

A short review of Samaritan binding practices

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Many questions were raised during the conservation and re-binding of CBL Heb 752, a large 14th century Samaritan Pentateuch manuscript treated as part of the project to conserve the Hebrew manuscript collection at the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Ireland in 2016.

As the conservation work began on this Pentateuch manuscript, it quickly became apparent that the current scholarly understanding of medieval Samaritan manuscript and binding production consisted only of a few texts and that even less published information was available when researching historical binding structures.

Although the Samaritans were a prolific and dedicated community of transcribers of early biblical texts (namely the Pentateuch), only a small amount of manuscript material has survived, and the original binding evidence this material preserves is especially sparse. One reason for this may be that on entering Western collections from the 16th Century onward, a large number of those bindings were lost, with the new owner preferring to replace what must have been considered old and uninteresting structures with new Library bindings. In spite of this, the existing literature and the small but substantial amount of binding evidence found during the conservation of the Chester Beatty manuscript gives a valuable starting point in understanding Samaritan book production.

The history of Samaritan bindings has never been firmly established, and appears to have been very changeable because of the continuous persecutions the Samaritan community was under. The constant changes these manuscripts and their bindings went through during their lifetimes makes studying their original bindings and looking for precious evidence very difficult. Scholars affirm that no Samaritan binding structures earlier than the 12th century have survived intact, so it is difficult to ascertain a binding style unique to the Samaritans prior to that date. However, the corpus of manuscripts from the 12th century onward is more substantial and allows for better interpretations.

This research is primarily based on a close examination of historical binding structures and in particular the evidence preserved in two large Chester Beatty Samaritan manuscripts, CBL Heb 751 and CBL Heb 752. Information on historical Samaritan binding structures, binding and scribal practices will also be discussed, referencing contemporary and historical literary sources.

I will describe both the conservation treatment and the ethical considerations adopted for rebinding the Chester Beatty manuscript Heb 752, as well as how the research on historical bindings and scribal practices carried out at the same time has informed decision making.

The story of Samaritan manuscript and binding traditions is a fascinating one which deserves to be recorded in order to better understand the place of the Samaritan manuscript tradition in the history of bookbinding in the Near East and bookbinding history in general. In sharing this paper, I hope to draw attention to an understudied area of bookbinding history.