

[Samaritan Calendrical Treatise] *Ishban kashtah* (True Calculation)
In Samaritan and Arabic, manuscript on parchment
Holy Land, c. 1300-1325

35 pages on parchment and one page on paper, modern paper flyleaves, modern pagination upper outer corner in pencil (pp. 10, 30-31, 33, blank), apparently complete (collation i' [pastedown] ii⁸), no catchwords, (justification 65-90 x 70-82 mm.), unruled, written in black ink in Samaritan square and Arabic scripts, number of lines is variable, no headers, intricate calendrical concentric circle diagram on p. 1, extensive calendrical tables on pp. 5-18, a few light stains, some worn or chipped ink (see, e.g., p. 34), some parchment leaves have darkened, tiny wormhole in gutter at head of pp. 1-27, small paper repairs at lower edges of pp. 4, 36. Bound in modern brown buckram, paper ticket with manuscript name on spine, shelf mark lettered in gilt on spine. Dimensions 98 x 88 mm.

There are very few copies of this Samaritan treatise on the calendar from such an early period that have survived. In addition to its early date, noteworthy here are the extra Arabic calendrical instructions and the circular diagram incorporating extra information from the Arabic astronomical tradition.

PROVENANCE

1. Written in the Holy Land in the early fourteenth century, based on the evidence of the script and textual content.
2. Marginalia throughout showing use: p. 4, marginal note about a birth; p. 21, missing word is added in the margin; p. 28, Arabic characters are found at the bottom of the page; p. 31, the page was left blank but two Arabic words are found at the upper left corner **أدام الله** which means "God preserves."
3. Belonged to Murjan ibn Ibrahim al-Danfi, 1669 (p. 4)
4. Belonged to David Solomon Sassoon (1880-1942); nos. 330-331 in Sassoon's catalogue, *Ohel Dawid* (1932, vol. 1, p. 24).
5. Descendants of David Sassoon (1792-1864), who was born in Baghdad, but emigrated to India in 1832, have been premier collectors of items of historical importance to Jewish history for more than a century. His grandson, David Solomon Sassoon (1880-1942), moved to England in the early twentieth century, was a businessman, philanthropist and also an author and scholar. He was as well an avid collector, who assembled the most important private collection of Hebrew manuscripts ever known. Cecil Roth in 1941 described it as "one of the most magnificent collections of Hebrew manuscripts in private hands in the world to-day."

Over the following decades, this library would expand to comprise more than 1,270 Hebrew and Samaritan manuscripts and a wide range of printed volumes and

lithographs, including over forty incunabula, twenty-eight books printed on parchment, and rare titles, periodicals, and broadsides published in Baghdad, Bombay, Poona, Calcutta, and the Far East.

6. The library then came into the possession of Solomon David Sassoon, a rabbi and communal activist in his own right, who added modestly to the collection and published some of its manuscripts. He, his wife Alice (Aliza Beyla; d. 1998), and their family immigrated to Israel in 1970.

TEXT

pp. 1-2, Diagram composed of concentric circles that give the following information in Arabic: the four seasons; the zodiacal signs; the months; the lunar stations; the Letter Value (Abjad numerals); note in Arabic describing how to calculate the date of lunar eclipse;

pp. 3-4, Note in Arabic describing how to calculate the date of solar eclipse; p. 4, marginal note in Arabic documenting the birth of a baby boy on Monday 18 Dhul Qidah 1075 (corresponds to Monday 1 June 1665);

pp. 5- 18, Samaritan calendar;

The calendar is anchored for the most part to the vernal equinox for the start of year and the moon's conjunction for months. The tables give the dates according to the era of Jezdegerd, and after the entry into Canaan; they give also dates and hours.

pp. 19-28, Note in Arabic on how to calculate the days in February. This note, according to the copyist, was taken from a translated letter; chapter in Arabic on "Leap years," with instructions and tips on the date of Passover and Leap years.

p. 29, Note in Arabic on how to define the date of Passover based on the occurrence of the month of March (ʿĀḍār);

[pp. 30-31, blank];

p. 32, Two notes in Arabic: on the relation between the lunar eclipse and the type of the month in which it occurs (if it is a solar or lunar month); and a short prayer to thank God; [p. 33, blank];

pp. 34-36, An incomplete portion of a text in Arabic on how to calculate the number of hours of a day (day and night); note in Arabic on Zodiac signs, their alphanumeric values and how they match with the months.

A Samaritan calendrical treatise or *Isbban kasbtah* (literally "true calculation"); it contains several calculation tips and rules, written in Arabic script, while the majority of the calendrical tables are in Samaritan script. Like the Jewish calendar, the Samaritan calendar is lunisolar. Each month begins the day after the moon's conjunction (a day, as in the Hebrew reckoning, from sunset to sunset). The year begins with the first month after the vernal equinox. Extra (lunar) months are added seven times every nineteen years to make sure the Passover falls on the

(solar) spring equinox. The Samaritans believe that God revealed the calendar's calculations to Adam through the angels, who then passed them on to Enoch, Noah, Shem, Eber, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Phinehas, and the priestly line, which has continued to guard them ever since.

Lately, the Samaritans fixed the date of the vernal equinox (which marks the beginning of Spring) to March 25th of the Gregorian calendar and transferred the responsibility for the calculation to a computer algorithm – by this means the calculation is said to be accurate to one second in a million years. The current manuscript was copied and used before these changes were introduced which makes it one of the rare witnesses of the traditional “theoanthropic” approach to calendars.

There is no census of surviving copies of this text (there are numerous copies, for example, in the Firkovich/Firkowicz Collection at the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg, of unknown dates), but copies as early as this one are uncommon.

Dating back more than 2,500 years, the Samaritans are the longest-lived religious sect in Israelite/Jewish history; today, their traditions, beliefs, and practices are still maintained by a small community of approximately eight hundred souls. As they have for nearly their entire existence, many Samaritans currently live in the vicinity of the biblical city of Shechem (Nablus), near Mount Gerizim on the West Bank. The mountain is central to Samaritan worship and is the site of the group's annual Passover sacrifice.

LITERATURE

Baillet, Maurice. “Quelques manuscrits samaritains,” *Semitica* 26 (1976), pp. 143-166, at p. 154 n. 2.

Crown, Alan D. “Samaritan Minuscule Palaeography,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 63,2 (1981), pp. 330-368, at pp. 352-353.

Crown, Alan D. “Studies in Samaritan Scribal Practices and Manuscript History: IV. An Index of Scribes, Witnesses, Owners and Others Mentioned in Samaritan Manuscripts, with a Key to the Principal Families Therein,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 68,2 (1986), pp. 317-372, at pp. 330-331 (no. 45), 360 (no. 439).

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Powels, Sylvia. *Der Kalender der Samaritaner anhand des Kitāb ḥisāb as-sinīn und anderer Handschriften*, Berlin, New York, 1977, pp. 106-107.

Powels, Sylvia. “Relations between Samaritan and Arabic Astronomical Calculations,” *Abr-Nahrain* 25 (1987), pp. 92-142, at pp. 92, 96.

Powels, Sylvia, “The Samaritan Calendar and the Roots of Samaritan Chronology,” in Alan D. Crown, ed., *The Samaritans*, Tübingen, 1989), pp. 691-742, at pp. 725-726.

Rustow, Marina, Sharon Liberman Mintz, and Elka Deitsch. *Scripture and Schism: Samaritan and Karaite Treasures from the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary*, New York, 2000, pp. 54-55.

Sassoon, David Solomon. *Obel Dawid: Descriptive Catalogue of the Hebrew and Samaritan Manuscripts in the Sassoon Library, London*, Oxford and London, 1932, vol. 2, p. 601 (no. 722).

ONLINE RESOURCES

The Samaritans; the Israelite Samaritans in Israel

<https://www.the-samaritans.net/samaritan-calendar/>

"The Sassoons in Baghdad and India," Sotheby's

<https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/the-sassoons-in-baghdad-india>

"David Solomon Sassoon," Sotheby's

<https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/david-solomon-sassoon>

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