

Celebrating Pesach in the Land of the Pharaohs

Dr. Jill Katz

Lecturer in Archaeology and Anthropology, Yeshiva University

The story of Pesach and the Land of Egypt are inextricably linked. In our recounting, Egypt is always the place we escaped from. We do not really concern ourselves with what happened to Egypt subsequent to our leaving it. Of course, King Shlomo did marry an Egyptian princess and subsequent Israelite and Judahite kings engaged diplomatically with Egyptian leaders. But overall, from the time of the Exodus (*yetziat Mitzraim*) to near the end of First Temple times, the people of Judah and Israel seemed to have had little interest in returning to the land of their enslavement.

However, this changed towards the end of the First Temple period, probably as a result of warming relations brought on by the common threat of the Assyrian Empire. When Egyptian Pharaoh Psamtik (26th Dynasty; 664-610 BCE), needed extra troops to protect Egypt's southern border from the Nubians, it is quite possible that the king of Judah, Menashe (687-642 BCE), responded favorably.

Whatever the origins, we know from written records that by the time the Persians reached Egypt under the leadership of Cyrus' son and successor Cambyses (525 BCE), a Jewish colony with its own temple was already flourishing in southern Egypt, at a place called Elephantine. Here, Jewish mercenaries were part of a large, Aramaic-speaking community. Within this multi-ethnic context the Jews succeeded in maintaining their distinct religious identity, bolstered by on-going relations with the Jewish communities of Jerusalem and Samaria. It is this community at Elephantine, their temple, and how they celebrated Passover that will be the subject of this brief essay.

Elephantine

Elephantine is an island in the midst of the Nile River, to the west of modern-day Aswan. In antiquity, the island marked the southern border of Egypt, as the Nubian Desert that stretched to the south was generally considered inhospitable for settlement while the Nile itself became

difficult for navigation. In addition to guarding the border, Elephantine played a significant role in the movement of exotic items from sub-Saharan Africa into Egypt proper.

The name “Elephantine” derives from the Greek word for elephant and is a translation of the Egyptian name for the city, *Yeb*. Two explanations have been proposed for this nomenclature. The first is that it reflects the pivotal role the town played as a market place for elephant ivory. The second suggests that the name comes from the smooth black rocks surrounding the island that from a distance appear to be bathing elephants.

The Jewish military colony that was first welcomed by the Egyptians and then retained by the Persians is well-known from papyri that were discovered over a century ago. The documents are primarily written in Aramaic and reflect a wide-range of communal matters such as politics, economics, social and legal issues, and religious concerns. Many are judicial and family documents that list property and marriage contracts. Quite a few of these property documents mention the colony’s temple in passing, so much so that the actual domiciles adjoining the temple precinct can be fairly well established.

The documents that most concern us here are known collectively as the Jedaniah Archive.¹ This corpus consists of 9 letters and 1 memorandum. The letters are either written by Jedaniah or are addressed to him, in his capacity as communal leader during the last quarter of the 5th century BCE. Many of the letters attest to escalating tensions between the Jewish community and the Egyptian priests of the nearby temple of Khnum. The reasons for these conflicts are not mentioned in the texts but are most likely related to religious differences.

A Passover Letter

The earliest letter in the archive makes it clear that not only were the Jews observing Pesach in Egypt but also that their observance accorded with established Jewish practice in *Eretz Yisrael*. This missive, known as the Passover Letter, is as follows:²

To my brothers Jedaniah and his colleagues the Jewish Troop, [from] your brother Hananiah.

The welfare of my brothers may the gods seek after at all times.

And now, this year, year 5 of Darius the king, from the king it has been sent to Arsames.

... Now, you, thus count fourteen days of Nisan and on the 14th at twilight the Passover make and from day 15 until day 21 of Nisan the Festival of Unleavened Bread observe. Seven days unleavened bread eat.

Now, be pure and take heed. Work do not do on day 15 and on day 21 of Nisan. Any fermented drink do not drink. And anything of leaven do not eat and do not let it be seen in your houses from day 14 of Nisan at sunset until day 21 of Nisan at sunset. And any leaven which you have in your houses bring into your chambers and seal (them) up during these days.

To my brothers Jedaniah and his colleagues the Jewish Troop, [from] your brother Hananiah.

We are uncertain whether or not this letter is a response back to an original petition from the garrison. In any case, Hananiah—about whom we know nothing else—succeeded in delivering

¹ Bezalel Porten, “Aramaic Letters: The Jedaniah Archive from Elephantine” in *The Context of Scripture*, Vol. III, edited by W.H. Hallo and K.L. Younger (Leiden and Boston, 2003), 116-132.

² *Ibid*, 117.

the proper protocol for observing Passover, approved not only by the authorities in Jerusalem but also by the Persian court. The Persian king at the time is Darius II (424-404 BCE) and Arsames is the satrap in Egypt. Thus the letter is dated to 419 BCE.

The letter itself follows a conventional structure, with an internal address, salutation, series of instructions, and external address. The plural use of gods in the salutation does not reflect polytheistic practice but is rather just common parlance. An analogy can be found in our names for the days of the week. When we schedule an appointment for “Thursday,” we are simply using convention and not actually attesting to the existence of the ancient Norse deity Thor.

More interesting are the instructions. The directives to observe Passover beginning on the eve of the 14th, to not work on the first and last days, and to eat unleavened bread seem quite basic. Were the Jewish soldiers so ignorant that they needed to be told the most rudimentary aspects of the holiday? Or perhaps the message was actually meant for the local Egyptians—serving as proof of the legality (*i.e.*, with Persian approval) of the holiday and its observances. A second teaching, to refrain from fermented drink, has given the letter a second moniker, the “No Beer” letter. This instruction is one of the oldest extant examples of Oral Law. A third instruction, to store one’s *chametz* in a sealed chamber without selling it, was evidently acceptable to them but prohibited by rabbinic tradition. (cf. *Pesachim* 5b, 28b).

A Temple

A number of the texts in the Jedaniah archive discuss the colony’s Jewish temple. A full range of rituals including food offerings, incense offerings, and animal sacrifices took place free from any explicit censure from Jerusalem. Tolerance for this temple probably derived from at least two sources: first, it was so far away and was serving a community that could not possibly travel regularly to Jerusalem; and, second, the temple at Elephantine probably predates the completion of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 515 BCE.

This acceptance of the temple by the authorities in Jerusalem contrasts with the increasingly hostile reception the temple and its activities were eliciting among the local Egyptian community. The Egyptian priests of a nearby temple of Khnum were particularly strident. The archives record rising tensions leading to the actual destruction of the temple by the Egyptians in 410 BCE. The Jewish community appealed to the Persian authorities via the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem, requesting permission to rebuild. After several rounds of negotiation, it was agreed a few years later that the temple could be re-built on condition that no more animal sacrifices would take place.

This condition provides insight into the likely cause of the Egyptian antipathy towards the temple. The Egyptian priests were dedicated to the worship of Khnum, a ram-headed deity with particular ties to this settlement because he was credited with the annual inundation of the Nile from there northward. The sacred area of Khnum contained a “ram cemetery,” with individual burials for rams that were no doubt greatly cherished. The priests of Khnum therefore had reason to resent the Jewish animal sacrifices, especially the sacrifice of sheep at Pesach.

The exact location of this temple, described in the texts, remained elusive to archaeologists for nearly a century. Then in 1997, a German team working in the “Aramean Quarter” discovered

parts of the floor and walls of the temple and the surrounding courtyard.³ The full dimensions will never be known as the western end of the temple precinct has eroded away. Nevertheless, a sense of the overall structure has emerged (fig. 1). The temple building itself is 6 m wide and consists of two chambers separated by a dividing wall. The courtyard is 23 m wide. Due to the erosion, the exact lengths of the temple and its courtyard cannot be determined. However, the layout of the structure makes clear that this temple does not present a parallel to the *Beit HaMikdash* in Jerusalem, where the fundamental layout is tri-partite (*ulam, heichal, dvir*). Rather, the plan at Elephantine is reminiscent more of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle).

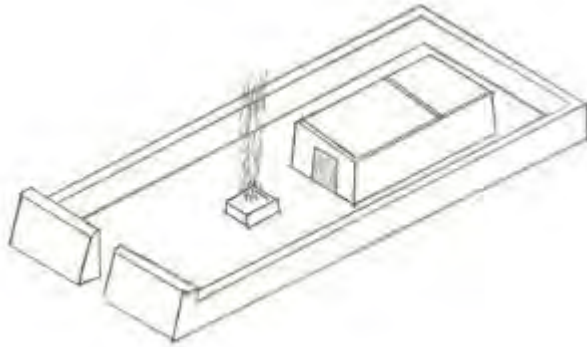


Fig. 1. Jewish temple complex at Elephantine⁴

This affinity in design with the *Mishkan* rather than the *Beit HaMikdash* has led some scholars to suggest that the original Jewish population that settled in Elephantine had their roots in the northern kingdom of Israel. Perhaps this elucidates Menashe's willingness to send troops to Egypt in the first place; he may have considered the Israelites (who had settled in Judah following the Assyrian conquest) more expendable. In any event, by the end of the 5th century BCE, the Jewish community in Elephantine considered itself part of the larger Jewish community, looking to *Eretz Yisrael* for guidance while maintaining their local traditions.

Conclusion

Even though the Jewish garrison did not last much longer—the Jews appeared to have left soon after the Egyptians wrested political control from the Persians in 400 BCE—this community at Elephantine enhances and enlivens the wonderful narrative that is Jewish history. Of all places, who would imagine that one of the first *galut* communities would be in Egypt, and that the Jews would be protecting the border from invasion! Their letters attest to the development of *halacha* and Oral Law, and how Jews were anxious to observe their rituals properly. The garrison modeled unity by transcending old political differences between Israelites and Judahites. In the face of religious opposition, they were also practical, finding a suitable compromise with their Egyptian neighbors. Yet, when the political winds changed and Egyptian intolerance was unleashed once again, the Jews of Elephantine learned from past experience and left quickly on their own. This time, they had a refuge waiting for them in *Eretz Yisrael*.

³ Stephen G. Rosenberg, *The Jewish Temple at Elephantine*, *Near Eastern Archaeology* 67 (2004), 4-13.

⁴ Adapted from *ibid*, 4.