

Solomon's Sins: Medieval Samaritan-Arabic Exegesis of the Verses of Jacob's Blessing (Genesis 49:8-12)

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1. Chapter 49 from the Book of Genesis contains the so-called Blessing of Jacob, a compilation of sayings, which are framed as Jacob's deathbed address to his twelve sons, each of them representing one of the tribes of Israel. Raising thus questions of identity and cultural delineation, Jacob's Blessing often became the starting point for polemics between Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Samaritans. ^[1]

2. Since antiquity, the Jewish reception of the verses on Judah displays a marked eschatological tendency, typically reading the enigmatic Hebrew term *Shilo* (שילה) as a reference to the Messiah. Christian theologians incorporated this understanding into their christological exegesis, polemicalizing against Jewish messianic concepts. Samaritan exegesis, however, which emphasizes the primacy of Joseph – in contrast to the Jewish-Christian focus on Judah – commonly identifies *Shilo* with Solomon. ^[2]



Figure 1. Adam van Noort, *Jacob Blessing his Sons* (late 16th–mid 17th century) (CC0)

The Samaritan understanding of the verses on Judah

3. The verses on Judah in the Samaritan Pentateuch (SP) differ substantially from the Jewish Masoretic text (MT) and express a negative assessment of Judah. Genesis 49:10–12 is particularly illustrative in this regard (differences to MT marked bold):

לא יסור שבט מיהודה ומחקק מבין דגליו ^[3] עד כי יבוא שלה ולו יקהתו ^[4] עמים אסורי לגפן עירו ולשריקה בני איתנו כבס ביין לבושו ובדם ענבים כסותו חכלילו ^[5] עינים מיין ולבן שינים מחלב ^[6]

Based on the Samaritan Targumim, the verses can be translated as follows: “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from among his hosts, until *Shilo* comes. To him the people are gathering. He turned aside to his city, Gaphna [i.e., Jerusalem], and the sons of his strength to emptiness. ^[7] He washes his garment in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes. His eyes are turbid from wine and white are his teeth from fat.” ^[8]



Figure 2. Title page of Adolf Posanski's *Schiloh* (Leipzig, 1904) (online edition, Frankfurt am Main: University Library, 2012)

4. A similar rendering of the first part of verse 11 (“He turned aside to his city, Gaphna, and the sons of his strength to emptiness”) as a pejorative reference to Jerusalem^[9] is reflected in the Arabic column of the triglot *Ms. London, BL, Or 7562*, which is probably the earliest version of the Samaritan Arabic translation of the Pentateuch.^[10] However, none of the manuscripts used in Shehadeh’s edition of the Arabic translations of SP attest to this understanding. For example, Ms. B of Shehadeh’s edition reads:

“The reign shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from among his hosts until Solomon comes. And the peoples will follow him. He binds his ass to the vine and his ass’s colt to the choice vine (?).^[11] He washes his clothes in wine and his garment in grape juice. The eyes are crooked from wine and the teeth are white from fat.”

لا يزول الملك من يهوذا والمرسّم من بين بنوده حتى يأتي سليمان واليه تنقاد الشعوب يربط في الجفن عيره وفي السّير وقة بني آتانه يغسل بالخمير لباسه ويعصير العنب كسوته مَرُور العينين من الخمر وأبيض الأسنان من الشحم^[12]

This translation expands the negative assessment of Judah by identifying Shilo with Solomon, while its polemical stance is centered around the consumption of wine and meat as a sign of Solomon’s debauched behavior and lack of self-control.

Excerpt from the Samaritan-Arabic commentary *Šarḥ al-barakatayn*

5. The context of this understanding is further illuminated in the Samaritan-Arabic commentary *Šarḥ al-barakatayn* (“The Explanation of the Two Blessings”), commonly ascribed to the prolific Samaritan polymath Šadaqa b. Munağğā (died after 1223). However, it is more likely that it was composed by an unknown author at a later date, as a comparison of the text with Šadaqa’s writings indicates.^[13] Nonetheless, the composition is an important witness for medieval Samaritan Arabic exegetical traditions, containing a commentary on Genesis 49 (“Jacob’s Blessing”) and Deuteronomy 33 (Moses’ Blessing). The following excerpt is an abridged version of the commentary on Genesis 49:10–12, transcribed from its oldest textual witness, Ms. Manchester, John Rylands Library, 228, fols. 58r–60r:^[14]

Commentary

6. Proceeding from the identification of *Shilo* (Gen 49:10) with Solomon, the commentary focuses on the lack of Solomon's moral qualities, as the author refers to his excessive consumption of wine and meat, and the negative character traits associated with it. The understanding that Gen 49:11-12 refers to Solomon is also prevalent in one of the Samaritan chronicles, the so-called Chronicle II edited by Macdonald. Manuscript H 2, written in Neo-Samaritan Hebrew, consistently uses *Shilo* instead of Solomon.^[20]

Commenting on the verses on Judah, it reads: "Thus applies the statement of our ancestor Jacob concerning the tribe of Judah to the times of King Solomon the son of David. [...] All these words apply in the same way to the deeds of King Solomon the son of David, for he behaved exactly as this statement said."^[21] Similar to *Šarḥ al-barakatayn*, this Samaritan interpretation not only opposes the Jewish identification of *Shilo* with the Messiah, but also criticizes Solomon's sinful behavior.

7. In this regard, the author of *Šarḥ al-barakatayn* mentions also Solomon's controversial predilection for foreign wives. Ultimately going back to 1 Kings 11:1–14, this tradition is obviously not originally Samaritan (the biblical books beyond the Torah are not part of the Samaritan canon).^[22] However, it entered the Samaritan tradition in the Middle Ages, most probably through Arabic sources, and it is also prevalent in the Samaritan chronicles.^[23] The main reason behind Solomon's negative portrayal in the Samaritan tradition lies in his role as the builder of the Jerusalem Temple, the schismatic sanctuary of the Jews, according to the Samaritans.^[24] The negative account of Solomon in *Šarḥ al-barakatayn* thus aims to disqualify the Jewish temple, the Davidic line, and the tribe of Judah as a whole, in gross opposition to the priority that is given to them in Jewish and Christian exegesis.

8. In spite of these discrepancies in the general contextualization of the verses on Judah, there are also occasional points of contact and cultural exchange between Samaritan and Jewish traditions, as already seen in relation to the tradition of Solomon's problematic character. Another example is the motive of Judah's drunkenness, which was also discussed among Karaite exegetes. Much like the Samaritan-Arabic translation, the prolific Yefet ben Eli (10th century) translates verse 12 without reproducing the elative in Arabic: *أزورار ألعينين من ألكمر* (approximately: "The eyes are crooked from wine").^[25] And he explicates: *ודלך אן אזוראר אلعין ידל עלי אפראט אלסכר* ("and this is because 'the crookedness of the eye' points to the exaggerate state of being drunk").^[26] Similarly, Sahl ben Maṣliḥ (second half of the 10th century) states in his commentary to Genesis: *והו איליין מן כתר איליין יכונ מן אלתר איליין* ("and this means 'crookedness of the eyes', which stems from the abundance of wine").^[27] However, this understanding is assessed positively since the verse points to the richness of the land, according to Sahl, or to favors granted by God, according to Yefet.^[28] Thus, while Karaite exegetes understand Judah's drunkenness as an allegorical expression of abundance, the author of *Šarḥ al-barakatayn* reminds the reader of the consequences of alcohol consumption and cautions: too much wine distracts the mind!

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References

- The length alone of Adolf Posnanski's seminal work *Schiloh* (1904) is suggestive: On over five hundred pages he presents a rich anthology of sources covering the exegetical literature of Jews, Christians, and Samaritans from antiquity until the 17th century on one verse alone, namely Genesis 49:10.
- First mentioned by Posnanski, who also included Samaritan Arabic material, see id., *Schiloh*, 283–84.
- דגליו (*dəgālo* instead of MT רגליו (“his legs”).
- The vocalization *yiqqālu* shows that the word is a Niph. of the verb קה”ת, impf., 3 pl. According to the oldest Samaritan sources it was understood as “to gather”; Schorch, “Die hebräische Wurzel QHT,” 78–80. MT יקה”ת is of unclear etymology and meaning.
- SP חכילו (*iklīlu*) is a verb (perf., 3 pl.), denoting eyes being turbid or glassy from excessive consumption of alcohol, Tal, “סאר חכילי ou les yeux de Juda dans la tradition samaritaine,” 14–15. MT reads חכילי which has been understood as an adjective denoting a reddish or blueish color.
- Schorch, *The Samaritan Pentateuch: I Genesis*, 434–35 (my emphasis).
- See, for example, Ms. J from Tal's edition of the Samaritan Targumim: עמוקה ברי ולריקה קרתה ולפנה קרתה וליקה ברי עמוקה, Tal, *The Samaritan Targum of the Pentateuch: Part I, Genesis, Exodus*, 4:212. See also Tal and Florentin, *The Pentateuch: The Samaritan Version and the Masoretic Version*, 655–56.
- The Samaritans read *miyyēlēb* (tib. מִחֶלֶב) “from fat” instead of MT מִחֶלֶב, “(whiter) than milk”.
- Note that Gaphna (Jifna) is a small town between Nablus and Jerusalem. Therefore, calling the important urban center Jerusalem by that name constitutes a dysphemism.”
- Zewi, *The Samaritan Version of Saadya Gaon's Translation of the Pentateuch*, 306. See also *ibid.*, 182
- It is not entirely clear how the Arabic term *السيرة* should be translated in the Samaritan context. The word is likely an arabicized form of Hebrew שרקה, Shehadeh, “The Arabic of the Samaritans and Its Importance,” 560. In the medieval Jewish-Rabbanite exegesis in Arabic שרקה is usually rendered *سُرَيْق* and understood as “choice vine”. Thus, although it is not entirely clear how the Hebrew text was understood by the Samaritan Arabic translator who produced this text, the parallelism to the Hebrew term גפן (“vine”) is obvious.
- Shehadeh, *The Arabic Translation of the Samaritan Pentateuch: Volume 1: Genesis – Exodus*, 1:251.
- See Zoref, “ברכות השבתים בפרשנות השומרנית לאור פירושו של יפת בן עלי הקראי,” 12-13 and my forthcoming article “Leader, Head, and Pious Man: The Verses on Joseph (Gen 49:22–26 and Deut 33:13–17) as a Reference Point for the Formation of Samaritan Religious Identity”.
- According to its colophon the manuscript was copied in 1722. Apart from Ms. Manchester, JRL, 228 there are at least eight other manuscripts. On these manuscripts see my forthcoming doctoral dissertation.
- In the Samaritan-Arabic tradition *شريعة* (“law”) is generally understood as referring to the Torah.
- Translated according to the Samaritan-Arabic understanding of SP. שרקה (*šērīqa*) is translated according to the author's own definition: *فلما הגפן هو الكروم والشرקה هو القضيب الطويل منها* (“As for *gāfēn*, these are the vines, and *šērīqa* refers to their long branch.”), Ms. Manchester, JRL, fol. 59v.
- The comparison of the inability of the body to rise and the rising of the sun possibly constitutes a word play of the Hebrew term שרקה, which is associated with the Arabic term اشراق due to the similarity in consonants.
- To be read חכילו (*iklīlu*), see above, n. 6.
- To be read *أزور* (“squint-eyed”) which corresponds to the Arabic rendering *مزور العينين* (“The eyes are crooked”) in the Samaritan-Arabic translations. The misspelling might be explained by the tendency for the letters *dāl* and *rā* to lose their graphic distinctiveness in cursive scripts.
- Macdonald, 1969, 11. Macdonald, *The Samaritan Chronicle No. II (or: Sepher Ha-Yamim): From Joshua to Nebuchadnezzar*, 11.
- Ibid.*, 151–52.
- The motive of Solomon's foreign wives is also prominent in rabbinical literature (see Langer, “Solomon in Rabbinic Literature,” 130), but it is generally absent from Islamic traditions, which depict Solomon as a prophet, sage, and magician (see Walker and Fenton, “Sulaymān b. Dāwūd”).
- E.g., in the *Kitāb at-ta'riḥ* by Abū l-Faḥ, which dates from 1355 and is the oldest Samaritan chronicle, as well as in the above-mentioned Samaritan Chronicle II, see Stenhouse, *Kitāb At-Tarīḥ, Translation*, 64. Macdonald, *The Samaritan Chronicle No. II (or: Sepher Ha-Yamim): From Joshua to Nebuchadnezzar*, 150–51.
- There are numerous polemical references to the Jerusalem Temple in Samaritan literature. For example, in the *Book of Asatir* (second half of the 10th century), written in Samaritan Aramaic, it is called “house of affliction” (בית המכתש) constituting a word play on the Hebrew name of the Jerusalem Temple (בית המקדש), Bonnard, “Asfār Asāḥīr, le ‘livre des légendes,’” 134–35; 155–56. Gāzāl ad-Duwayk (probably 13th century) in his *Maqāla fī ṭubūt ad-dawla aṭ-ṭaniyya* (“Treatise on the Certainty of the Second Kingdom”) uses the term “house of idolatry” (בית זרותה), Merx, *Der Messias oder Ta'eb der Samaritaner: Nach bisher unbekanntem Quellen*, 61–62. Recently, Schorch discussed the different traditions of holy space attributed to Mount Gerizim and to Mount Zion as one of the central topics of debate between Samaritans and Jews, see id., “‘Woe to Those Who Exchanged the Truth for a Lie, When They Choose for Themselves a Different Place’: Samaritan Perspectives on the Samaritan–Jewish Split.”
- Ms. St. Petersburg, RNL, Yevr.-Arab. I 28, fol. 80v.
- Ibid.*, fol. 86v.

27 Ms. Yevr.-Arab. I 4633, fol. 229v. Transcription provided by courtesy of Friederike Schmidt.

28 Ibid., fol. 229v and Ms. Yevr.-Arab. I 28, 86v.

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