

## SAMARITAN HEBREW IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE HISTORICAL DICTIONARY OF THE HEBREW LANGUAGE

Abraham Tal  
Tel-Aviv University

As common understanding associates Hebrew with Judaism, there is no wonder that groups that do not determine themselves as Jewish, although they still use Hebrew for literary composition, present a problem to this consensus: how should be treated this kind of Hebrew within the framework of a Historical Dictionary.

This is not the case with regard to the Karaite sect, which defines itself as a Jewish community that does not recognize the authority of the so called Oral Torah. Accordingly, the entire Karaite literature written in Hebrew (the larger part is Arabic) is being included into the database of the Historical Dictionary with no hesitation.

Unlike Karaites, the Samaritans never identified themselves with Judaism. They not only reject the Oral Law like the Karaites, they even refuse to accept the Prophets and the Hagiographa, which they consider heresy. For them, nothing is permissible in addition to the Torah following the precept of Deut 13:1 "you shall not add to it or take away from it". Samaritanism regards Judaism as the progeny of the ancient split made by Eli the priest, who left the tabernacle soon after its establishment on Mount Gerizim and erected a heretic tabernacle in Shilo. Being the true "Guardians of the Law", they promoted Mount Gerizim as the true chosen place where God installed His Presence (Shekhina) after the conquest of Canaan, while Jews went astray and transferred their religious center to Jerusalem. Since the separation between the two communities took place on the soil of Eretz Israel, obviously, the languages used by both were nearly identical (with the exception of slight dialectical differences). Thus, when Jews spoke Hebrew during the Second Commonwealth, Samaritans spoke Hebrew too. When the former community abandoned Hebrew for Aramaic, at the turn of the second century of the Common Era, the same shift occurred within the latter one.

Lastly, Arabic eliminated Aramaic from everyday speech, and from the eleventh century on, Aramaic nearly disappeared from literature too. Now, with Arabic as their vernacular, the Samaritans started a kind of cultural *Renaissance*, which looked for its natural roots in the Holy Scriptures, to which they were very much attached. Thus, a new language arose, constructed on the basis of the old Hebrew, but enriched and developed according to the modern needs, with elements taken from Aramaic and Arabic. This new hybrid language reached its apogee in the fourteenth century, and it is still used by some members of the community. As a social-linguistic phenomenon, this literary language is paralleled by the medieval Hebrew that flourished in the Diaspora.

As such, the inclusion of the Samaritan literary expression in the database of the Historical Dictionary of the Hebrew Language project of the Academy of the Hebrew Language would be well justified.