The various Arabic translations of the Bible, Rabbinic, Karaite, Samaritan and Christian, are a vivid witness to the fact that the Bible has remained firmly rooted to the civilization of the Middle East. These religious communities, with the exception of the Karaites, lived before the advent of Islam in the seventh century and continued all to exist until the present day. The Israelites consisted of Jews, both Rabbanites and Karaites on the one hand and the Samaritans on the other hand, whereas Christianity was represented by Copts, Jacobites, Maronites, Melkites and Nestorians. These religious communities called by Islamic law 'ahl al-kitāb / ad-dimma, the people of the book / the dhimīs (Christians and Jews) had gradually been arabicized by the end of the eleventh century.

The spread of Islam in vast areas of the so-called Middle East meant among other things the replacement of Aramaic by Arabic. The Arabic language became the lingua franca, as well as the native tongue and literary tool of all communities mentioned above. In such circumstances it was but natural that the need for an Arabic translation of the Scriptures has emerged. Unlike the Jews and Samaritans, the Christian communities have translated the Bible not directly from the original languages but from Syriac and Coptic versions which have been in circulation among their members. The Arabic versions of the Bible which were carried out by these communities served as a milestone in the history of non-Muslim Arabic literature. As a matter of fact, those versions were the firstlings of that literature and functioned as a fundamental source of inspiration and an example to be

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1 The Samaritans call themselves: Bānī Yīšā‘el aš-Šāmērīm and the Jews are Bānī Yīšā‘el ay-Yē‘ūdīn. They still believe that they are the descendants of the original children of Israel and Judaism is an imitation. See ha-'Arets 8.5.1992. Though the government of Israel considers Samaritans as Jews, the Orthodox Jews do not have the same attitude, see Y. Ben-Zvi, Sefer ha-Shomronim, 2nd ed. Jerusalem 19709, p. 365.


3 See in general Ahmad Mukhtār 'Omar, tārīkh al-lūga al-arabiyya fi mīsr. Cairo 1970, p. 28 seq.; as to the Samaritans see H. Shehadeh, »Matai tafsa ha-arvit 'īt m'qom ha-aramit ha-hōmronit«, mihq're lašon muggāšim li-Zī'ev Ben Hayyim b'-haggī'ō l'seva, ed. by M. Bar-Asher et alia, Magnes, Hebrew University, Jerusalem 1983, pp. 515-528.
followed. One of the remarkable features of this bulky literature written in different scripts, such as Syriac (karshuni), Hebrew square letters, Samaritan and Arabic, is the fact that it came down to us in the so-called Middle Arabic. In this connection it seems not superfluous to draw attention to the fact that the Arabic language is not only the native and national language of Christian Arabs but also their language of liturgy. This statement does not hold true with respect to the other religious communities aforementioned.

Despite the common origin of Jews and Samaritans there are many differences with regard to beliefs and practices between these two sects. Suffice it here to refer to three primary differences. It is well-known that Samaritans believe only in the first part of the Torah, which differs from the Masoretic Text in about six thousand instances. They believe in one prophet only, Moses: And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face (Dt 34:10). The third main difference is related to the chosen place of worship.

For Samaritans the holy place is not Jerusalem and Mount Moriah as Jews, Christians and Muslims believe but Mount Gerizim. Attention must be directed to the fact that

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4 See J. Blau, »On a Fragment of the Oldest Judaeo-Arabic Translation Extant«, Genizah Research after Ninety Years: The Case of Judaeo Arabic, eds. J. Blau and S.C. Reif, Cambridge 1992; the first Arabic book, though in Hebrew script, to have been printed in the East was the Tafsir of Ray Sa'adia Gaon 882-942) in the Polyglot Pentateuch of Constantinople in 1546. One century later the Fafsir in Arabic characters appeared in Paris Polyglot in 1645 by Gabriel Sionita (1577-1648) and later by E. Pococke (1604-1691) in London Polyglot in 1657.

5 The Samaritan creed is: »My faith is in Thee, Yahweh (pronounced Shema) and in Moses son of Amram, Thy Servant; and in the Holy Law; and in the Mount Gerizim, Beth-El; and in the Day of Vengeance and Recompence«. See J. Macdonald, The Theology of the Samaritans. London 1964, pp. 49-55.


8 The root והב in connection with God’s chosen place occurring 21 times in the Pentateuch (Dt 12:5, 11, 14, 18, 21, 26; 14:23, 24, 25; 15:20; 16:2, 6, 7, 11, 15, 16; 17:8, 10; 18:6; 26:2; 31:11) appears in the imperfect tense (will choose) in the MT and in the perfect tense in the ST (has chosen). For the Samaritans the chosen place has been chosen in Shechem since the period of Abraham. The Samaritans are also proud to indicate that Mt. Gerizim in contrast to Jerusalem is mentioned in the Torah (twice in the MT: Dt 11:29, 27:12 and three more times in the SP: after Ex 20:14 and after Dt 5:18 and Dt 27:4 instead of Mt. Ebal). Finally it should be noted that the two words Mt. Gerizim are written as one word in Samaritan sources and pronounced ārgizām.

9 Though Mt. Gerizim is 868m high and Mt. Ebal is higher than it (938m), the Samaritans consider it the highest mountain. It has 13 names in the Torah: Gn 10:30, 12:8, 22:2, 22:14, 28:17, 28:19; Ex 15:17, 23:19 and 34:26; Dt 3:25, 11:9, 12:11, 33:15. A short interpretation of these names is
Mount Gerizim forms the tenth commandment\textsuperscript{10} in the Samaritan version of the Torah. Samaritans hold that Noah's ark rested upon this mountain because it was the only place that the waters of the flood did not reach it. Marqa adds that the olive leaves brought by the dove to Noah were from Mt. Gerizim.\textsuperscript{11} This tradition is clearly reflected in versions of the Samaritan Arabic Pentateuch (Gn 8:4, 11). Ararat is rendered by Nablus\textsuperscript{12} and צאלח [צאלח in the MT] are translated by the collective form 'waraq' = leaves. It is to be noted that this interpretation is not attested in the known versions of the Samaritan Aramaic translation (Targum).\textsuperscript{13} The Samaritan community is well-known as a historical curiosity.\textsuperscript{14} It is perhaps the smallest and the most ancient religio-ethnic group in the world. The present total number of the Samaritans is about 560 souls.\textsuperscript{15} Half of them live in Qiryat Luzah on Mt. Gerizim in Nablus (ancient Shechem, 66 km to the north of Jerusalem in the West Bank) and the other half live in Holon (to the south of Tel-Aviv) since 1954. Palestinian Arabic is the mother tongue of all Samaritans living in Nablus and of the old generation in Holon. The

\textsuperscript{10} It appears after Ex 20:14 and Dt 5:18 in the MT and this tenth commandment is a composition of Dt 11:29, 27:2-3, 4-7 and 11:30.

\textsuperscript{11} See Ben-Hayyim, pp. 190-191, section 130b. Cf. Midrash B`-Rishit Rabba, section 32.

\textsuperscript{12} It seems that Samaritans did not give this name to their sacred mountain (see note no. 9) in order to avoid a possible confusion with Mt. Ebal.

\textsuperscript{13} The form is צלח in the edition of Avraham and Ratson Tsedaka, vol. 1. Tel-Aviv 1962, Genesis 8:11.

\textsuperscript{14} To put it more accurately: in the versions which reflect the stage in which Samaritan Aramaic was a spoken language. Ararat is in fact as in the origin, and צאלח appears as צאלח a leaf in singular like the reading in the MT. The two MSS, Shechem (Synagogue) Nos. 3 and 4 present variants of Arabic versions.


\textsuperscript{16} In March 1992 the number of the Samaritans was 555 of which 303 were males (60\%) and 252 females (40\%). There is no scientific explanation for the fact that more males than females are born among the Samaritans.
young generation in Holon speaks modern Israeli Hebrew as a mother tongue. After the war of 1967 most of the Samaritans in Nablus started to learn modern Hebrew. The only Samaritan paper, the bi-weekly A.B. Samaritan News, established in December 1969 reflects the linguistic situation of modern Samaritans. Though its main and official part is written in modern Hebrew, other sections appear in Samaritan, Arabic and Latin (as a rule English) scripts.

A complete and detailed picture of the emergence of the Arabic Translation of the Pentateuch still can not be drawn due to the paucity of surviving sources. We are almost in dark regarding the identity of the translator(s). Yet it is reasonable to assume that the translation in question emerged some time between the end of the 10th - beginning of the 11th centuries. This assumption is mainly based on the fact that grammatical, halakhic and lexicographical Samaritan works in Arabic from that period have come down to us. These four works namely qānūn ibn Darta fi tartib al-miqra and qānūn ibn Darta fi al-miqra of Tabia ibn Darta, kitāb al-kāfi of al-`Uskari and an anonymous tri-lingual (Hebrew, Arabic and Samaritan Aramaic) glossary of the Pentateuch are in fact the oldest extant compositions written by Samaritans in Arabic. These works, as well as the lion’s share of the whole Samaritan literature viz. in Hebrew, Samaritan Aramaic and Arabic are substantially religious. In other words, the five books of Moses are the core of life and existence of the Samaritans.

In view of this state of affairs it is very likely to presume that certain Arabic versions of the Pentateuch would at least have been among the first Arabic writings of the Samaritans in their main places of residence - Palestine, Syria and Egypt. This means that a period of more than three centuries of Muslim Arab rule has elapsed and the Arabic language spread over the entire Muslim empire. We were unable to find any evidence for

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17 This issue has been discussed by about thirty scholars since the 17th century, see H. Shehadeh, The Arabic Translation of the Samaritan Pentateuch: Prolegomena to a Critical Edition, Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, Jerusalem 1977 (Hebrew), pp. 49-118.

18 See Shehadeh in note no. 3, pp. 524-526.

19 The former was at first published with a German translation by P. Kahle, »Die Lesezeichen bei den Samaritanern«, in Oriental Studies Published in Commemorations of the Fortieth Anniversary (1883-1923) of Paul Haupt, ed. by Cyrus Adler and Aron Ember. Baltimore-Leipzig 1926, pp. 425-436; both works were published with Hebrew translation and annotation by Z. Ben-Hayyim, LOT, vol II, Jerusalem 1957, pp. 339-373; pp. 308-315, about Ibn Darta and his work see ibid. pp.לע-וט.

20 This book written in 433 Hegira-1041 A.D., is still kept in several MSS, yet an Italian translation was published, see S. Noja, Il Kitāb al Kāfi dei Samaritani. Napoli 1970.

21 Known as ha-Meliš was published by Z. Ben-Ḥayyim, LOT II. Jerusalem 1957, pp. 440-616.

the Samaritan tradition saying that Samaritans began to write in Arabic from the middle of
the 9th century.  

That the Samaritans possessed and used the Torah in Arabic before the 13th century is
obvious on the basis of the following four evidences. Firstly, the oldest dated MS including
an arabic translation of the Samaritan Holy Writ, namely Shechem (Synagogue) No. 6, a
triglottite - Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic - was copied in 601 Hegira, 1204 A.D. Secondly,
the evidence of Abū Sa`īd ben Abī al-Husain ben Abī Sa`īd, the 13th century Egyptian
Samaritan reviser of the ancient Arabic translation of the Torah. Thirdly, the existence of
Samaritan MSS of the Pentateuch in Arabic written in Samaritan letters such as BL Or.
7562 which are based on the Tafsīr of Sa`adīa. In the light of a recent discovery of a
fragment from the Cairo Genizah it is possible to deduce that the Tafsīr was in circulation
in the second half of the 10th century in Egypt. To put it more precisely the Tafsīr, most
probably in Arabic script, was known and used in the weekly court (mağlis) of the vizier
Ibn Killis (d. 991). Fourthly, the usual appearance of Pentateuchal verses in Arabic in
Samaritan works from the 11th-12th centuries such as al-Kāfi, at-Ṭabbākh and Masā`īl al-
Khilāf.

In a one-page preface to his revised text Abū Sa`īd writes: »...verily [when] I saw
the translation of the Noble Book, which is in the hands of our fellow worshippers, may
God increase their number and restore them, which is corrupt both in form and meaning,
because of their ignorance of the Arabic language, whilst some of them [emphasis added]
claim it is the translation of the eminent scholar Abū-l-Hasan as-Ṣūrī, may God have mercy
upon him. But it is not his and it is not permissible to utter it especially the rendering of
'When thou goest to return to Egypt' [Exodus 4:21 ff.] which is within the realm of pure


24 A brief description of this MS is found in Shehadeh’s dissertation mentioned in note no. 17, pp.
273-275. The text of this Pinhsiyya served as the basic text for the ancient version in: The Arabic
Translation of the Samaritan Pentateuch Edited from the Manuscripts with an Introductory Volume
by Haseeb Shehadeh, Volume One: Genesis-Exodus. The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humani-
ties, Jerusalem 1990.

25 See P. Kahle's description of the MS in the introduction of A.F. von Gall, Der hebräische
Pentateuch der Samaritaner. Giessen 1918, pp. LXXXVIII ff. It seems worthwhile to mention that
the Aramaic Targum in this MS served as the basic text in Tal’s edition.

26 See M.R. Cohen and S. Somekh, »In the Court of Ya’qūb ibn Killis: A Fragment from the Cairo
Genizah«, JQR LXXX, Nos. 3-4 (January-April, 1990), pp. 297-298.


28 Bibliothèque Nationale Arabe 6 copied in 1432 A.D., a description of the MS may be found in
Shehadeh’s dissertation, part I, pp. 308-309.
heresy, and so are other similar passages. It is rather the translation of al-Fayyūmī, a scholar of the Jews, may God require him...29.

Abū Sa’īd is convinced that the Arabic translation of the Pentateuch used by the Samaritan community in Egypt was Sa’adianic and could not have been carried out by a Samaritan such as the famous writer Abū al-Hasan (Ab Hisda) the Tyrian.30 The reason for Abū Sa’īd’s conviction is explained in his marginal note on Exodus 4:24. The word ‘الله’ referring to Moses in this verse - (wyā‘i baddārak bammālon wyēfāqē’e u šēmā wyēbaqqūs ʿămīto) - is rendered by ‘qatlahu’ (killing him) in the version under discussion. Such a rendition ascribes to Moses a great disobedience which deserves death punishment. It goes without saying that Samaritans strongly reject this interpretation because it offends one of their five main articles of faith, namely the belief in Moses as the only and greatest prophet. It is noteworthy to point out that the rendition hamīto = qatlahu is not found in the present common editions of the Tafsīr, that is to say, Derenbourg’s edition32 and the Tāḡ.33 In these editions we find that God’s angel set out to kill the son of Moses.34 The said rendition is attested in a Florence MS of the Tafsīr copied in 1245-46 and including Genesis 1:4-Exodus 26:1535, as well as clearly in only one Samaritan MS of the Samaritan Arabic translation of the Pentateuch. This MS is BL Add. 19011, a biglotte, Hebrew and Arabic, written in Samaritan letters and copied in 1509/10 A.D.36 It seems that the same reading was the original one before the erasure in three Samaritan MSS.37 Moreover, the interpretation of ʿalīm al-yahūd qābalahu ʿAllāh...
from the root מות (to kill, murder) rather than from הוהי וסם (to frighten, to confuse) is reflected in several variants of the Samaritan Targum - למותה, למטהה, לקטלתה, למותה, לקטלתה ומותה and לקטלתה.

Both Munagga and Abu Sa'id testify of faulty pronunciation of ימותי as יimitu which falls into line with 'killing him' but contradicts the belief of the reader. According to the former this reading was current among some Samaritans (ba'd 'shabin, 12 cent., Syria) whereas the latter speaks about the majority of the Samaritan community ('ktar tā'ifatīnā, 13th cent., Egypt). It is equally hard to determine whether the reading at stake has stemmed from a Sa'adianic rendition or it was a result of a Samaritan oral tradition in reading the Torah. It seems reasonable to assume that in some cases both factors have worked together or separately. In some MSS such as Shechem (Synagogue) No. 6, the oldest MS as mentioned above, presents two different meanings for ימותי in Aramaic and יבגא'תahu (to excite, awaken) in Arabic. On the other hand the so-called »arabized« versions of the Samaritan Targum as Shechem (Synagogue) No. 3 (a bigottle, Hebrew and Aramaic from the beginning of the 16th cent.) reads ימותי. However, one thing is clear: the efforts of Abu Sa'id to replace qatlahu by 'ibgatahu in rendering ימותי were fruitful. The present Samaritan pronunciation יimitu could be a reflection of Abu Sa'id's correction included in his revised text which has been common among Samaritans for many centuries. That the original Samaritan reading(s) of the Torah has (have) undergone changes is taken for granted. As the High Priest Jacob ben 'Uzzi (1899-1987) has put it while referring to present-day recitation of the Pentateuch »This pronunciation can in no way be original«.

As adopted by Abu Sa'id himself in his famous revision יבגא'תahu (to awaken him, excite, agitate, arouse etc.) instead of qatlahu (killing him). The whole issue is discussed in detail by Abu al-Farag Munagga Ibn Sadaqa from the middle of the 12th century in his book Masā'il al-Khilāf..., in which he derives the form ימותי from רמותי which is like ימותי but in which the*, see Shehadeh's dissertation, part I, pp. 83-86 (there the name and the time of the author are inaccurate and they refer to his son the physician Sadaqa al-Hakim). Cf. S.L. Skoss, The Hebrew-Arabic Dictionary of the Bible Known as Kitāb Jāmi' al-Alfaz (Agron) of David ben Abraham al-Fāsī the Karaite (Tenth Century), Vol. I. Yale 1936, pp. 446-447. It should be noticed that the two roots רמותי and הוהי are employed as intransitive verbs, whereas הוהי is transitive and may occur in Pi'el without gemination of the second radical (fā'īl), see Z. Ben-Hayyim, LOT, Vol. 5. Jerusalem 1977, p. 82.


Like the modern reading of the other forms of מות in the infinitive of hi̇f'il such as Gn 18:25, 37:18; Ex 16:3, 17:3; Lev 20:4; Dt 13:10, see Ben Hayyim, LOT, IV. Jerusalem 1977.

The issue of adjustment between the two or three columns (Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic) in Samaritan MSS deserves special investigation.


The only written source known to us that has some bearing on the ancient Arabic translation of the Samaritan Pentateuch are Abū Saʿīd’s few words included in his previously mentioned preface and marginal note. In the preface we are told that »some Samaritans claim (believe, maintain etc.) it is the translation of the Shaikh Abū-l-Hasan as-Ṣūrī (ba’duhum yāz’amūna). From the marginal note we learn that the earlier Samaritan sages were content with the Tafsir of Saʿadia, whereas the uneducated ones believed it to be the translation of Abū al-Ḥasan. (wa-‘innī la-‘gabu mina-l-fuṣḥā’īl-muṭaqaddimīna min ‘ummātinā rahimahumūn ilāhū kāfā radaw bi-targāmatihi wa-l-’uḥdūlu minhum yazunnūna ‘annahā targāmatu Š-Saikhi Abi-l-Ḥasan as-Sūrī...). Needless to say that these words of Abū Saʿīd neither confirm nor deny Abū-l-Ḥasan’s authorship of an Arabic translation to the Samaritan Pentateuch. We believe that the customary Samaritan tradition of attributing such a work to Abū-l-Ḥasan is based on these two quotations of Abū Saʿīd.44

The separation between Jews and Samaritans, south and north in Israel, took place after a long series of events, the climax of which, was the destruction of the temple on Mt. Gerizim in the 2nd cent. B.C. by John Hyrcanus. The present version of the Samaritan Pentateuch has emerged in that period, 2nd-1st cent. B.C.45 It is in fact the oldest Samaritan work which came down to us. In contrast to the Jewish tradition which is written (הכרב, they wrote to you) the Samaritan one is based on מַגָּדֶה אֶת בָּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בִּפְיוֹתָם - and teach it the children of Israel: put it in their mouths, Dt 31:19).

It should be noted that the Samaritans have spoken and written Arabic without interruption for about a dozen centuries. Their Arabic version of the Pentateuch is undoubtedly an important source for a better understanding of their concepts and beliefs, of their medieval exegesis and of their Aramaic and Arabic dialects. Unlike the Aramaic version of the Samaritan Pentateuch the Arabic version(s) is (are) given in tens of MSS in whole or in part. Ninety-five such MSS which are housed in various libraries in the world have been examined so far by us.46 These MSS fall into the following five main groups47:


46 They are found in the following cities: St. Petersburg 30, London 13, Nablus 12, Oxford 8, Manchester, Paris 6, Jerusalem 4, Cambridge, Berlin 3, New York, Sassoon’s family 2, Rome, Leiden, Uppsala, Dublin, Rouen and Princeton 1. A great part of these MSS was described in Shehadeh’s dissertation, part I, pp. 273-335. The collection of A. Firkovitch in St. Petersburg needs further investigation. For the time being, see the partial description of: A. Y. Garkaby, Описание Самаритянских Рукописей, Хранящихся в Императорской
I would like to conclude my article by touching upon an example which illustrates the contribution that the Arabic version can offer with regard to Palestinian Arabic vernacular in particular. The dialectal word 'ta'sīn' (dedication, consecration, inauguration) as a translation of נָאָלָה in Numbers 7:10 is attested in the oldest Samaritan MS - Shechem (Synagogue) No. 6 - copied in 1204 A.D. As far as we know, this is the oldest source for this vivid word.\(^{48}\)

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\(^{48}\) See H. Shehadeh, »The Arabic of the Samaritans and its Importance« (in press).