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Sharon Sullivan Dufour
Eastern Michigan University

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Variants in the Samaritan Pentateuch of the Hebrew Bible as Compared to the Masoretic Text

Abstract

Not long after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE began the eventual end of a long history of textual competition between variations of the Pentateuch. For nearly two millennia the Masoretic Text has held a singular dominant position as the most authoritative text. However, it should never be forgotten that in the earliest history of the Pentateuch is a history of several variant Pentateuch texts that held high authority in different regions of the Near East. The Samaritan Pentateuch is one such text, with an ancient history of competition with the Jewish Masoretic Text. It contains many similarities to the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls. In addition, the Samaritan Pentateuch offers new perspectives on problematic Biblical passages. Far too often the Samaritan Pentateuch is relegated to an inferior position, designated as a borrowed and edited text of the Jews. The Septuagint, a Greek translation composed around the second century BCE, actually shares over 6000 commonalities with the Samaritan Pentateuch and less with the Jewish Masoretic Text.

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**VARIANTS IN THE SAMARITAN PENTATEUCH
OF THE HEBREW BIBLE
AS COMPARED TO THE MASORETIC TEXT**

By: Sharon Sullivan Dufour

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Honors Advisor (Print Name and have signed)

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Honors Director (Print Name and have signed)

Not long after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE began the eventual end of a long history of textual competition between variations of the Pentateuch. For nearly two millennia the Masoretic Text has held a singular dominant position as the most authoritative text. However, it should never be forgotten that in the earliest history of the Pentateuch is a history of several variant Pentateuch texts that held high authority in different regions of the Near East. The Samaritan Pentateuch is one such text, with an ancient history of competition with the Jewish Masoretic Text. It contains many similarities to the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls. In addition, the Samaritan Pentateuch offers new perspectives on problematic Biblical passages. Far too often the Samaritan Pentateuch is relegated to an inferior position, designated as a borrowed and edited text of the Jews. The Septuagint, a Greek translation composed around the second century BCE, actually shares over 6000 commonalities with the Samaritan Pentateuch and less with the Jewish Masoretic Text.

From the seventeenth century it was declared that of the assumed six thousand differences between SP and MT, nineteen hundred involved readings common to SP and LXX. After scholars had recognized this, an endless number of theories appeared concerning the special relation between SP and LXX. Such views drive from the restricted view that the biblical text was current in a small number of recensions and that all textual witnesses necessarily belonged to one of them. (Tov 157-158)

Some of the recent discoveries, such as a Deuteronomy 27 fragment from the Dead Sea Scrolls, in comparison to the Samaritan Pentateuch, have renewed and increased interest in the Samaritan Pentateuch, and drastically altered the opinion of some leading Biblical Scholars on the importance of the text. The evidence is indeed building to support not only the claim the Samaritans have made that their text was not an altered text of the Jews, but also that their holy place on Mount Gerizim was not a later development to Jerusalem.

James VanderKam shows that some of the primary rewritten scriptural texts that are based on the Pentateuch have affinities with the readings of the Samaritan Pentateuch,

and argues that such rewritten scriptural texts represent an important component of the evidence relating to the so-called biblical texts. (Herbert and Tov 2)

The first English translation of the Samaritan Pentateuch, currently awaiting publication, opens the door to new interpretations of problematic Biblical texts, such as Exodus 3:24ff and Numbers 12:1. The similarities the Samaritan Pentateuch (SP) shares with the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS), as well as many similarities with the Septuagint (LXX), challenge the longstanding view that the SP is a later, borrowed, and altered form of the Masoretic Text (MT). The historical devaluation of the Samaritan Pentateuch requires reevaluation, based upon the contextual cohesiveness of the Samaritan Pentateuch, agreement with the most ancient texts of the DSS and LXX, and the uninterrupted and non-dispersed oral transmission of the Ancient Israelite Samaritans.

The Israelite Samaritan people are one of the most ancient, continuous, indigenously living people in the Middle East, counting their ancestry back to over 125 generations. The religious customs of the Israelite Samaritans have remained relatively constant for thousands of years, despite incessant persecutions, regime changes, plagues, etc. Although the community has been thinned to a mere 730 individuals to date, their numbers steadily increased over the past 60 years due to the advances in a modern world, and the creation of Israel as a State in 1948. They continue to practice the oldest form of scriptural transmission, an oral transmission passed on from father to son in an ancient pronunciation, as well as a written transmission of the text itself that is written in Ancient Samaritan Hebrew script. They continue to practice the ancient rituals of the Biblical text, recognizing only the Torah of Moses as authoritative and inspired. Each Spring at Passover the Samaritans sacrifice young lambs and male goats on Mount Gerizim, the same sacred place they have cherished for thousands of years. Every home practices strict ritual purity laws, stringent Sabbath observances, and traditional religious dietary laws. A long history

of faithful oral transmission of the Torah within the community has maintained a unremitting, undivided, interpretive practice of their written Torah scrolls and codices. It should be noted that their text does not use diacritical marks, which creates many problems when anyone (other than the Samaritans) attempt to translate their texts. In addition, the disallowance for converts and exclusiveness of the cult has made Biblical Studies in Samaritanism especially difficult.

Until only months ago there was no complete English translation of the Samaritan Pentateuch. I had a unique opportunity that began in 2002 to work directly with a Samaritan Elder, Benyamim Tsedaka, due to my acceptance by the community, and my humanitarian work within the community. In 2003 I proposed to assist in the creation of the first complete English translation of the Samaritan Pentateuch, if Elder Benyamim Tsedaka was willing to translate. Tsedaka accepted my request to assist him, and six years later the translation was complete. The English translation of the Samaritan Pentateuch opens a wide door to Biblical Studies and historical studies of Ancient Israel, with fresh and alternative perspectives on Biblical passages.

The SP has a long history, labeled as a heretical text, considered inferior to the MT. This stigmatization, still hindering Biblical Studies, has its origin not solely in historically based unbiased textual analysis, but rather from ancient regional prejudices in the political northern and southern kingdoms of Ancient Israel, and the accepting of these biases by the religions parented from a first century Judaism.

The Israelite Samaritans existed as a people and were labeled by the Jews as a corrupt and foreign sect that adulterated the Torah of the Jews with heretical and fraudulent changes in order to promote their sacred place of Mount Gerizim over the sacred place of Jerusalem. The historian, Josephus stated that the Samaritan's claim to be descendants of the Patriarch Joseph was deceptive.

For such is the disposition of the Samaritans, as we have already elsewhere declared, that when the Jews are in adversity, they deny that they are of kin to them, and then they confess the truth; but when they perceive that some good fortune hath befallen them, they immediately pretend to have communion with them, saying that they belong to them, and derive their genealogy from the posterity of Joseph, Ephraim, and Manasseh. (Antiquities 11.8.6).

The validity of the Samaritan Torah in comparison to the Jewish Torah was debated in the second century BCE before the king of Egypt in Alexandria, and in addition to this debate Samaritan historical sources state there was an earlier debate as well.

It is not surprising that Samaritan sources describe the outcome of the debate as a victory for the Samaritans; whereas, Jewish sources and Josephus himself marked it as a victory for the Jews. Samaritan Chronicles date the first debate to the time of Darius the Second, King of Persia, in the 6th century BCE. (Tsedaka and Dufour 2).

It is fortunate today, thousands of years removed from those ancient hostile debates, research of the two texts in consideration with other variant texts has the potential to advance Biblical Studies and reconstruct ancient history. A Qumran fragment from Deuteronomy 27:4b-6 in agreement with the SP, yet scribed in a late Hasmonian (Jewish, not Samaritan) script dating to approximately 175 BCE, has attracted considerable attention in recent Biblical Studies. The fragment has some deterioration (represented by brackets) in the English translation by James Charlesworth that follows:

(4) [And when you have cross]ed the Jo[r]dan, you shall set u[p these stones, about which I charge you] today, on Mount Gerizim, and coat [them with plaster. (5) And there, you shall build an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of st]ones. [You must] not wield upon them an iron (tool). (6) [Of unhewn] st[ones you must build the altar of the LORD] your [God], and you shall offer upon it burnt offerings to the LOR[D your God.] (Charlesworth IJCO)

The fragment is unique because not only is it scribed in a Jewish script that was never used by Samaritans when scribing Torah, but also that it was reported to be found in a location at Qumran among only Jewish sectarian texts, and yet it agrees with the Samaritan Pentateuch on one of the most contested Biblical passages between Jews and Samaritans. What makes this text

most confounding to many Biblical scholars is the dilemma that even if one argues that a Samaritan scribed the text in a Jewish Hasmonian script, it must be asked how the text arrived among the Jewish sect at Qumran who by their very nature would have been extremely opposed to a Mount Gerizim Samaritan theological position?

Is it significant that the scribe wrote *bhrgrzim* and not *bhr grizim*? I think we should attend to the *scriptio continua*, especially when he separates most words. The slurred expression, without the expected “Gerizim,” denotes most likely his own expressions. That is, he is most likely reflecting his peculiar diction. The scribe probably thinks not of two separate things, a mountain and its name, but compresses all into one expression. An anthropologist would urge us to imagine that the copying scribe is a Semitic-speaking Samaritan who well knows the mountain sacred to him. (Charlesworth IJCO)

This fragment is the second known Biblical variant to agree with the Deuteronomy 27:4 SP passage. Previously, only the oldest version of the Latin text, known as the Vetus Latina (VLB) agreed. There is no doubt that the Qumran finds are revolutionizing Biblical Studies, with encouragement from the Editor-in-Chief of the Dead Sea Scrolls Publication Project, Emanuel Tov, to reevaluate Biblical Studies that favor the MT over other texts. “Emanuel Tov has sounded the clear trumpet call that the Qumran texts have ‘taught us to no longer posit MT at the center of our textual thinking.’” (Ulrich 85).

When considering the new DSS find of Deuteronomy 27:4 it should be kept in mind that Josephus, the Jewish Historian from the first century CE, actually states that the altar was on neither Gerizim nor Ebal, but situated in between the two mountains.

And that when they had got possession of the land of the Canaanites, and when they had destroyed the whole multitude of its inhabitants, as they ought to do, they should erect an altar that should face the rising sun, not far from the city of Shechem, between the two mountains, that of Gerizim, situate on the right hand, and that called Ebal, on the left; and that the army should be so divided, that six tribes should stand upon each of the two mountains, and with them the Levites and the priests. (Antiquities 4.8.44)

This unusual description by Josephus is not the only Deuteronomic anomaly that occurs when assuming the MT is correct in the Deuteronomy passage of placing the altar on Mount Ebal.

Indeed, the Deuteronomist Theory, widely accepted among Biblical Scholars, postulates a late composition date for the book of Deuteronomy due to the references in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles in which part of a Torah scroll was found hidden within the temple. Biblical Scholars deduced that the Kings/Chronicles account was a way of introducing the very recently composed book of Deuteronomy, which later scholars theorized had been compiled out of redacting early independent sources. This theory received a lot of attention after Wilhelm Martin Leberecht De Wette proposed it first in a thesis and later in his 1864 *“Canonical Scriptures of The Old Testament.”*

In his thesis (1805), de Wette identified the book of Deuteronomy, at least its earliest version, with the “book” found in the temple during the reign of Josiah (2 Kings 22). He came to this conclusion after having noted that the reforms carried out by Josiah (2 Kings 23) largely corresponded to the cultic requirements of the Deuteronomic laws. Their principal tenets concern the centralization and purification of the cult. De Wette was not the originator of this idea; it had already been advanced by some of the Church Fathers. However, he was the first exegete to use it as a solid basis for dating the texts; that is, the laws and narratives that do not presuppose the centralization of the cult in Jerusalem must be earlier than the reform of Josiah, in 622 BCE; conversely, the legislative texts or narratives that take it into account are logically later...Since de Wette, no one has found a more reliable basis, although there has been no lack of discussion on the matter.” (Ska 106)

The SP text states in Deuteronomy 27:4 that the altar was to be built on Mount Gerizim, shortly after the sons of Israel entered the holy land. The Samaritans have their own perspective on the Deuteronomist Theory. The Samaritans insist that the book of Deuteronomy is as ancient as the four other Torah books, and suggest that the book of Deuteronomy was intentionally removed as sacred scripture by the Jews in ancient history because it presented too much evidence that the sacred chosen place was Mount Gerizim.

The SP uses the past tense in every Torah verse that mentions the sacred chosen place as “has chosen,” whereas the MT consistently uses the future tense of “will choose.” The Samaritan text is more logical when considering that during the time of the Patriarchs sacred

places had already been established. Mount Gerizim is directly mentioned as a sacred place, but Jerusalem is never mentioned in the Torah. The last Patriarch, Joseph, is given a special privilege above all the other tribes by having two tribes identified under him, and in addition to this Jacob bequeathed the highest blessing to Joseph, which was the sacred place where he built an altar (Gen 33:18-20). Moreover, in Gen 48:21 Jacob follows the reminder of the promise God had made of bringing the Sons of Israel out of Egypt and into the promised land, with the mention of the area of Shechem, land which was taken from the hand of the Amorite.

“Another change based on the Samaritan ideology pertains to the frequent Deuteronomic formulation *המקום אשר יבחר יהוה* ‘the site which the Lord will choose.’ This reference to an anonymous site in Palestine actually envisioned Jerusalem, but its name could not be mentioned in Deuteronomy since that city had not yet been conquered at the time of Moses’ discourse. From the Samaritan perspective, however, Shechem had already been chosen at the time of the Patriarchs (Gen 12:6; Gen 33:18-20), so that from their point of view the future form “will choose” needed to be changed to a past form *בחר* ‘has chosen.’ See, e.g., Deut 12:5, 14. Possibly also the following reading in SP reflects the same ideological change.” (Tov 95)

The Samaritan claim about the book of Deuteronomy should not be dismissed especially when some modern scholars date the book of Deuteronomy as being an ancient composition, before the time of King David.

Yehezkel Kaufmann a modern Israeli Bible scholar, claims that the narrative material, the sections dealing with admonitions, and most of the statutes are very ancient, but that their influence was not great. Only during the period of Hezekiah and Josiah did these statutes become important. The Jerusalem scholar Mosheh Hayyim Cassuto maintains that by far the greater part of Deuteronomy is extremely ancient, dating from even before David’s time. Had the volume been written during the period of the monarchy, the author would certainly have attributed to Moses some hint that the ceremonial religious center of Israel would be Jerusalem, whereas Jerusalem is not mentioned at all. (Herman Rosenthal Jewish Encyclopedia Entry on Deuteronomy)

Scholars debate often for years on complex Biblical passages that have unusual textual features, and offer various interpretations. In some of these cases the Samaritan Pentateuch is useful as a comparative text to expand the field of possibilities. The text of Exodus 4 is a perfect

example of Biblical text that has received a lot of attention, but with no scholarly discussion on the Biblical interpretation that the Samaritan Pentateuch offers. In part, this is due to the fact that the Samaritan Pentateuch is scribed in Samaritan Hebrew, which resembles Ancient Hebrew or Paleo Hebrew. Further limiting scholars in translating the SP text is the fact that the Israelite Samaritans have never added diacritical marks to their text, which leaves the vocalization of the SP a mystery to outsiders, due to both the consonantal language of Hebrew and the vocalization of the text. The tradition of passing on the vocalization is by a long oral tradition among the Samaritans from generation to generation. The Samaritans never experienced the diaspora that the Jews experienced, and continued to pass on the vocalization (as the Jews once did too) and interpretation by oral instruction.

Exodus 4:24-26 is a good example of a problematic passage of scripture that has stirred up a great deal of debate over the years in Biblical Studies. If the diacritical marks were to be removed from the MT, then the unmarked Hebrew text of the SP appears identical to the MT. However, the vocalization is very different, which changes the story entirely. The translated differences are plain to notice in the English translation of the SP parallel to the MT, as seen below. It should be noted that the SP is located in the left column and the MT in the right column:

24 And it came about at the inn on the way that Shehmaa met him and sought to **STUN HIM**.

25 And Seebbooraa took a flint and she **CIRCUMCISED HER BLOCKED HEART**, and she brought herself to his feet. And she said, You are indeed a bridegroom of blood to me.

24 And it came to pass on the way at the lodging-place, that Adonai met him, and sought to **KILL HIM**.

25 Then Zipporah took a flint, and **CUT OFF THE FORESKIN OF HER SON** and cast it at his feet; and she said: 'Surely a bridegroom of blood to me.'

26 And he **LET HER** go. Then she said, A bridegroom of blood, **TO BE CIRCUMCISED.** **

26 So he **LET HIM** alone. Then she said: A bridegroom of blood **IN REGARD OF THE CIRCUMCISION.** (Tsedaka and Dufour Ex. 4:24-26)

Examples of these words are identical to the MT but vocalized differently according to the SP oral reading. These differences are easily found in bold, majuscule print.

In the Jewish version, verse 25, has the pronunciation of "Benah" meaning her son. In the Samaritan version it is pronounced "Binnah" meaning her heart...Only a few scholars are aware of the difficulty of the Masoretic text. The different pronunciation of this word is leading to a different meaning...(notice that there were two sons at the lodging place and not one as in the Jewish pronunciation: "Benah" בנה=(her son) and not "baaneeyah" = בניה(Her sons)...And she cut her blocked heart." "Blocked" – pronounced "arel" ערל or "arilla" ערלה (circumcision context = "Foreskin" - as it is in: Lev.26:41, Duet.10:16) is also connected with blocked lips, blocked from expressing the thoughts of the heart (Ex. 6:12,30)...the Almighty had no intention of killing his emissary, but only warning him by stunning him. [SP version: "Aamitoo" המיתו in the meaning of "stunning him" (Ex. 14:24, Deut: 2:15); MT version: "Hamito" המיתו = to kill him]... Zipporah knows she is not Hebrew and that she is the reason for the incident...So she decided to do something to show her effort to love the Almighty. She took a sharp rock and scratched the skin over her heart, to cut her blocked heart from loving the Almighty. Blood dripped from the scratches to the feet of Moses, who was in the situation of awakening from his sleep and becoming aware of what Zipporah did; and dealing with her deed which resulted from the gentile ways of her previous customs (and this after ten years of living with him). So he decided to leave her, (SP: "Uyarref miminna" מירפ ממנה = And he let her go. MT: "Vayaref mimennu" מירפ ממנו = And he (the angel) left him, sending her back to her father's home with his two sons, absorbing the intention of the Almighty to go down to Egypt alone; and he did. (Tsedaka and Dufour 4-5)

In Numbers 12:1 the MT indicates that Moses took a second wife from the Kingdom of Cush (Ethopia). Onkelos, the famous Jewish convert of the first century CE and nephew of the Roman Emperor Titus, suggested that the true meaning was not one of nationality, "Cushite" but had a true meaning of "beautiful." Likewise the SP and the MT in this text have the same Hebrew characters, but a different vocalization resulting in a different interpretation. (Note the SP on the left and the MT on the right.)

1 And Maryaam and Aahrroon spoke about Mooshe because of **THE BEAUTIFUL** woman whom he had married. For he had married **A BEAUTIFUL** woman,

1 And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of **THE CUSHITE** woman whom he had married; for he had married **A CUSHITE** woman. (Tsedaka and Dufour Num. 12:1)

Rashi, the famous Jewish sage of the middle ages, attributed this to being a cacophemism.

The antonym of "euphemism" is "cacophemism," the application of expressions of contempt to desirable objects. The basis of the use of cacophemisms seems to be the wide-spread fear that too great happiness may attract envy (see Evil Eye). It was thought to avert this by giving a bad name to the thing which was in reality highly esteemed. The best-known though almost isolated example of this kind in Hebrew is כְּנֻשִׁית = "the Ethiopian woman" (Num. xii. 1), which, according to Rashi, stands for "beautiful woman," and is so translated by the Targum of Onkelos. (Herman Rosenthal Jewish Encyclopedia 268)

In the Samaritan tradition of the Biblical Text, Moses was only married to one woman, Zipporah. When Moses first began his ministry to deliver the Sons of Israel out of Egypt, Zipporah was at the side of Moses with their two sons, travelling with him. The situation that developed along the way, in Exodus 4:24-26 created a dilemma in which Moses sent her back to her father, which is confirmed in Exodus 18:2.

2 And Yitroo, Mooshe's father in law, took Mooshe's wife Seebbooraa, after he had sent her away.

2 And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her away, (Tsedaka and Dufour Ex. 18:2)

Both the SP and the MT contain the same story that Zipporah is returned to Moses by Jethro (Zipporah's father) while they are encamped in the wilderness (Exodus 18:2), yet the SP is more cohesive contextually due to the earlier text in which Zipporah was sent away due to her heathen religious practices, according to the SP.

It should be understood from the written words in a very simple way that since her marriage Zipporah never totally joined the faith of her husband, and she was left all her life as a subject for gossip between the people. We read afterwards that even Moses' brother and sister chatted about her (Numbers, 12:1) beauty. The Israelite Samaritans

translate the word in Numbers 12:1 "Kaashet" as "Beautiful" relating to Zipporah. (Tsedaka and Dufour 4)

The role of the first English translation of the Samaritan Pentateuch in Biblical Studies comes at a time in which archeology continues to uncover new historical facts of ancient Israel that confirm the validity of the Samaritan Torah as an ancient text with strong similarities to the DSS and LXX. Therefore, the English translation of the Samaritan Pentateuch holds the potential to not only increase Biblical Studies of the Biblical text, but also to shed light on the history of Ancient Israel's Northern and Southern Kingdoms, with distinct traditions and distinct histories that provide a clearer picture to understanding this ancient time period. The SP is invaluable for the dimension it adds to Biblical interpretations in comparative analysis. The Israelite Samaritan people have a long history of passing down the text in the oldest vocalization of Hebrew known today, and keep traditions of interpretation and pronunciation that represent an earlier time period than the Jewish traditions and interpretations. It is time now for Biblical Studies to stop showing favoritism to the MT, discontinue ancient allegations that the Samaritans were not original Israelites, and examine variant texts in equal standing.

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