Digital Samaritans

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My involvement with the Samaritans and their collections did not begin with an extensive rhetorical understanding of their history or present situation. Rather, it began as a digital humanities project I initiated as a graduate student. In late December 2007, I was halfway through my PhD in Rhetoric and Writing at Michigan State University, and I was in my fourth year of employment as a graduate research assistant at the Writing in Digital Environments (WIDE) Research Center. With some free time between semesters, I found myself one evening browsing the online catalogue for Michigan State University Special Collections. Having recently taught two undergraduate courses with assignments based around research projects on the Radicalism Collection at Special Collections, I was searching for collections that could be useful for new undergraduate research assignments. At the time, I also was deep into my dissertation research and writing about the Hebrew work of fifteenth-century rabbi and rhetorician Judah Messer Leon. Consequently, I had several semesters of university Hebrew under my belt and was very interested in Semitic manuscripts. Not surprisingly, the MSS 287 finding aid for the Chamberlain Warren Samaritan Collection of Samaritan Hebrew materials immediately piqued my curiosity; I found myself wondering about the collection’s history.

The finding aid described the collection as “the most extensive set of Samaritan materials in the United States,” consisting of over two dozen Samaritan cultural artifacts, including scrolls, codices, a third–sixth-century marble inscription, and a sixteenth-century brass scroll case. To me, the finding aid also gestured toward the beginning of a story. How, when, and under what circumstance did this large “variety of religious and liturgical materials used by the Samaritans” end up in Michigan? Though it suggested such a story existed, it provided only the barest bones of a narrative:

The Chamberlain Warren Samaritan Collection . . . [was] acquired by E.K. Warren, a wealthy businessman of Three Oaks, Michigan in the early 20th century. Warren . . . first met the Samaritans during a visit to Palestine in
1901. He took great interest in helping the Samaritans preserve their religious artifacts. (Abood)

In my attempt to flesh out those bare bones, I learned that during the thirty-five years that followed the rediscovery of the Chamberlain Warren Collection, only a handful of scholars had taken an interest in it. For the most part, the Samaritan materials did not have many visitors, though there are two significant exceptions. The first was Robert Anderson’s discovery of the Samaritan manuscripts in 1968, which piqued his own interest in Samaritan studies. In the years that followed, he researched and composed numerous books, articles, and chapters on the Chamberlain Warren Collection, including his 1978 Studies in Samaritan Manuscripts and Artifacts: The Chamberlain Warren Collection.³ The second was the interest of Benyamim Tsedeka, a Samaritan and community scholar, who began traveling from his home in the Samaritan neighborhood of Holon, Israel, to visit archives with Samaritan collections in North America in 1982. These trips included visits to Columbia University, the Annenberg Institute at the University of Pennsylvania, the Library of Congress, and Michigan State University. During his 1982 visit to North America, he met Michigan State University religious studies professor Robert Anderson in East Lansing and saw the Chamberlain Warren Collection for the first time. According to Robert Anderson, the Chamberlain Warren Collection includes “a fine selection of relatively scarce artifacts and manuscripts,” including three fifteenth-century Samaritan Pentateuchs on parchment from Egypt and Damascus, many modern liturgical works on paper, a brass scroll case, and a third to sixth-century marble inscription of Exodus 15:13 (Anderson, “Museum Trail” 41–43). In total, twenty complete and partial Pentateuchs in scroll and codex form, the marble inscription and brass scroll case, one book of law, and six additional liturgical texts made up the collection; the languages of the manuscripts include Samaritan Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic (“MSS 287”), a collection representative of the kind of Samaritan texts in diaspora.

Impressed with the Chamberlain Warren Collection, Tsedaka returned in 1984 and 2003 to do additional research on the history of his people.⁴ On his third trip to East Lansing in 2003, he visited more than the Special Collections. Learning that there was a MSU Board of Trustees meeting scheduled for that day, Tsedaka attended the “Public Participation on Issues Not Germane to the Agenda” segment of the trustee meeting and stood to address MSU’s trustees about the MSU Chamberlain Warren Collection of Samaritan manuscripts and artifacts. The meeting notes record that he introduced and explained some basic facts about himself and his people, specifically, that he was a descendant of the ancient Northern Israelite Kingdom. According to the meeting notes, he then explained to the trustees that “MSU received one of
the largest collections in the world of Samaritan manuscripts; they are located in the Library.” On behalf of his people, Tsedaka made a request, encouraging “the University to utilize this collection to promote Samaritan Studies” (“Michigan State University Board of Trustees”). After Tsedaka spoke at the Board of Trustees meeting, there was some activity on the part of Peter Berg at MSU Special Collections to display key pieces of the Chamberlin Warren Collection, but the university did not move forward with any larger initiatives.

Four years later in December 2007, I discovered the finding aid to the Michigan State Chamberlain Warren Collection. Curious about the collection, a quick Google search led me first to Professor Robert Anderson’s article “The Chamberlain Warren Samaritan Collection at MSU: The Museum Trail,” which details the history of the MSU collection and, a few hours later, to Tsedaka’s November 2003 Michigan State University Board of Trustees address. After reading the meeting notes and Tsedaka’s request to do something with the collection, I searched to see if MSU had responded to Tsedaka; I did not find any evidence that they had. I did, however, find Tsedaka’s e-mail address, and a few days later I wrote to him:

I am interested in potentially digitizing some or all of the three Pentateuch texts in the collection, and making them available online off msu.edu . . . for educators, researchers, and your own Samaritan community. I wanted to know if first and foremost such an endeavor is respectful of your culture’s values regarding these texts. I am aware that these are sacred texts, and I would not proceed with such an endeavor unless it honors the values of your people. Any feedback you could give would be greatly appreciated. (Ridolfo)

Tsedaka responded back almost immediately with his support for a digitization project:

In regards to the question you have asked. We will be much honored with your blessed work. Go ahead with this and you have my pure blessings. The texts in your hands are very important and need a professional use. Displaying them before the public will be a great contribution to the world’s culture. (Tsedaka)

What developed over the next few years became the first in several stages that ultimately led to this current project about rhetorical delivery, cultural sovereignty, and the digital humanities. The exigence for this book emerged as I began to notice the difference between digital humanities work at the intersection of rhetorical studies and the interests of more traditional scholars
in textual studies. For example, in the summer of 2013, Samaritan Benyamim Tsedaka translated and published the first English edition of the Samaritan Torah, The Israelite Samaritan Version of the Torah. For the first time ever, English-speaking scholars and lay people would be able to access and compare the Jewish Masoretic Torah (MT) and the SP (Samaritan Pentateuch) side-by-side. In Tsedaka’s introduction to the translation, he writes that

For the first time in history we present the English translation of the Israelite Samaritan text of the Pentateuch (SP), parallel to the English translation of the Masoretic Text (MT) based on The Holy Scriptures, the 1917 Jewish Publication Society edition, in two columns emphasizing the differences between the two versions and explained by commentary in marginal notes by the author, emphasizing the most important differences from a Samaritan point of view (because the Jewish commentary is already widely known in the field of Biblical Studies). (Tsedaka, The Israelite Samaritan Version of the Torah: First English Translation Compared with the Masoretic Version, xxxiii)

This publication coincided with scholars Terry Giles, Stefan Schorch, Emmanuel Tov, and Ingrid Lilly’s panel proposal to the 2013 Society for Biblical Literature (SBL) on “Current Issues in the Study of the Samaritan Pentateuch.” Since Professor Giles, a renowned scholar in his own right and a student of Robert Anderson, was familiar with my work on the digitization of Samaritan manuscripts at Michigan State University and Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, he invited me to share his time on the panel. On November 23, 2013, I traveled to Baltimore for the SBL to talk about the digitization of Samaritan manuscripts, not only for scholars to access, but also for the Samaritan community in the West Bank and Israel to view, share, and use.

During the panel session, accomplished Samaritan scholar Professor Stefan Schorch responded to Tsedaka’s translation of the Samaritan Pentateuch into English. Although he found much to praise about the book, he also critiqued Tsedaka’s project. For Schorch, Tsedaka’s choice of English as the translation language for the Samaritan Pentateuch demonstrated that the book “isn’t intended for the Samaritan community.” And if the translation is not for the community, then, Schorch reasoned, the translation must be intended for biblical scholars. Following this line of reasoning, Schorch assumed that text was aimed at biblical scholars and consequently, the project fell short of its intended audience. He also noted a number of translation problems, which he attributed to language influences present in Tsedaka’s translation. At the panel and then later in a public Facebook post, Tsedaka
responded to the concerns Schorch raised about the intended audience of the translation and value of the book to the Samaritan community:

The main purpose of the book is to open the Samaritan version of the Torah for the first time to readers of the most spoken language in the world today—English. More than four billion people in the world speak this language and there is room to expose them to the [Samaritan] version that was previously only available to 10 million speakers of Hebrew.

According to Tsedaka, the book was not only aimed at scholars but also at opening up global access to Samaritan culture and religious beliefs, as well as the need for Samaritan cultural sovereignty. In contrast to the more particular audience of Biblical scholars Schorch assumed for the book, Tsedaka’s introduction to *The Israelite Samaritan Version of the Torah* makes clear that a key concern for his English translation is to communicate the “Samaritan point of view” to outside audiences. In his foreword to the translation, Professor Steven Fine also notes that the goal of Tsedaka’s translation is to more widely circulate Samaritan culture, history, and traditions outside the 770-person Samaritan community:

Benyamim Tsedaka has reached beyond the bounds of the Holy Land, the “Sacred Tongue,” and the “Holy Nation” to present Samaritanism to the broader world of scholars and interested lay people. His work has coincided with a period of new prominence for Samaritan studies in Israel and abroad . . . [He] has presented a Samaritan perspective on Samaritan life, culture and politics as well as a forum for scholarly research on Samaritan history, religion, and culture. (xiv)

Schorch called attention to issues he saw with the use of the book for Samaritan scholarship, such as Tsedaka’s Modern Hebrew influencing how he translated particular passages from the Biblical Hebrew (Tsedaka, “Panel on the Samaritan Version of the Torah”). Yet, Schorch’s questions about the value of Tsedaka’s English translation for the Samaritan community do not account for the possibility that the book does more than simply communicate to scholars.

The issues that sparked disagreement at this panel—the proposed audience for Tsedaka’s translation and definitions of what constitutes a Samaritan translation—highlight the central issues *Digital Samaritans* explores. What might texts do, especially texts in diaspora, for cultural stakeholders such as the Samaritans to help them communicate their unique identity and need for
cultural sovereignty to a global audience in the digital age? What is the role of rhetoric at the crossroads of the digital humanities in that mission, and what might engaged research look like at the intersection of rhetorical studies and the digital humanities? At the core of this book is the idea that beyond digitizing manuscripts, there remains an unanswered question about the role of rhetorical delivery in digital humanities. Digital humanists have been regularly digitizing and sending out texts for more than three decades: but what do those texts do once they enter digital circulation and for whom?

The panel at the SBL brought to light a key difference in how scholars consider Samaritan texts. In the eyes of some textual scholars, texts are first and foremost objects of study. In the eyes of many Samaritans, however, texts form part of their cultural heritage and provide one of the primary ways they may communicate their identity and need for cultural sovereignty to faraway audiences. In other words, texts enable Samaritans to engage in a process that I term leveraging textual diaspora, which is the process by which cultural communities strategically theorize the future delivery and circulation of their texts in diaspora, a concept I discuss more in chapters 1 and 3 of this book. For Tsedaka, his translation of the Samaritan Pentateuch is first and foremost a means to convey in a more “accessible” global tongue the uniqueness of Samaritan cultural heritage. For Schorch, the text is first and foremost an object of textual study, most important to the community itself (the Samaritans) and the elite group of Biblical/textual scholars trained to appreciate the text as an object of scholarly study. These two views may complement one another most of the time; however, in the case of Schorch and Tsedaka’s argument about the intended audience for Tsedaka’s translation of the Samaritan Pentateuch, they differ. The difference between what each values is one of the central tenants of the book. While Tsedaka privileges access and the ability to communicate with as broad an audience as possible, his imagined purpose for his translation bumps up against the more limited and particular conception of the translation’s audience that Schorch assumes. What this minor clash of values demonstrates is the central focus of this book: the difference between what textual scholars, largely the dominant voice in the digital humanities to date, might want from texts, and what cultural communities such as the Samaritans might want from their texts, a key area of interest for scholars in rhetorical studies. The clash of values that Tsedeka and Schorch found themselves in at the SBL is similar to the competing values inherent in more traditional approaches to the digital humanities that do not imagine diverse audiences and purposes for texts in future circulation. Rhetorical training provides the tools to better understand where Tsedeka and Schorch miss each other even though they’re talking about the same issues—audience—and the same text.

While the digital humanities typically is interested in developing tools for
scholars, and understanding how digitization may benefit the work of scholars, Digital Samaritans is interested in the historical and contemporary reasons for Tsedaka’s rhetorical goals and objectives. More broadly, Digital Samaritans investigates the history of the Samaritans’ textual diaspora and asks Samaritans what they think about and want from their diaspora of manuscripts, and why. In rhetorical terms, these questions about what Samaritans want from their textual diaspora translate into questions about the kind of future digital delivery and distribution they want from their texts, why they want them circulated in the first place, and for what rhetorical circumstances? As part of the ongoing digitization project to make Samaritan manuscripts available on the Internet, the book also explores how members of the community are theorizing their textual diaspora as digital objects in order to help them communicate their cultural sovereignty to the world.

Based on archival research and interviews with the Samaritan community, Digital Samaritans explores what some Samaritans want from this diaspora of manuscripts, and how these goals and objectives relate to the contemporary existential and rhetorical situation of the Samaritans as a living, breathing people existing “between the raindrops” and “between the two fires” of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, phrases Samaritans use to describe their delicate geopolitical position in the region. The exigence for this book is rooted in a practical digital humanities project: a digitization project involving the Samaritan community. What do some Samaritans want to communicate to outside audiences with their manuscripts? Why do Samaritans want to engage the outside world with their culture, history, and religious texts? How does the circulation of Samaritan manuscripts, especially in digital environments, relate to their rhetorical circumstances and future goals and objectives as one of the smallest religious/ethnic minorities in the region “walking between the raindrops” or “two fires” in one of the most tumultuous regions in the world? What does it mean for scholars and community members to research and engage the digitization of Samaritan manuscripts from a rhetorical perspective? Where do engaged digitization projects intersect with current conversations in rhetorical studies and the digital humanities? For rhetoric scholars, there have been a number of calls (Grabill; Cushman) to consider the relationship of the humanities in community-university partnerships, the role of public intellectuals (Weisser), and public engagement (Cushman). Digital Samaritans provides an additional case example of university-community engagement for scholars in rhetoric, and especially the digital humanities, to consider.

Digital Samaritans argues that digital humanists could benefit from engaging conversations around theoretically informed practice or praxis, with projects developed in conjunction with communities outside the academy, or what is referred to as stakeholders in this book. There are benefits for human-
ists engaging with digital humanities projects through the disciplinary lens of rhetoric, especially rhetorical delivery. Just as rhetoricians typically seek to understand what texts do, as much as scholars in literature seek to understand what texts mean (Bazerman), rhetoricians working at the intersection of the digital humanities and rhetorical studies seek to understand digital projects themselves as rhetorical activities of value to specific audiences. For each digital humanities project, there’s a rhetorical history informing the contemporary rhetorical situation and potential consequences or outcomes for each individual and community with a stake in the project. When we upload and hit send on digital projects, there’s the potential for something to happen as a result of those acts of rhetorical delivery. Perhaps that act of delivery will lead to a ripple effect, triggering other discrete acts of delivery and broader circulation as the project is shared across networks, referenced on Facebook, responded to in e-mail, or criticized on Twitter. In exploring the intersection of digitization and the communication of cultural identity, the digital humanities and rhetorical studies intersect in meaningful and productive ways. This is a book about those ways.

Chapter 1 begins with a brief introduction to the Samaritans, their current situation on Mount Gerizim, a digital humanities project, and their rhetorical sovereignty. In chapter 2, “Between the Raindrops and Two Fires: A Brief History of the Samaritans and Their Diaspora of Manuscripts,” I investigate the history of the Samaritans’ diaspora of manuscripts in relationship to their recent history and contemporary rhetorical situation in Israel and Palestine. In chapter 3, “From Parchment to Bytes: Digital Delivery as a Rhetorical Strategy,” I examine the complexity of nine Samaritan reactions to the diaspora of Samaritan manuscripts in order to argue that the way Samaritans strategize the future circulation of their manuscripts in diaspora is rhetorically complex and has conceptual connections to rhetorical sovereignty and delivery. Chapter 4, “Leveraging Textual Diaspora: Rhetoric and the Digital Humanities as Engaged Scholarship,” examines two instances of engaged research in rhetoric and the digital humanities. In the concluding chapter, I outline not only the rhetorical implications of Samaritan calls for digitization and engagement but also the implications for the relationship of rhetorical studies to the digital humanities.

While Digital Samaritans is a static print project representing over six years of research with the Samaritan community, the book also references digital resources produced for the Samaritan community and this book. These resources include a dozen digitized manuscripts from Michigan State University and Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion’s Klau Library, geocoded maps of the Samaritan diaspora of manuscripts with (when available) links to library finding aids, a geocoded map of known digitized Sa-
maritan manuscripts, and a geocoded map of current Samaritan centers of population in relationship to many of their former locations. In addition, I also include links to a UNICODE Samaritan keyboard I am developing for OS X and Windows and a recent open source Samaritan font with vowel markers developed by Yoram Gnat of the OpenSiddur project. All resources are hosted on http://samaritanrepository.org, a server I host in London, United Kingdom, in order to be as equidistant as possible in terms of Internet traffic patterns between Israel and the West Bank, North America, and Europe: the former are centers of the Samaritan population, and the latter are home to large concentrations of Samaritan scholars. As Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green emphasize, digital participation is a complicated matter:

even if we get our messages through, there is often a question of whether anyone is listening. None of this allows us to be complacent about the current conditions of networked communications, even if the expanded opportunities for participation give us reasons for hope and optimism. (194)

The digital content referenced in this book takes advantage of the electronic medium to reach as many stakeholder audiences as possible. The digital content referenced is not static; rather, the digitized manuscripts and interactive maps are part of a growing project and will continue to improve over time. As David Bodenhamer, John Corrigan, and Trevor Harris note in The Spatial Humanities: Gis and the Future of Humanities Scholarship, “seeking to fuse GIS with the humanities is challenging in the extreme, but already we have glimpses of what this technology can produce when applied to the problems in our disciplines” (24). For rhetorical studies and the digital humanities, mapping technologies hold the promise to geocode and consider the spatial dimension of the relationship of people to their texts. In turn, this visualization has implications for thinking about rhetorical delivery and the circulation of texts. Initially, what interactive maps of manuscripts and other texts have to show rhetorical studies is not necessarily why texts are where they are or where they have been, but where texts are said to be in a particular moment in time. As more is discovered about the history of texts, interactive maps may be complicated, improved, and built upon, or put into conversation with other maps.

In the years to come and with the help of Samaritan Benyamim Tsedaka, I plan to update the map of the Samaritan diaspora of manuscripts to include more detailed information about when each manuscript was acquired by each institution. For now, the map of Samaritan textual diaspora includes additional information on library holdings from Jean-Pierre Rothschild’s bibliography, information from Tsedaka, and updated links to library catalogue websites. When I started writing Digital Samaritans, there was to my knowledge no
other digitized Samaritan manuscripts available and thus no activity to map. Over the last two years, the situation has changed for the better, and I now make available a geocoded map of digitized Samaritan manuscripts. With time, my hope is that this map too will grow exponentially, as the late High Priest Elazar ben Tsedaka ben Yitzhaq had wished in 2009 when he told the Michigan State University project team on Mount Gerizim that he wanted all Samaritan manuscripts abroad digitized.