

# Passover in the Land of Egypt?

‘Right’ Worship of YHWH in Ancient Jewish Diasporas

*By Postdoctoral Researchers Kacper Ziemia and Alexiana Fry*



The Hebrew Bible is not our only source to the history of Judaism before Alexander the Great. Documents from a Judean community in Egypt offer fascinating glimpses into religion and everyday life throughout the 5th century BCE. In this unique material, we encounter experiences of migration and diaspora 2,500 years ago and get a much more dynamic picture of what was becoming Judaism.

## **Rituals and Religiosity**

For those that use the biblical corpus as a way to observe, practice, and even appropriate rituals for not only understanding the past, but also for current religious practices, the importance of how these are depicted is paramount. And yet, too often missed are how divergences and variations of these practices may have been carried out among “other” communities that worshiped the same god(s).

While we could discuss how these different flavors of religiosity can be seen in the Hebrew Bible, there are a few, less discussed, communities outside of the region of Israel and Judah that also are shown to be paying homage to YHWH. In the instance of a few Judeans and Arameans living in southern Egypt during the 5th century BCE, the deity is instead spelled Yaho.

Our research group entitled, “Divergent Views of Diaspora in Ancient Judaism,” explores the similarities and differences of many aspects of life lived for those who would identify their ancestral origins in the Land of Israel, and one of these categorizations includes religion.

Through a brief introduction of this diaspora group, and some conjectures involving a handful of letters kept in its archive, we will discuss the potentiality of a shared tradition of passover among all with shared memory of the land of Ancient Israel that also worshiped (a) YHWH. This matters to not only our research group as a special interest, but also to those who desire to see a more full picture of what it may have looked like to create normative and dogmatic behaviors as part of establishing a large-group identity.

## **Introducing Elephantine**

On an island in the Nile, a military garrison made up of Judeans and their families lived and left papyri and ostraca spanning between the time period of 495 to 399 BCE in Aramaic. They lived amongst the native Egyptians, those in power at the time being the Persians, but also included other settlers and migrants

identified as Caspians, Ionians, Carians, Babylonians, and more.

What makes this group of even more interest to our study is their own identification markers with Judah, which included theophoric names (names that include their deity) but also, the temple to their god, Yaho, found in the midst of the island of Elephantine. Moreover, we also know that Judeans in Elephantine sent a petition to the governor and elites of the province of Yehud (Judah) to ask for assistance after the temple of Yaho was destroyed (*TAD* A4.7), meaning that they could be acknowledging a connection between their religiosity and of those in the “homeland.” This archeological find hand-in-hand with the textual archives help to give, while incomplete, a partial vision of how this community may have lived.

### **Uncertain Origins**

While there are many who call themselves Judean in this community, *when* they arrived in this city and *why* is entirely up for debate. Many scholars would prefer connecting the biblical text to the Elephantine community, by citing Jeremiah 42-46, identifying them as a group of Judeans fleeing conflict that also may have even forced Jeremiah himself to come with them to Egypt.

The community at Elephantine upon facing conflict, that being the destruction of their temple of Yaho by the hands of both Persian and Egyptian perpetrators, note that this temple already existed in 526 BCE when Persians conquered Egypt (A4.8:12). Whether this is factual or used for rhetorical purposes is up for debate. Many note that this community does not

seem to have any awareness of authoritative texts, such as portions of scripture, making others then date their arrival to Egypt at a much earlier time in history.

Given that this is a military garrison that serves the Persian hegemonic powers that be, making it a potential imperial diaspora, they may have also been sent by Persia themselves from Judah directly, even as part of *corvée* (unpaid, forced) labor services. And yet still, some could have migrated to Egypt because they wanted to, allowing for current studies on migration to see that the more “normative” forms of movement are quite simply less discussed as they do not come off as “problematic,” or “irregular.”

All said, there are many thoughts on how this community came to be, and even with the archives and archaeological advances we have, we are still unsure. Given that the letters are dated, we can at least assume that this Judean diaspora had two to three generations born and raised here in Elephantine. The rest is up to constant questions amongst our fervent imaginations.

### **Observing Passover?**

Although this community called themselves Judean, connections of similar worship to those residing in Judah during this time period are under negotiation by both this group at Elephantine and those from the “homeland.” We have quite a few letters that demonstrate that the worship of Yaho in Egypt involved what seems to be interplay of both Egyptian traditions with the probability of polytheism with a triad worship of gods (C3.15), as well as Persian traditions in the perplexing nature of combining elements of

YHWH and Ahuramazda, the proclaimed god of heaven.

While there are many ways we can demonstrate competing narratives from different groups pertaining to what would have been a part of “proper” worship of this same god, one letter we would like to highlight is one that may be mentioning Passover, which could be the creation of a unifying practice across diasporic difference.

This letter (A4.1) dated in 419 BCE comes from a man named Hananiah, sent to Jedaniah and others of the Judean garrison at Elephantine, with instructions for a certain celebration to be held amongst them. This information was said to have been issued straight from King Darius II (405-403 BCE) then sent to the satrap Arsamenes—the highest Persian official in the administrative unit of Egypt.

The letter details *when* this celebration would occur, as well as other details outlining *what* this celebration might entail regarding fasting and feasting. Some similarities with the celebration outlined here and in biblical narratives (Exod 12:1-28; Deut 16:1-8) have led many to call what is occurring “Passover,” and/or the “Feast of Unleavened Bread.” From just this brief and lacunary letter, however, there are many questions that arise for us who study these documents in detail.

### Crucial Questions

One of the questions that comes to mind involves *why* this letter had to be sent. If one takes at face value the biblical texts, wouldn’t those who worship YHWH already be participating in such events? One could instead read this letter and see that the festivals that are being given concrete dates and even specific modes of

carrying out such festivities as the very text(s) that portrays their origin stories.

If what we’re looking at is a text that depicts King Darius II of Persia as one who is setting the timing of this/these events, we also have a more complicated, but interesting, origin story over and against what is seen as “traditional” as depicted in the biblical text for observing practices of YHWH. At a time when these biblical narratives were in the process of being canonized, we must remind all that there was no specific agreed upon way to celebrate these rituals; from what we are looking at, it seems that the imperial policies at this time were, in effect, shaping what would become the standard.

We know that there were also diaspora communities located near these centers of power, and influence of Persian cultural ideals were significant on Judaism and Judeans alike. From a diasporic perspective, we also know many biblical texts portray Egypt through the use of negative rhetoric (Jeremiah and Ezekiel), and many biblical texts also view living outside of the homeland as something less than desirable. However, we also have biblical texts that portray diasporic Judaism as something that can flourish. This allows for the speculation that Babylonian and Persian diasporas may have helped to create the very need for a letter like this sent to the many communities within and out of Judah/Yehud. This also allows for an appreciation for multiple perspectives, resisting harmonization, even as the letter itself creates a semblance of singularity or commonality.

While it is potentially deeply ironic for Passover to be celebrated by diasporic Judeans living in Egypt, it is also si-

multaneously powerful. The opportunity to hold nuance and breaking binary approaches to the study of religion and even theology is astonishing in light of the texts found at Elephantine.

### **Why Does This Matter?**

For many decades the Biblical vision of Judean history was uncontested as the only legitimate depiction, regarded as properly linear both chronologically and theologically. For that reason scholars downplayed the significance of the documents originating in the diaspora communities regarding them as a dead-end lane in the history of Judaism. But the reality was much more complex and multidimensional, much like the processes of migration and diaspora themselves.

In allowing these other sources to come into play, we have a much more dynamic picture of what was becoming Judaism. Instead of seeing one specific set of texts as the only source by which to reconstruct the developments of what would become Judaism, we add in the perspectives from different diasporic communities, as seen here from Elephantine, and in other sources from Babylonia (Al-Yahudu and Murašû texts). Together, these texts display room for many different expressions of Yah-wism(s). The experience of diaspora shows us clearly the diversity of practice and phenomena that we now call Judaism, and perhaps, allow us to see the diversity within all religions.

As different beliefs, rituals, behaviors begin to merge into a more “standard” set of religiosity, diasporic questions as referenced above encourage us to ask the biblical corpus more difficult questions

of how much these texts actually depict the majority’s view, and/or *when* as well as *why* did these views become authoritative and therefore exclusive. Perhaps views like Jeremiah’s and Ezekiel’s demonstrate that there was already a bias against the kind of worship of Yaho in Egypt, and show clear tensions between different Judean communities across the Ancient Near East.

Our project hopes to map and chart these multiple layers of seemingly contested approaches within each of these diverse communities, all of whom are at least claiming to be worshipping the same god, as well as sharing a cultural memory or ancestry as rooted in the Iron Age Southern Levantine states of Israel and Judah. As we continue to explore and parse these extant texts from places regarded as less important to research, we are often confronted with more nuance than clarity, and hope that an acceptance of this posture will become more “normative” amongst fellow scholars in biblical studies.

The project “Divergent Views of Diaspora in Ancient Judaism” is supported by the Independent Research Fund Denmark and headed by Associate Professor Frederik Poulsen.

### **More...**

If you want to read more of these letters and ostraca, request *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt* by Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni. See also for more on this community, *Identity in Persian Egypt: The Fate of the Yehudite Community of Elephantine* by Bob Becking via the Royal Danish Library.