case of the Abisha scroll. In his comments, Manning noted that the location of the door to the tent of meeting, on the right-hand side rather than in the center, was "as the Talmud describes it", and that the peculiar shape of the curved or bent trumpet "may throw some light upon a question much debated amongst students of the Talmud".<sup>27</sup>

Scholars are often hopeful that new information will resolve or clarify old problems. Whether this might be the case with the Samaritan drawings of the vessels remains to be seen. I do note, however, the following Samaritan depictions which may be compared positively with some ancient Jewish traditions.

**The Base of the Altar.** At the base of the altar is a rounded mound identified in Jacob ben Aaron's drawing as 'aphar, "dust". This may imply that the altar rested on a mound of dirt, or it may allude to the ashes which had accumulated there. Here it is worth considering a statement which appears in

Josephus' description of the altar (Antiquities III 149): "The ground was in fact the receptacle for all burning fuel that fell from the brazier, the base not extending beneath the whole of its surface".

**The Priest's Vestment.** The vestment is shown with sleeves in Jacob ben Uzzi's drawing. It is my opinion that the stylized depiction in Jacob ben Aaron's drawings also contains sleeves. (A similar depiction is found in the older, seventh century drawing.) Interestingly, sleeves are not mentioned in the description of the priestly garments in Exodus 28:143, but they are in Josephus (Antiquities III 162).<sup>28</sup>

**The Containers on the Table of Showbread.** The variety of types of containers on the table in the Samaritan drawings suggests that not all were regarded as having been used for the same purpose, for bread. One may compare here the tradition preserved in Josephus (Antiquities III 143, 256), that two golden cups filled with frankincense were placed on the table above the bread. Two small cups appear also on the table of showbread depicted on the Arch of Titus.<sup>29</sup>

In some cases, Samaritan depictions may reflect features of the ancient cultus which the Samaritans regarded as especially important. I have suggested that the inclusion of two trumpets among the instruments in the outer court may reflect a special importance attributed to them: The Lord said to Moses, "Make two silver trumpets; of hammered work you shall make them; and you shall use them for summoning the congregation... The trumpets shall be to you for a perpetual statute throughout your generations." (Numbers 10:1-2, 8).

According to a Samaritan tradition preserved in the Arabic Book of Joshua, the continual burnt-offering of the morning was offered before sunrise. As soon as the high priest had completed the sacrifice, he blew the trumpet from the summit of Mt Gerizim. The trumpet blast was continued by the other priests so that all the Israelites would know that it had been offered and that the time had come to arise and pray.<sup>30</sup>

Could this literary tradition preserve a memory of actual practice in the ancient Gerizim cultus?-a practice whose importance may also be reflected in the artistic tradition of the trumpets among the tabernacle vessels? I note a similarity in what is reported by Ben Sira of Jewish worship during the time of Simon the Just. In his ode to Simon, Ben Sira related that, following the morning sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple,

... the sons of Aaron shouted, they sounded the trumpets of hammered work, they made a great noise to be heard for remembrance before the Most High. Then all the people together made haste and fell to the ground upon their faces to worship their Lord... and the people besought the Lord Most High in prayer before him who is merciful (Sirach 50:16-19).

The following points summarize the findings on the issues under consideration:

1. The Samaritan drawings of the tabernacle and vessels were part of an historic, artistic tradition in Samaritan culture.
  2. That tradition constituted virtually the only statement of graphic, representational art in the history of the community.
  3. These drawings were distinctively Samaritan in the theological views they expressed. (This explains why they were acceptable for a culture which was otherwise restrictive in its iconography.)
  4. Samaritan drawings sometimes depict the vessels in ways differing from traditional Jewish interpretations.
  5. Samaritan drawings sometimes depict the vessels in ways agreeing with Jewish traditions.
  6. The Samaritan drawings may, in some cases, reflect features of the ancient cultus which the Samaritans regarded as especially important.
- 

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented under the title, "The Sanctuary Vessels in Samaritan Tradition," Societe d'Etudes Samaritaines, Congresso, Milano, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term vessels in this study in a broad sense, to refer, collectively, to all the sacred furnishings of the tabernacle, not simply to utensils or cultic instruments. It will be noted that the Hebrew Bible sometimes uses kelim in this broad way, as well as in a more restrictive or narrow usage. See the Chronicler's phrase for the temple furnishings, collectively, "all the vessels of the house of God, great and small" (2 Chr 36:18). On the vessels in Jewish tradition see 1. Kalimi and J. D. Purvis, "King Jehoiachin and the Vessels of the Lord's House in Biblical Literature" Catholic Biblical Quarterly 56 (1994) 449-457, esp. 453.

---

<sup>3</sup> "Two Samaritan Drawings of the Tabernacle in the Boston University Library" Aleph-Beth: Hadshot Shomronim 20 (Samaritan Research Center 1992)105-120. Of these two drawings, a photograph of that by Jacob ben Aaron had been published (without descriptive study) by W. E. Barton in 1907. See Jacob ben Aaron, "The Messianic Hope of the Samaritans" trans. from the Arabic by Abdullah ben Kori, edited with an introduction by William Eleazar Barton The Open Court (1907) 272-296.

<sup>4</sup> A photograph was originally published by Moses Gaster, The Samaritans: Their History, Doctrines and Literature Schweich Lectures 1923 (Oxford University Press 1925) p1. 4 (no descriptive text). It is described (no photograph) in Edward Robertson, Catalogue of the Samaritan Manuscripts in the John Rylands Library II. The Gaster Manuscripts (Manchester: John Rylands Library 1962) ms. no.330, cols. 4.28 251-252. Neither Gaster nor Robertson identified the artist as Jacob ben Aaron, but of this there can be no doubt.

<sup>5</sup> A photograph and description appear in Robertson, The Gaster Manuscripts col. 252, ms. no. 330A plate 11. See also, R. Pummer, The Samaritans Iconography of Religions §23 fasc. 5 (Leiden 1987) 31 (text), p1. VIIIa.

<sup>6</sup> "The Tabernacle in Samaritan Iconography and Thought" in L. M. Hopfe (ed.), Uncovering Ancient Stones: Essays in Memory of H. Neil Richardson (El senbrauns 1994) 223-236.

<sup>7</sup> See Pummer, Samaritans 31. A report (with photograph) of the seventh century parchment drawing is published in Aleph-Beth 248 (15111/1979)1.

<sup>8</sup> In my verbal presentation I also included depictions on torah-mantles. However, fellow Congress participant Dr Bracha Yaniv, art historian and specialist on Samaritan ceremonial objects, informs me that this particular medium has not been used for tabernacle depictions.

<sup>9</sup> See the comment by W. E. Barton on ben Aaron's drawing in the latter's article "The Messianic Hope of the Samaritans".

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Manning, Those Holy Hills: Palestine Illustrated by Pen and Pencil (Religious Tract Society n. d.) 154

<sup>11</sup> R. Pummer, "Samaritan Material Remains and Archaeology" in A. D. Crown (ed.), The Samaritans (Tubingen 1989)156.

<sup>12</sup> Pummer, "Samaritan Material Remains" 142-143 (mosaics), 161-162 (lamps); V. Sussman, "Samaritan Lamps of the Third-Fourth Centuries AD," Israel Exploration Journal 28 (1978) 238.

<sup>13</sup> R. Pummer, Samaritan Marriage Contracts and Deeds of Divorce (Wiesbaden 1993) I 21.

<sup>14</sup> A. D. Crown, "Art of the Samaritans" in A. D. Crown, R. Pummer, A. Tal (eds), Companion to Samaritan Studies (Tubing 1993) 29.

<sup>15</sup> Crown, "Art" 30

<sup>16</sup> The dates of their pontificates were as follows: Jacob ben Aaron (1840-1916), high priest 1874-1916; Abisha ben Pinhas (1881-1961), high priest 1943-1961; Jacob ben Uzzi (1899-1987), high priest 1984-1987.

<sup>17</sup> For bibliographical references, see Purvis, "The Tabernacle" 233-234.

<sup>18</sup> See the essay by Jacob, edited by Barton, "The Messianic Hope of the Samaritans." Priest Jacob was a prolific writer, being not only a copyist of manuscripts but also the author of essays on various aspects of Samaritan culture, many of which were published in English translation by Barton. Some of these were polemical tracts setting forth the claims of the Samaritans against the Jews, but many were informative essays for the benefit of those who wished to know more about the sect. These articles were reprinted in booklet form and sent to Jacob for sale to tourists. Jacob reported that of the various off-prints, the one on Samaritan eschatology was the most popular. See James D. Purvis, "Studies on Samaritan Materials in the W. E. Barton Collection in the Boston University Library" in P. Peli (ed.), Proceedings of the Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 3-11 August 1969 vol.1 (Jerusalem n. d.)13~143, 168; idem, "The W. E. Barton Collection in the Boston University Library, Special Collections Division" Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research 248 (1982) 76.

<sup>19</sup> For Samaritan traditions on the Taheb and the restoration of the ancient tabernacle, see the texts from the fourth to the eighteenth centuries gathered together by Ferdinand Dexinger, "Der Taheb: Ein 'messianischer' Heilsbringer der Samaritaner" Kairos: Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft und Theologie n. f. 27 (1985)1-172. Note especially the chart on page 27. (This work is also published as a monograph under the same title, as Kairos Religionswissenschaftliche Studien 3 [Salzburg 1986].) Josephus records that the Roman procurator Pontius Pilatus was removed from office after an unwarranted attack upon a large Samaritan crowd which had gathered to ascend Mt Gerizim to find the lost tabernacle vessels (having been deluded by a pretender to the role of the eschatological prophet). See Antiquities XVIII 85-88.

<sup>20</sup> Curiously this is not true of the seventh century drawing, where only one budding rod appears, and that in the courtyard.

<sup>21</sup> The Jewish scriptures do not indicate that the rod of Aaron was subsequently placed in either the Shiloh or the Jerusalem temples as a relic or sacred souvenir, although such may have been the case. See the interesting study by Karel van der Toorn, "Did Jeremiah See Aaron's Staff?" Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 43 (1989) 83-94, in which it is argued that the budding almond seen by Jeremiah (Jer 1:11-12) was a cult-relic purported to be the rod of Aaron.

<sup>22</sup> See the story in Numbers 17:16-26 (English=17:1-11).

---

<sup>23</sup> Curiously the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews 9:4 contains a tradition that the budding rod of Aaron and the jar of Manna were within the holy of holies, in fact, within the ark itself (along with the tablets of the covenant). The same text also places the golden altar of incense within the holy of holies.

<sup>24</sup> See Dexinger, "Der Taheb" 27.

<sup>25</sup> See Isaac Kalimi and James Purvis, "The Hiding of the Temple Vessels in Jewish and Samaritan Literature" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994) 679-685.

<sup>26</sup> Dr Abraham Tal informs me that the Samaritan Targum also uses an Aramaic term signifying "fork" for the Hebrew *mizraq*.

<sup>27</sup> Manning, *Those Holy Hills* 156-159.

<sup>28</sup> See the comment by H St J Thackeray, that outside Josephus, sleeves of the priest's coat are not mentioned in Jewish tradition. Josephus IV : *Jewish Antiquities* books I-IV Loeb Classical Library 242 (Cambridge 1930) 393.

<sup>29</sup> See comments by Thackeray, Josephus Iv 383, 441.

<sup>30</sup> See Juynboll, *Chronicon Samaritanum* 38-39 (Arabic text) and 174 (Latin translation). An English translation is found in John Bowman, *Samaritan Documents relating to their History, Religion and Life*, Pittsburgh 1977) 73. Bowman stated that he knew of no parallel practice in the Jerusalem temple, but note the tradition we cite from Ben Sira.