

The Last High Priest and a Pentateuch of 1624 CE

By Larry Rynearson 2012

What happened to Shalmaiah, the last High Priest of the sons of Phinhas, of the sons of Aaron, Moses' brother, in 1624 C.E? There should be more to the story of his disappearance¹. But the fact is that the Samaritans really do not know what happened to High Priest Shalmaiah. All they really know is that he disappeared and was never seen or heard from again. But there is still an anonymity that just may be associated with the disappearance of last high priest.

Just as the high priest vanished, there is the matter of the sudden appearance of a complete Samaritan Pentateuch. In 1624, the same year, in fact the same summer that High Priest Shalmaiah went missing, a Samaritan manuscript was located *by meer accident*, by a Levant company merchant Thomas Davis, in Aleppo.²

Davis had been requested to obtain ancient manuscripts from the Middle East by Archbishop Ussher³ of Ireland. Ussher had been working on a Chronology, wanting to use information from these sources. A letter of April 16, 1622, testifies to Ussher's seriousness of his project.⁴ Davis, from the main office of the Levant Company in Aleppo, requested the merchants to locate these manuscripts for Ussher.

A letter, dated August 29, 1624, from Davis to Ussher confirms he had located a Samaritan Pentateuch.⁵ The letter by Davis relating the circumstance of his acquisition of the Samaritan

¹ **Benyamim Tsedaka**, [The High Priesthood and the Israelite Samaritan Priests](#), 2012. 'In 1624 CE died, the last High Priest of the family of Phinhas, Shalmaiah b. Phinhas b. Eleazar that was 11 years in office and he left after him only one daughter. There was mystery in regard to his death. He was on his way from Nablus to the Samaritans at Gaza. He disappeared. There is a tradition that he was taken by the Almighty. But the poet and writer Marchiv b. Jacob solved the mystery in one of his many letters to Europe in the 17th century when he wrote that "the last Rabban died in our time".'

² Europeans opened Consulates and began trading from the Aleppo (city today located in Syria) to neighboring countries during the 16th and the 17th centuries. Mention of travels include Damascus.

³ **James Ussher** (sometimes spelled **Usher**, 1581–1656) was Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh & Primate of All Ireland between 1625-1656. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Ussher Also see: Richard Parr, *The Life of the Most Reverend Father in God, James Usher, late Lord Arch-Bishop of Armagh.....* 1868. Located as # 3642 in the Bibliography of the Samaritans, 2005.

⁴ **Todd, Henry John**, *Memoirs of the life and writings of the Rev. Brian Walton lord bishop of Chester, Editor of the London Polyglot Bible*. Vol 1 [of 2] London, F.C. & J. Rivington, 1821, pp. 183-4.

⁵ **Todd, Henry John**, *Memoirs of the life....*pp. 184-6. "' Aleppo, Aug. 29. 1624. May it please your Lordship to take notice, that your letter of the 24th of January, in London, came to my hands the 14th of July, unto which I have given due perusal; and, perceiving your Lordship's pleasure thereby, omitted no opportunity, neither any time, but the very day that I received it began to look out for those books you writ for. **The five Books of Moses in the Samareitan character I have found by a meer accident**,, I purpose to send by this ship, lest I meet not with another; yet I have sent to Damascus, and if not there to be had, to Mount Gerizim; so that in time I hope to procure another, which shall contain the five Books of Moses perfectly..." Thomas (*afterwards Sir Thomas*) *Davis to Usher*.

Pentateuch, by what he says was, 'by a *meer accident*.' What is meant by a *meer accident* is not clear, no other letter gives us any information on this first Samaritan manuscript that Davis obtained for Ussher. It is strange, since other manuscripts were given with more information.⁶ But Davis names neither source nor provenance in locating the Samaritan Pentateuch. It is only by his statement, 'by a *meer accident*,' that it becomes suspicious. Why did Davis express the accident in a letter to Ussher or was he hiding something? And did Ussher even ask the question to Davis, what was this accident? Unless some hidden archives from these two men surface, we may never truly know for sure what Davis meant.

The first Samaritan Pentateuch to arrive in Europe in 1616, was obtained in Damascus by Pietro della Valle and presented to the Library of the Oratory in Paris. How he obtained this manuscript is as curious as the *meer accident* Pentateuch of Davis. But nevertheless it sparked the beginning interest and demand for the Samaritan Pentateuch outside of Samaritan circles. Samaritan manuscripts were very difficult to obtain by anyone other than a Samaritan. Samaritans were prohibited from selling any Pentateuch to anyone outside of their community.⁷ Samaritan Pentateuchs were later finally sold to outside sources from Nablus after the Samaritan High Priest Shalmah (1784-1857) stepped down from his office to his son, Amram in 1850.

The manuscript that Davis sent to Ussher was the second Sam. Mss. to find its way to Europe and the first in England. Ussher received a total of six copies of the Samaritan Pentateuch. Four are still at the Bodleian, and one in the British Museum.^{8,9} James G. Fraser solved the puzzle of the 6th missing manuscript, informing us that it exists today as MS Samaritan 4,¹⁰ of the Bibliotheque Nationale.¹¹ But of all the manuscripts that Ussher obtained, only one was complete, that was the first Pentateuch that was located *by meer accident* by Davis. Bp. Ussher's had expressed his intention¹² to deposit this Samaritan Pentateuch in Sir Robert Cotton's library¹³ in 1625.¹⁴ This manuscript can be none other than the British Museum, Cotton, Claudius B VIII, which bears Ussher's own inscription recording the gift.¹⁵ Ussher's other manuscripts that we are informed

⁶ **Charles Richard Elrington**, *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher*, Vol 15 [of 17] Dublin: Hodges, Smith and Co. 1864, pp 32-6. Letter CII. Mr. Thomas Davis to the Archbishop of Armagh.

⁷ It is of interest to mention the fact that in later years, the naïve Samaritans had sent 40 Pentateuchs to Europe with the belief that there were Samaritan communities there, but this was the invention of European scholars.

⁸ *Literary Remains of the Late Emanuel Deutsch With a Brief Memoir*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1874 p.425

<http://shomron0.tripod.com/articles/literaryremainsofthelateemanueldeutsch.pdf>

⁹ **Henry Ellis**, *Original Letter of Eminent Literary Men of the Sixteenth, Seventeenth, and Eighteenth Centuries*. London, Camden Society, 1863, pg 139-40. 'Dr. Kennicott, in his Dissertation at the end of the second Volume of his "Vetus Testamentum Hebraicum," fol. Oxf. 1780, p. 76, [reference link](#). 'The following is a list of the MSS. of the Sam. Pent. now in European Libraries [Kennicott]. No. 1. Oxford (Ussher) Bodl., fol., No. 3127. Perfect, except the 20 first and 9 last verses., No. 2. Oxford (Ussher) Bodl., 4to., No. 3128, with an Arabic version in Sam. characters. Imperfect. Wanting the whole Leviticus and many portions of the other books. No. 3. Oxford (Ussher) Bodl., 4to., No. 3129, wanting many portions in each book. No. 4. Oxford (Ussher, Laud) Bodl., 4to., No. 624. defective in parts of Deut. No. 7. London (Ussher) Br. Mus. Claud. B. 8. Vellum. Complete. 254 leaves.

¹⁰ **Jean-Pierre Rothschild**, *Catalogue des manuscrits samaritains*. Paris: Bibliotheque nationale, 1985, pp. 42-4 [catalogue here](#)

¹¹ **James G. Fraser**, Ussher's Sixth Copy of the Samaritan Pentateuch, *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 21, Fasc. 1 (Jan. 1971) pp. 100-102 [link here](#)

¹² <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/viewtext/2573358?op=t&n=8803&s=4>

¹³ Another letter dated March 22/ April 1, 1628/9 (ibid., letter 143).

¹⁴ **Nicholas Bernard**, *The Life & Death of the Most Reverend and Learned Father of our Church Dr. James Usher*, London, E Tyler, 1656, p.85.

¹⁵ <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/viewtext/2573358?op=t&n=8804&s=4>

about in one of Davies letter¹⁶ have not been collected and was sent at a later date from Aleppo in July 1628.¹⁷ Usher would not have given any library his new acquisitions until he had had enough time to inspect them. So the first manuscript was deposited being deposited with Cotton, in 1628¹⁸, was the first manuscript he received and not the later arrivals from Damascus.

Cotton, Claudius B VIII manuscript is the '*by a meer accident*' manuscript, the first manuscript found in summer of 1624, which happens to be the same time as the Samaritan High Priest Shalmaiah disappeared.

The date of Davis's letter to Ussher, was dated being Aug. 29. 1624. Davis, having obtained a Samaritan manuscript would have been excited and wrote to Ussher on the very day he obtained it, since after the formalities, Davis next begins with the Samaritan manuscript in his hands. Samaritan Chronicles do not mention the time of year but can be assumed that could be after Shavuot or after the festivals of the seventh month.' This year the Passover (May 5, 2012) falls late in spring, and the rest of the festivals end for the summer on June 24th, 2012. This basically would be the worst case scenario for the end of the festival for the summer but had this year not been a leap year in the Samaritan Calculations the festivals could have ended a month earlier. But using the end of June as a base compared to end of August would have been a two-month span. Thus, the date of locating of the Pentateuch and the disappearance of priest Shalmaiah appears to coincide.

Davis' business, as a merchant, can also be related to the disappearance of the priest Shalmaiah. Merchants used traveling caravan of camels for transporting their goods around the region. When, the Samaritans of Nablus went looking for Shalmaiah, as is written in the Samaritan Chronicles, that he left for Gaza by way of Wadi Elnamil (a wadi close to Gaza), there he is said to have met a group of camel shepherds. There is no evidence that they were in fact a traveling merchant group. But the appearance of camels, once again is a coincidence that should not be overlooked.

A Samaritan Priest carrying a complete Samaritan Pentateuch (as so described of the Cotton, Claudius B VIII manuscript) would have been natural since he would read from it every day. And there is a possibility that he was returning a Pentateuch to one of the families of Samaritans in Gaza, that he may have rebound, since the Samaritan priests are the ones that perform this.

¹⁶ *The Whole Works*, Volume 16, Pp. 444-6 LETTER CCCLXXXVIII.MR. THOMAS DAVIES TO THE ARCHBISHOP OF ARMAGH. ...I do not cease to procure those other books your lordship wrote for. The Old Testament in the Syriac is not yet finished; in forty days I hope to have it in my possession, with the books in the Samaritan language that were granted to the Spahee in Damascus;.... 'From Aleppo, the 13th March, 1626.'of the 20th October, per the ship Rainbow, when sent you such books in the Syriac tongue as then could procure, the which I hope are in safety.'

The Whole Works, Volume 15p. 376 "MAY it please your lordship to take a view of my proceedings for the procuring of such books you gave me order for; such as I could get, and have in readiness to be sent by our next ships, (which may depart this port about four months hence,) are certain books, and loose papers in the Samaritan tongue, of what use or value I cannot learn.Fourteen days past I sent again to Jerusalem, to try if it or any other of the books your lordship would have in the Samaritan tongue may be had. THOMAS DAVIS. Aleppo, the 11th of March, 1627. Of the Turks' account, the 18th day of the 7th month, called Raged, and the 1037 year of Mahomet.

¹⁷ LETTER CCCCCI. MR. THOMAS DAVIS TO TI-IE ARCHBISHOP OF ARMAGH. 'MAY it please your grace, by the ship Hercules, of London, I have sent your lordship such books as I have been able to procure...., THOMAS DAVIS. Aleppo, the 29th July 1628. And of Mahomet, the 8th day, their last month, called Tamouss, 1037.'

¹⁸ J. M. Stone, *Studies From Court and Cloister*, Sands & Co. London 1905 p. 286.

A Samaritan High Priest of Eleazar, a son of Aaron, would not have given up his Holy Pentateuch so easily, so it is hard to say exactly what happened. It is very possible that since priest Shalmaiah was traveling alone, that he was picked up along the way and taken as a slave. The slave trade was big business, especially for the English in those days. The *meer accident*, as Davis so described, may have been finding the Samaritan Pentateuch on him.

These facts, as I assume them to be, would explain the locating of the Samaritan manuscript by Davis/Ussher and the disappearance of the High Priest Shalmaiah.

So, what happened to priest Shalmaiah? He may have died or may have been taken as a slave, much like the story of Joseph, in Genesis.

Note: This article is from my personal notes and references and was not intended for publication. But because of its importance I have decided to share my thoughts.

This reference is not located in ***A Bibliography of the Samaritans, Third Edition, Revised, Expanded, and Annotated***, by **Alan David Crown** and **Reinhard Pummer**, ATLA Bibliography, No. 51, **The Scarecrow Press, Inc.** Lanham, Maryland, Toronto, Oxford. 2005