Three different varieties of the Hebrew language are in use among present days Samaritans: Modern Israeli Hebrew, Samaritan Neo-Hebrew, and Samaritan Hebrew. While Samaritan Neo-Hebrew is the language used mainly for liturgical compositions after the revival of Hebrew in the 12th century CE, Samaritan Hebrew (SH) is the Hebrew language employed in the reading of the Torah as transmitted in the Samaritan community. The present contribution will focus on the latter only.

The linguistic evaluation of SH has undergone dramatic changes over the last 50 years, especially due to the work of Zeev Ben-Hayyim. While Rudolf Macuch in his comprehensive “Grammatik des samaritanischen Hebräisch” (1969) tried to explain most of the peculiarities of SH as the result of influence from the Arabic vernacular adopted by the Samaritans around the 11th century CE, Ben-Hayyim successfully demonstrated
that the language of the Samaritan reading of the Torah preserves the characteristics of Hebrew as spoken in the late Second Temple period:

“[…] [T]he characteristics of S[amaritan] H[ebrew] developed in the wake of the linguistic trends that became prominent in the period of the Second temple […] S[amaritan] H[ebrew] preserves one of the language types spoken amongst the last generations of Hebrew speakers before Hebrew was displaced by Aramaic.”4

It seems to me, nevertheless, that the exact place of SH within this rather broad linguistic context has not yet been sufficiently described, neither in terms of language history nor in terms of Hebrew dialectology. Towards this aim, I shall deal with the following sub-problems:

1. Samaritan Hebrew and the history of the Hebrew language,
2. SH as a Hebrew dialect,
3. The linguistic relation between the oral and the written tradition of SH,
4. SH and the phonetics of late Second Temple Hebrew.

1. SAMARITAN HEBREW AND THE HISTORY OF THE HEBREW LANGUAGE

As has been convincingly demonstrated by Ben-Hayyim and others, SH shares many linguistic features with the Hebrew language attested in the scrolls from Qumran, and with Mishnaic Hebrew. As to the question of whether the particular features of SH should be described in terms of Hebrew language history or rather in terms of Hebrew dialectology, Ben-Hayyim’s conclusion is as follows:

“Given that the spiritual center of the Samaritans was throughout the generations in the hill country of Ephraim, […] we are tempted to attribute the particular features of the language of the S[amaritan] P[entateuch] to differences of dialect between the Hebrew in use in Ephraim and that current in Judah in general and [in] the Jerusalem area in particular. However, sustained and careful attention to the differences in orthography and word formation reveals that many of the features of SH are the same as those evident in non-Biblical Hebrew literature among the Jews, such as rabbinic literature. Furthermore, now that we have access to a number of […] works […] preserved among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and find their linguistic features similar to SH, it is entirely certain that we

4 Ben-Hayyim, A grammar, 340.