Digital Samaritans

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The Good Samaritan: At the Crossroads of Rhetoric and the Digital Humanities

We want to tell people in the world that we are still alive. We have our language, we have our culture, our heritage.
—Yacop Cohen

Every year, Benyamim Tsedaka makes a trip to Europe and North America to visit Samaritan manuscript collections and speak about his people’s culture and heritage, to tell the world, as Yacop Cohen emphasizes, about the Samaritans. For each of the past six years, I have joined Tsedaka for a few days to discuss projects and collaborate. On a recent November 2013 visit to Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Tsedaka and I stopped at the Good Samaritan Hospital next to the college and took the photograph above. This moment is worth reflecting upon. Next to one of the largest collections of Samaritan manuscripts in the Midwest (housed at Hebrew Union College) is the Good Samaritan Hospital with a picture of a man wearing a kūfīyyah, or a traditional Middle Eastern headdress. What connection is there between the image of the “Good Samaritan,” the repository of Samaritans’ cultural heritage just a few hundred feet away, and the living cultural community in the West Bank and Israel? Are the Samaritans a living people in the mind of the average driver going past the “Good Samaritan” Hospital?

In North America and Europe, the word “Samaritan” is commonly associated with the Parable of the Good Samaritan from the New Testament Gospel of Luke. Hospitals and clinics all across the United States are adorned with references to the Samaritan of Luke. In the process of circulating as part of one of the world’s major religious texts, the parable has become a commonplace and has been rewritten onto the namesake of thousands of hospitals, clinics, and crisis hotlines. Yet, these organizations and institutions that bear the Samaritan namesake do so with little or no connection to today’s living Samaritan community. In fact, many Westerners are genuinely surprised to
learn that the Samaritan people mentioned in Luke have continued to survive against great historical odds in their historical homeland. Since the time of Jesus, the Samaritans of today have survived countless wars, starvation, disease, and forced conversion; they remain Shomrim (“Keepers” in Hebrew) of a rich religious and cultural tradition. They have not only kept their traditions but have also continued them. They teach their children their two liturgical languages (Samaritan Hebrew, what Samaritans call “Ancient Hebrew,” and Samaritan Aramaic), a system of writing, musical traditions, as well as their own foodways and recipes.²

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is an appropriate place to end, then, because like the Samaritans of today, the Samaritans of two millennia ago also found themselves in the midst of political fires. What’s changed from first century Palestine to today, however, is that though the Samaritan population has gone from more than one hundred thousand to 770, the politi-
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Cal fires around them are proportionally much larger. Because of this trend, the Samaritans have had to develop methods to “go between the raindrops.” Today’s Samaritans are a living, thriving people, and their more than three millennia-long story of survival has much to teach scholars in rhetorical studies. To better understand this connection, however, it is important to be familiar with the representation of the Good Samaritan found in Luke.

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan narrated by Jesus, a wounded traveler (possibly Jewish) on the road to Jericho receives compassion and aid from a Samaritan. What’s most significant about the content of the story is that this kindness took place at a time when there was considerable sectarianism in first century Palestine. For the audience of the Christian Bible in the first few centuries after Jesus of Nazareth’s death, it is significant that it was a Samaritan that assisted the needy traveler on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho because of the tensions in the first century between Jews and Samaritans:

[30] Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead.

[31] Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.

[32] So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

[33] But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion,

[34] and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

[35] And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’

[36] Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?”

[37] He said, “The one who showed mercy on him.” And Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”


1901 Revised Standard Version of the Bible

While the parable is a Christian story, it’s a story that has circulated so widely in the West that, as the image of Tsedaka and the hospital at the beginning of the chapter demonstrates, it’s become part of the everyday landscape of building and hospital names in North America and Europe. The parable is a story
that reflects favorably on the Samaritans, and it’s a story whose circulation has rhetorical benefits for today’s Samaritan community.

For Benyamim Tsedaka, the parable’s wide circulation serves as a commonplace to introduce the world to the living Samaritan community in Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Tsedaka has done significant work not only to explain the Samaritan community and its identity to his neighbors and the world but also to draw on the Samaritans as a bridge for promoting peace and mutual understanding. To this end, for the last five years Tsedaka has led a group of Samaritan leaders to create The Samaritan Medal for Peace and Humanitarian Achievement in order to build on the ethos of the Good Samaritan and to position the Samaritans as peace brokers in the region: “Many organizations offer ‘Samaritan medals,’ recognizing those who demonstrate the behavior of the Good Samaritan in their lives. Few, if any, realize that ‘Samaritan’ is not merely an archaic term: it is the name of a living, vibrant people in the heart of the Middle East, having the unique distinction of being on good terms with all sides, in a region more commonly associated with conflict” (Tsedaka, “Medal”). According to Benyamim Tsedaka, the medal serves as a means to help “others to know about us more and more. In the ‘Good Samaritan’ spirit, we go and we give the Medal to prominent personalities all over the world . . . [and] now every ceremony is doubling the interest in Samaritans” (Tsedaka, “Personal interview in Holon, Israel, 28 Feb. 2012”). The Samaritan Medal for Peace and Humanitarian Achievement may be seen as one way in which the Samaritans position themselves to walk, as I discussed in chapters 2 and 3, between the fires and raindrops:

Now the Samaritans themselves step forward to offer the first and only Samaritan medal awarded by the authentic historical Samaritan people of the Holy Land. As is the case with other “Samaritan” medals, its purpose is to recognize and reward service to humanity, especially in the cause of peace . . . The Samaritan Medal forms a bridge among all the People of the Book: the Children of Abraham; Samaritans, Jews, Christians and Muslims. The spirit of the “Good Samaritan” can live inside all people, even those who may be disparaged by others. (Tsedaka, “Medal”)

As the Samaritans position themselves as a “bridge among all the People of the Book,” they leverage the ethos of the Samaritan described in the parable for their own rhetorical work to explain who they are to their neighbors. The Samaritan Medal Foundation’s example is an interesting one for scholars of rhetorical delivery and cultural rhetorics, because the Samaritans connect another people’s story about a Samaritan from long ago to the coexistence work of today’s Samaritan community, work that advances the Samaritans’ long-
standing ability to live and work in peace with their neighbors and to communicate their existence to the world. As Yacop Cohen quoted at the beginning of this chapter suggests, they tell the world that the Samaritans exist and that the Samaritan people have a unique culture and history in the region.

Rhetoric and Digital Humanities at the Crossroads

In this book, I have looked beyond the digitization, keyboard, and maps project at http://samaritanrepository.org to explain why the communication of Samaritan cultural identity as an issue of rhetorical sovereignty matters, and matters differently in the digital age. Chapter 1 introduced the theory of textual diaspora or leveraging manuscripts spread out across the world for specific cultural-rhetorical ends. In chapter 2, I examined key historical events in recent Samaritan history: first, National Geographic’s special issue on the Samaritans in 1920 where the author predicted the Samaritans’ extinction by the end of the twentieth century. Second, the establishment of the Samaritan neighborhood in Holon by Israel’s second president, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, and his rhetorical move to claim the Samaritans as fellow Israelites. Third, the years of isolation, 1949–1967, when there was very little physical contact between the Samaritan communities in the West Bank and Israel. And fourth, Yasser Arafat’s appointment of Saloum Cohen to the Palestinian Council in 1996 and his argument to claim the Samaritans as Palestinians. I contend that these recent events, the Palestinians’ and Israelis’ competing claims to the Samaritans’ cultural heritage, the isolation between the two Samaritan communities as a result of the war of 1948, and National Geographic’s yet-to-be recanted proclamation are important factors for understanding the historical context of the digital repository project and the rhetorical situation of the Samaritan diaspora of manuscripts. I argue that, together, the manuscripts and the Samaritans’ work educating their neighbors about who they are constitutes a complex rhetorical strategy that’s reflected in the title of the 1998 “Memo: Between the Israeli, Palestinian, and Jordanian Raindrops.”

In chapter 3, I outlined some reasons that help to explain why delivering textual diaspora digitally matters for the Samaritans. First, it helps them to communicate their identity in a digital age, and second, this digital repository of textual diaspora may be more easily accessed and thus also leveraged to achieve greater rhetorical sovereignty. The implications for scholars of rhetorical delivery working at the intersection of the digital humanities are many, but in chapter 4 I argue that one of the more important lessons we learn from this case example is that long-term engaged work matters not only to the communities we work with but also the disciplines of both rhetoric and the digital humanities. Long-term, engaged work may assist not only scholars
but also cultural stakeholders such as the Samaritans. I examined the complex history and relationship of the Samaritan diaspora of manuscripts to present-day Samaritan circumstances and desires for the material and digital future of those materials. I've shown how the very existence of the manuscripts and their unique record of Samaritan cultural practices, scattered in collections across the world, provide rhetorical tools Samaritans may use to communicate their identity to the world and to advance their own digital and scribal production, while also advancing knowledge about their textual history. To actualize the potential of these manuscripts, however, requires libraries, museums, archives, and private collectors to make their Samaritan collections available to the Samaritans through digitization. For material cultural heritage at the intersection of digital technology, there's a looming rhetorical crossroads on the horizon with many options for cultural communities about what to do. Cultural heritage content may be tailored to digital environments or may not be digitized at all; however, as I have tried to illustrate with the Samaritan case example, either path—doing something or choosing to do nothing—may have long-term rhetorical implications. While there are multiple paths to choose, there are no clear road signs about which path is preferable. On a case-by-case basis, only cultural stakeholders can make those kinds of decisions.

For example, as I write this last chapter during the summer of 2014, the Islamic State (Dawlat al-Islamiyya or Daesh) is engaged in a brutal military campaign in Iraq and Syria. On Mt. Sinjar of northern Iraq, Daesh has trapped thousands of Yazidis, members of an ancient religion with ties to Zoroastrianism, and a major humanitarian crisis is underway. In the week of August 15, dozens of news stories ran in papers throughout the West with a version of the same title: “Who are the Yazidis?” As the West decided what sort of humanitarian response it would muster to help the trapped Yazidis in the Sinjar mountains, the media attempted to educate general publics about the Yazidis during the month of August 2014. The Yazidis, however, have a complicated history with the West, texts attributed to them, and the recent recording of their oral knowledge or qawls. According to the Encyclopaedia Iranica’s entry on the Yazidis,

Most Yazidi religious texts have been passed on exclusively by oral tradition, and many features characteristic of oral literature can be seen in them. It is now generally accepted that the manuscripts of the Yazidi Sacred Books, the Masḥafā Reš and Ketēbā Jelwa, published in 1911 and 1913, were ‘forgeries’ in the sense that they were written by non-Yazidis in response to Western travelers’ and scholars’ interest in the Yazidi religion,
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amid a general environment of trading in ancient manuscripts. ("Yazidis I. General")

Recently, however, members of the Yazidi community in Armenia and Germany appear to have begun to record and publish on Yazidi culture and religious traditions:

In 1979 two young Yazidi intellectuals published a number of the qawls, provoking considerable controversy within the community. (A few had been published in the Soviet Union the previous year, but were presented as part of a folklore anthology and largely ignored). By the beginning of the 21st century more had been published in Armenia and a research program in Germany was almost complete. With the assent of the community, this latter aimed to collect and transcribe the many unpublished qawls for use in academic research and the education of Yazidi children, especially in the diaspora. Yazidism is thus being transformed into a scriptural religion. ("Yazidis I. General")

While the Yazidis do not appear to have as large a textual diaspora as the Samaritans, there are two similarities. First, the Yazidis of northern Iraq are a minority in the midst of a dangerous conflict. Second, the Yazidis are trying to communicate their identity and culture to the world in order to safeguard their people on Mt. Sinjar. In the time-sensitive popular news articles listed in the footnotes, there is very little online cultural heritage material available on the Yazidis. Should there be? How might have it impacted Western responses to their situation? Is any of the work referenced above available for digital work? What kind of digital communication would Yazidis in northern Iraq want to advance so that they may communicate their unique cultural heritage to the world audience as quickly and effectively as possible? I can’t answer these questions for the Yazidis, and I shouldn’t answer these questions as a researcher for any people. What I recommend is situated engagement at the intersection of rhetoric and the digital humanities. Why? So that the Yazidis, if they wish, might have the kairotic opportunity to maximize the communication of their cultural heritage to the world, and that scholars working at the intersection of rhetorical studies and the digital humanities may support, learn from, and help to advance their rhetorical strategy and delivery. While the Samaritan example may highlight some potential similarities with the Yazidis, textual diaspora and engagement are not limited to cultural, ethnic, and religious minorities living in the West Bank or Iraq. Rather, engagement, reciprocity, and fieldwork are relevant to any group with cultural heritage looking
Engagement and reciprocity matter not just for digital humanities scholars’ involvement with the Samaritans but also Samaritans’ involvement with and beyond their local political circumstances. The Samaritans not only walk between the raindrops and two fires around them but also work to transcend them through their peace initiatives from Mount Gerizim. The Samaritan medal is another piece of the Samaritan textual diaspora; however, unlike other texts that might have arrived in diaspora via dubious means, the medals are Samaritan-authored texts given to those that advance cultural values the Samaritans wish to spread. In the Samaritan example, there’s a dialectic between what others have said about the Samaritans (the Parable of the Good Samaritan) and the Samaritans’ own reclamation of the “Good Samaritan” ethos not only to help members of the community conduct peace work but also to walk and thrive between the raindrops. Another factor is the manuscripts abroad, located in institutions whose locations and ethos may be capitalized on to advance the rhetorical goals of continuing to communicate Samaritan identity to their neighbors and the world. The relationship of re-
claiming and recirculating materials for specific rhetorical goals or objectives is key to textual diaspora. Digital technology turns the possibility of recirculation into a much more likely potential while also increasing the reach and scope of media, formats, and options for tailoring cultural heritage resources to specific audiences.

The technological range of options for leveraging textual diaspora has increased from forty or fifty years ago. The current digital moment provides more opportunities to consider how stakeholders may leverage their textual diaspora to do rhetorical work, such as how some Samaritans want to utilize Facebook to share images of Samaritan manuscripts. In the case of the Samaritans, there’s much more to learn as we see how their textual diaspora is digitized, delivered, and circulated over the next decade. When I first began to write this book in 2011, Michigan State University and Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion were the only two institutions working to digitize Samaritan manuscripts. Today in 2014, the University of Manchester and Cambridge University have digitized some of their Samaritan manuscripts. Additionally, within the Samaritan community some of the Sassoni manuscripts in Holon have been digitized as discussed in chapter 3.

The concept of textual diaspora along with the methods of engaged, reciprocal work with stakeholder communities offer a useful heuristic and model for research at the intersection of rhetorical studies and the digital humanities. Such a concept could prove strategically useful for the Yazidi people (if appropriate) or other cultural stakeholders. In the case of Benyamim Tsedaka’s 2003 visit to the Michigan State University Board of Trustees meeting, requesting the university do something more with its collection of Samaritan manuscripts was the beginning of such a long-term collaboration (Tsedaka). As the digital humanities matures as a field and concentration in the university, digital projects too will mature and rhetoric scholars will have greater opportunity to study and understand how projects are referenced, leveraged, and circulated by stakeholder communities. This is one possible future for rhetorical studies at the intersection of rhetorical studies and the digital humanities.

Scholars in rhetoric might conduct the following types of work over the lifespan of a project:

- **Researching** the relationship of digital resources to stakeholder communities (see Potts; Sun and Hart-Davidson; Graban; Graban, Ramsey-Tobienne, and Myers).8
- **Theorizing** with stakeholders the relationship of digital projects to their communities. Work in cultural rhetoric such as that by Malea Powell,9 Craig Howe, Ellen Cushman,10 and especially Angela Haas11 is essential for developing a deeper understanding of how rhetoric and cultural
heritage intersect in diverse indigenous community contexts. Work in community literacy (such as Grabill’s book *Writing Community Change*) is also important for understanding practices surrounding digital resources as knowledge work. The goal or outcome of such work would not only be the development of relationships with stakeholders but also the beginning of an iterative process of research and engagement that could include building (or what many digital humanists call “making”), delivering, and studying.¹²

- **Building** digital resources with community members and also working with stakeholders to assess how building digital resources can serve their best interest, and what kind of access permissions they want with their cultural heritage materials (Christen’s work).

- **Delivering** digital resources in rhetorically appropriate file formats (see Stolley’s work). Consider how stakeholders may leverage diasporic texts and strategize future delivery (see Rude; DeVoss and Porter; Ridolfo and DeVoss; Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel; Ridolfo).

- **Studying** the long-term use (or lack thereof) of digital projects, especially the long-term conversation surrounding projects: for example, how are projects discussed or referenced by cultural stakeholders and outside communities? How are they referenced and cited? This latter work has yet to be done en masse but will be of increasing importance over the next twenty or thirty years.

The promise of work in rhetorical studies that researches, theorizes, builds, delivers, and studies digital projects alongside engaged research with communities is a multitude of rich case examples and relationships to co-create with, to learn from, and to extend our disciplinary knowledge about rhetoric and the digital humanities. In the future of the Samaritan textual diaspora, rhetorical delivery, the digital humanities, cultural, scholarly, and institutional stakeholders have practical and theoretical roles to play in assisting the Samaritan people to leverage textual diaspora in digital environments. The combination of disciplines, institutions, and stakeholders foregrounded is not uncommon to large humanities and social sciences grants, but I argue that researching the question of what stakeholders want to do with their digital texts is largely a question of rhetorical delivery and circulation, one that’s not unique to this project but is not yet foregrounded in mainstream digital humanities conversations.

At the core of the question “what do stakeholders want from their digital texts” is an implicit call for engagement, reciprocity, and fieldwork in order to understand, contextualize, and actualize stakeholder concerns. This book is the byproduct of six years of engaged work to answer this core question as
it pertains to members of the Samaritan community. This book is not an end in itself or an absolute representation of what all Samaritans think and want from their texts abroad until the end of time. Rather, it is one highly situated way of understanding the core issues of the last six years in light of field conversations in rhetoric and the digital humanities. As I write the conclusion to this chapter, the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict (English Wikipedia title) has taken place and violence once again permeates the region. For the Samaritans, long-term safety and security is still a dream that must be supported through the community’s seven principles and through international cooperation and engaged work. For scholars and institutions abroad, there is still much to be done to actualize the future rhetorical potential of Samaritan manuscripts abroad and to help the Samaritan people continue to make the strongest case possible to the world for their unique identity, heritage, and inalienable right to a future free of travel restrictions and geographic separation. For scholars abroad working not only with the Samaritans, we must do so in a way that the spirit of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (which the Samaritans have reappropriated) suggests: when possible and appropriate, help those that request assistance, learn from those actions, and do better in the future. That is one vision of engaged rhetoric at the intersection of the digital humanities.