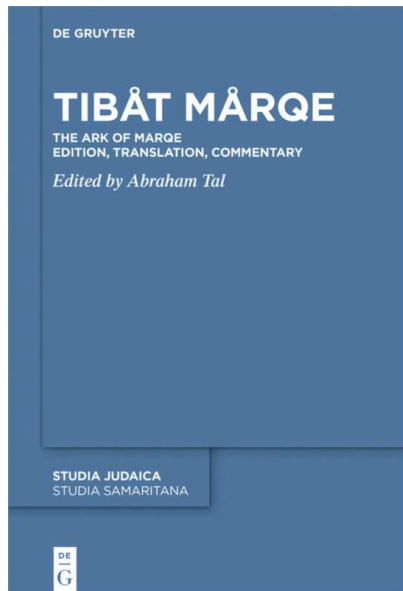


RBL 12/2020



Abraham Tal, ed.

Tibât Mârqe: The Ark of Marqe; Edition, Translation, Commentary

Studia Samaritana 9

Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019. Pp. ix + 639. Hardcover.
\$137.99. ISBN 9783110442328.

Steven Fine
Yeshiva University

Samaritan studies has always been a niche discipline. For a century and a half, individual scholars have “found” the Samaritans and fallen in love with their literature and culture—and with the Samaritan community itself. Today the significance of Samaritan studies is increasingly recognized. This is thanks to a small but dedicated international group of scholars and their project of establishing Samaritan studies as an interdisciplinary field of study. This community includes historians, philologists, biblical scholars, talmudists, classicists, Islamicists, folklorists, cultural anthropologists, and archaeologists. These scholars revived the study of Samaritanism during the second half of the twentieth century, creating the infrastructure for future growth. They published text editions, final reports of excavations, translations, language studies, and lexicons, as well as synthetic analysis of primary sources. They have studiously published the results of their labors in ways accessible to scholars and to educated general readers. They even created *A Companion To Samaritan Studies*, edited by Reinhard Pummer, Abraham Tal, and Alan D. Crown (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), to help the novice through the complex thicket that has naturally developed around Samaritan studies, a field that stretches from biblical Israel to the present and multiple languages.

Among the leaders of this movement were Ze’ev Ben-Hayyim (1907–2013) and the community of Israeli language scholars that he in large part created over his long life. These linguists have blessed us with excellent critical editions and linguistic studies of many of the most important Samaritan documents in Hebrew and Aramaic, including the Torah and its translations, liturgical texts, the

chronicle literature and the all important Samaritan midrash, known as Tebat Marqe, literally the “Book Chest of Marqe.”

In 1988 Ben-Hayyim produced a critical edition of Marqe based upon the best manuscripts available at the time with a thorough Hebrew translation, beautifully produced by the Israel Academy of Arts and Sciences. Ben-Hayyim’s technical edition is not an easy read and had small impact within the Hebrew reading community and none in popular culture. In the meantime, Benyamim Tsedaka, a leader of the Samaritan community, created a delightful series of popular retelling of Marqe in modern Hebrew, mainly for the benefit of the Israeli Samaritan community in Holon (*Marqe le-Khol Kore: Iyunim be-“Tevat Marqe”; Asupat Midrashim Shomroniyim al Ha-Torah* [Holon: A.B. Institute for Samaritan Studies, 2008]).

Happily, Abraham Tal, Ben-Hayyim’s student, took upon himself to create a new edition of Marqe, based upon even better manuscripts, with an accurate, fluid, and enjoyable translation into English. A short linguistic commentary that accompanies the entire text is essential for the scholar, and the translation serves as a literary commentary in and of itself. Tal describes his work as a “supplement” to Ben Hayyim’s edition (vii). It is actually much more.

Tibat Marqe (also known as Memar Marqe) is a wellspring of Samaritan theology, lore, exquisite poetry, and prose. It is of cardinal importance to the Samaritans, who today number some 850 members, split between their holy mountain, Mount Gerizim, (above Nablus) and the Tel Aviv suburb of Holon. A collection of six “midrashic compositions” ranging from late antiquity to the medieval period, this anthology is ascribed to Marqe, a fourth-century liturgical poet who thrived during the short-lived “Samaritan renaissance” under the leader Baba Rabba. Samaritans consider Marqe to be “the greatest writer of all time” (2), and for good reason. Each of the books has its own character. Its earliest texts, written in Aramaic that is similar to Jewish and Christian Palestinian Aramaic, date to the fourth century or so. Later texts are written in a late Aramaic with Arabic influences (ca. tenth–eleventh centuries) and, finally, Hebrew fused with Aramaic (ca. fourteenth century).

The first and earliest section, written in late antique Palestinian Aramaic, is “The Book of Wonders.” This is a line-by-line exposition of the deliverance from Egypt. This delightful retelling weaves verses and oral lore, poetry and prose to tell a story that will be recognizable at points to readers of Jewish midrash, while also containing traditions unknown elsewhere.

The second and third books are composed in later mixed literary dialect, though the second book, “By the Depths of the Spring of Eden,” preserves sections in the same Aramaic as book 1. This second section deals mainly with the Song of the Sea (Exod 15). The third section, “Moses and the Leviticus Priests Said,” explores the “curses” of Deut 27:9–27; the fourth, “Treatise about the Great Song,” is a collection of homilies “considered by the Samaritans to be a compendium of the whole

Torah.” “Moses Died There,” the fifth book, describes the events of Moses’s death (Deut 34:5), and the sixth is “A Treatise Composed of the Twenty Two Letters.” This section contains a discourse on creation and a dialogue between Moses and the letters of the alphabet that spells out the role of the Samaritan alphabet in Israelite history (3–4).

Tal places *Tibat Marqe* within the category of “rewritten Bible,” which also includes such books as the *Genesis Apocryphon*, Josephus’s *Antiquities*, and *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*. *Tibat Marqe* is loosely comparable with the Jewish anthology known as *Midrash Rabbah*, whose components were edited roughly along the same chronological span. This volume is thoroughly indexed, and few errors have crept into the English.

The value of this edition became immediately clear to me last semester when I taught a graduate seminar on Jews and Samaritans in late antiquity. My students are reasonably proficient in Hebrew, and all know some Talmudic Aramaic. Ben-Ze’ev’s edition, not terribly user-friendly, is beyond their skill and comfort level. Literally weeks before the start of the semester, my copy of Tal’s well-produced volume arrived, and the e-book was procured by our library. The students worked through most of the most ancient section of this anthology, “The Book of Wonders” and selections of the later sections. I am happy to report that the students loved *Marqe* and especially appreciated the opportunity to read all of “The Book of Wonders” as a complete statement.

Tal’s contribution promises to finally bring *Marqe* into the mainstream of scholarship related to late antiquity and the “age of transition” between New Rome and Islam, where it belongs. Abraham Tal’s marvelous edition makes it possible for the next phase of *Marqe* scholarship to begin.