

The Return of the Diaspora Samaritans to Nablus at the End of the Middle Ages

By Nathan Schur

European scholars have rediscovered the Samaritans since the sixteenth century. Their impression was that the sect existed only in the ancient Shechem (modern Nablus). Actually they were mistaken.

This matter is of some importance. Though most historians have shown interest only in the Samaritan history of pre-medieval times, the fact remains that most of our sources for these early times, such as the Samaritan Chronicles, are of late medieval date at the earliest. In order to get a real grasp of these sources, it is essential to understand their historical background.

The Samaritans had had a sizeable Diaspora since the Hellenistic period. It reached its greatest extent in the Roman and Byzantine periods. Remains of Samaritan communities have been discovered in Babylonia, Persia, Armenia, Egypt (originally in Alexandria and the Fayum, but later in the Middle Ages in Fustat and Cairo), in Damascus, Aleppo, Antiochia, Asia Minor, in the Aegean Islands of Thasos and Delos, in the Greek cities of Athens, Piraeus, Corinth and Saloniki; in Constantinople, Rome, Sicily and in Carthage in Northern Africa.^[1]

The Samaritan Diaspora could never compete in size and importance with the Jewish Diaspora, but still it was quite sizeable. A. D. Crown has estimated its size initially at 150,000 souls^[2] and later even much higher.^[3] His numbers might be too high,^[4] but they indicate the size and importance of the Samaritan Diaspora late in the Classical Period.

Still, one has to remember that their numbers were balanced or overshadowed by the hundreds of thousands of Samaritans who continued to live in Samaria and the adjacent parts of the Holy Land. M. Avi-Yonah has estimated their numbers there at 300,000^[5].

This demographical situation began to change when the rise and expansion of Christianity brought about the disappearance of the Samaritan communities in Europe and also made inroads into their center in Palestine. Several Samaritan uprisings in the fifth and sixth centuries were easily subdued by the Byzantine authorities.^[6]

In spite of these events, at the time of the Muslim conquest of Palestine (63~640) there still existed a Samaritan nucleus in Samaria and the adjacent Coastal Plain, with Shechem at its center. The greatest change came in the Abbasid period (750-878 in Palestine), when practically all the Samaritans living in agricultural communities were converted to Islam and only a few hundred city-dwellers remained loyal to their old creed.^[7]

Benjamin of Tudela (in about 1170) mentioned that there were still a thousand Samaritans in Nablus, two hundred in Caesarea and three hundred in Ascalon.^[8]

There still survived, however, sizeable Samaritan communities in the Diaspora---in Cairo, Damascus, Aleppo, Baalbec and Sarafend on the Lebanese coast, south of Sidon. Benjamin mentioned four thousand Samaritans in Damascus where one of the branches of the family of the High Priest lived. Many of the local Samaritans were physicians and prosperous merchants. Samaritan literature seems to have flourished there. Such poets and grammarians as Tabya ibn Darta, Abu l'Hassan as-Suri, Abu l'Farag Munagga b. Sedaqa, Muhaddab ad-Din b. Abu Said, Nafis ad-Din, Ab Gilluga and others were active mostly in Damascus, Baalbec and Cairo. Abu Ishaq Thrahim al Musannif served as physician to Saladin.

In both Damascus and Cairo more Samaritan manuscripts seem to have been copied than in Nablus. R. T. Anderson reports that in the Chamberlain-Warren collection in Michigan out of forty-six manuscript, seventeen are from Damascus, six from Sarafend and most of the remainder from Cairo. Only a very few are possibly from

are from Damascus, six from Sarafand and most of the remainder from Cairo. Only a very few are possibly from Nablus.^[9] In addition, the investigation of the paper of the Samaritan manuscripts, carried out by A. D. Crown, shows that most of the copying was done in Damascus and Cairo^[10]. Both Crown and Anderson stress that the copying was done in these two centers mostly in the second half of the fifteenth century. The manuscripts from Sarafand are earlier, from between the years 1160 to 1225.

Bracha Yaniv mentions the Samaritan Torah cases from the fifteenth century, which, again, were manufactured in Damascus and Cairo.

There is thus evidence that the Samaritans of the Diaspora showed more interest than those of Nablus in Samaritan writing, literature and handicraft. The importance of the center in Cairo is also manifest from the economic prosperity of the Samaritans living there: they paid more taxes than the local Rabbanites and Karaites combined.

The center in Nablus was weakened in the thirteenth century by the conquests and temporary occupations of the city in 1242 by the Christian Knights Templar, in 1244 by the Khawarismians, and in 1260 and 1300 by the Mongols. Writers of The Samaritan Chronicles, edited by Adler and Neubauer, in these of the losses of life and property suffered by the Samaritan community cases. Among those affected was the heir presumptive of the High Priest, who was carried away as captive and never returned.^[11]

Dimashki reports around 1300 that most Samaritans lived in Nablus and that their number in Palestine was no more than one thousand. However this number was possibly copied from earlier sources. Even so, in the fourteenth century their position seems to have been strengthened, as indicated by the far reaching reforms carried out by the High Priest Finas Arrabban (Pinhas ben Josef 1308-1363) and his sons El'azar and Abisha, "Baal Hameimar". They started to write in Neo-Hebrew or Shomronit, and perhaps thus saved their community from total assimilation into their Arabic-speaking environment.^[12] Abisha was regarded as the most important Samaritan poet, next only to Marqa. Abu alFatah's chronicle was also compiled around that time, between 1352 and 1355. Its purpose was to arouse among Samaritans a pride in their nationality and religion. This reform movement also prevailed in the communities of Damascus and Cairo.

Another community existed in Gaza. It was described in 1395 by the Seigneur Ogier d'Anglure. He claimed that "a thousand Samaritans are still left in all of the world".^[13] However, this, too, might be an inflated estimate.

In Gaza, Cairo and Damascus the Samaritans lived next to Jewish communities. However, in Nablus this was not so, since no Jewish community existed there before the Ottoman conquest.

With the coming of the Turks the medireview preeminence of the Samaritan Diaspora reached its end. Sultan Selim 1 (1512-1520) defeated the Mamluks in 1516 and during the month of December in that year, occupied Syria and Palestine. In January 1517 his armies reached Cairo, where a difficult battle took place. The local Jews helped the Turks, the Samaritans sided with the Mamluks. When news of the original Turkish setbacks reached Palestine, the local Muslims attacked both Jews and Turks in Safed, Hebron and perhaps elsewhere. The historian Kapshali reports that the Samaritans of Cairo were to blame for the Mamluk attack on the Jewish quarter there. He claims that the Jews defended it and were saved by the eventual Turkish conquest.^[14] As a result, during the sixteenth century the Jews enjoyed Turkish help and the advancement of their interests. One outcome was the flourishing of the Kabbalistic center in Safed; another; the planting of a Jewish community in Nablus. The Samaritans were made to suffer for their support of the losing side. Most of the Samaritans of Cairo were apparently exiled to Gaza. While Meshulam of Volterra in 1481 mentions only three Samaritan households in Gaza^[15] in the Tahrir survey of the tax-payers of 1525 a hundred Samaritan tax payers from Gaza are mentioned^[16].

In later surveys the number of Samaritans declined in Gaza and apparently some of them moved to Nablus.¹⁷ It seems however that the Turks tried to harm the Samaritans of Nablus as well; one example was the exiling of the High Priest Pinhas ben Eliazar (1509-1549). However in 1538/9 he was allowed to return. The Samaritan community of Nablus, as reported in the Tahrir registers remained fairly small throughout the sixteenth century in 1538/9 twenty nine households and four bachelors are mentioned in 1548/1917 thirty four households and in 1596/17 only twenty households.¹⁸

The French traveler Henri de Beauvau in 1605 mentions only four Samaritan households in Damascus, ten in Cairo fifteen in Gaza and (incorrectly) fifty in Nablus, which he did not actually visit.¹⁹

Pietro della Valle from Rome in 1616 successfully purchased from the Samaritans of Damascus two copies of their Pentateuch an early indication that the local community was losing its cohesion and stability²⁰ Indeed soon after in 1625, during the rule of the local Pasha Mardam Beq a pogrom by the local Muslims further weakened the Samaritan community Their quarter was attacked by a mob which had been aroused by the Muslim Ulema A few were killed many more converted to Islam, and the Samaritans disappeared from the city However in Damascus there still exist quite a few prominent Mushm families which had originally been Samaritan. Examples include the Dar Malisan Dar Ghafari, Dar Nahas, Dar Rumali, Dar Mes'id, Dar al Asali and Dar Shahun.

The center in Nablus was saved from a similar fate because around 1625/6 most of the remaining Samaritans from the Diaspora came to settle there The Marhiv family came from Sarafand on the Lebanese coast the Danefi clan from Damascus and the Matari family from Gaza. A further group of Danefis arrived in 1636. The Danefis soon became the dominant element in the Nablus community. The Karaite pilgrim Samuel ben David reported in 1640 that ten Samaritan families were living in Nablus.

The community of Aleppo also disappeared during the seventeenth century. That of Cairo reached its end early in the eighteenth century. The local Samaritan synagogue was passed on to the Rabbanite community in 1708.²¹ A few Samaritans were left in Gaza and were apparently last mentioned by the traveler A. Myller in 1726.²² However, according to another version they finally disappeared only during the French occupation of 1799.

Thus the Samaritan Diaspora disappeared, and all surviving Samaritans lived in Nablus. Actually the Diaspora's importance had been waning ever since the Ottoman conquest, and scholars such as Julius Scaliger in 1589, J. Morin early in the seventeenth century, Robert Huntington in 1671, Job Ludolph in 1684, John Usgate in 1734 and Sylvestre de Sacy early in the nineteenth century, mentioned only the Nablus community.

Thus in reality the Samaritan literary figures of the Middle Ages and the authors of the earliest chronicles, such as Abu al-Fatah, must have had a very different picture of the Samaritan world, with the Diaspora still playing a most important role. In fact only in the nineteenth century were all Samaritans concentrated in Nablus. Early in the present century a few returned to Jaffa, and they have spread elsewhere since. When this paper was written, half of them lived in Holon, near Tel-Aviv, and half in Nablus.

[1] Ben Zvi, *Sefer Hashomronim* (Tel-Aviv 1970) 118-133; Z. Safrai, "Hashomronim" in Z. Baras et al. (eds), *Erez Israel Mihurban Bayet Sheni* (Jerusalem 1982) 260; A.D. Crown, "The Samaritan Diaspora to the End of the Byzantine Era" *Australian Journal of Biblical Archeology* (1974-5) 107-123; *idem*, "The Samaritan Diaspora" in *The Samaritans* (Tubingen 1989) 195-317; N. Schur, *History of the Samaritans* (Frankfurt a.M 1992) 54-123.

[2] Crown, "Samaritan Diaspora" 118.

[3] In a paper read at the 11th Congress for Judaica, Jerusalem 1989.

[4] Schur, *History* 56.

[5] M. Avi Yonah, "Al-meridot ha shomronim, be byzantion" *Eretz Israel* 4 (1956) 128.

[6] Avi Yonah, "Al-meridot" 127-132.

[7] Schur, *History* 93-97

[8] *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela* ed. M.N. Adler (New York n.d.) 20, 21.

[9] R.T. Anderson, *Studies in Samaritan Manuscripts and Artifacts: The Chamberlain-Warren Collection* (Cambridge Mass. 1978) 10-11.

[10] A.D. Crown, "A Profile of Paper in Samaritan manuscripts" in A. Tal et al (eds), *Proceedings of the First International Congress of the Societe d'Etudes Samaritaines* (Tel-Aviv 1991). 205-224.

[11] B.Z.Kedar, "The Frankish Period" in A.D. Crown (ed.), *The Samaritans* (Tubingen 1984) 84.

[12] Schur, *History* 134.

[13] *Le Saint Voyage de Jerusalem du Seigneur d'Anglure* ed. Bonardon et Longnon (Paris 1878) 43.

- 14** A. Kapshali, *Seder Eliahu Zuta* 2 vols (Jerusalem 1976) I 340-342.
- [15]** *Masa Meshulam mi Volterra be Eretz-Israel* ed. A. Ya'ari (Jerusalem 1949) 28 (Hebrew).
- [16]** A. Cohen and Bernard Lewis, *Population and Revenue in the Towns of Palestine in the Sixteenth Century* (Princeton 1978) 120-126.
- 17** Cohen and Lewis, *Population and Revenue* 120-126.
- 18** W.D. Hueteroth et al. (eds), *Historical Geography of Palestine in the Late Sixteenth Century* (Erlangen 1977) 52-53.
- 19** Henri de Beauvau, *Relation journaliere du Voyage du Levant* (Toul 1608) 144-146.
- 20** Pietro della Valle, *Viaggi* (Bologna 1672) I 424.
- 21** Schur, *History*. 136-137.
- 22** A.M. Myller, *Peregrinus in Jerusalem* (Wien 1735) II 287-288.