

CHAPTER XXI

A JEWISH COLONY IN EGYPT DURING THE TIME OF NEHEMIAH

PAPYRI WITNESS TO THE EXISTENCE OF A COLONY AT ELEPHANTINE, TRANSLATION OF A PETITION RELATING TO THEIR TEMPLE. REPLY OF PERSIAN GOVERNOR. HISTORICAL BEARINGS OF THESE DOCUMENTS. HANANIAH'S PASSOVER LETTER. LETTER SHOWING THAT THE JEWS OF EGYPT WERE UNPOPULAR.

NUMEROUS papyri found since 1895 at Elephantine, an island at the First Cataract of the Nile, reveal the existence of a Jewish community there. The documents are dated from the year 494 B.C. to the year 400 B.C. They show that this Jewish community had at Elephantine a temple to Jehova, that they were soldiers, and that some of them were engaged in trade. One document declares that when Cambyses conquered Egypt (525 B.C.) he then found the temple of Jehova in existence there, and that it had been built under native Egyptian kings. How came such a community of Jews to be established there? It is thought that there was a garrison placed there by Psammetik II, King of Egypt, 593-588 B.C. This Psammetik endeavored to conquer Nubia, and according to a confused statement in Josephus (*Contra Apion*, 1, 26, 27) Rhampses (perhaps a corruption of Psammetik), employed some Jews in an expedition to that country. However, these Jews came to dwell at this point, and whensoever the settlement was made, the documents are most interesting, and open to us a hitherto wholly unknown vista in the history of the Jews.

1. Translation of a Petition Relating to Their Temple.

Unto our lord, Bagohi, governor of Judah, thy servants Jedoniah and his associates, the priests who are in Yeb, the fortress, health! May our Lord, the God of Heaven, abundantly grant unto thee at all times, and for favors may he

Sayce and Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri Discovered at Assuan*, London 1906
Kautzsch, *Apokryphen and Pseudepigraphen*
Sachau, *Aramaische Papyrus and Ostraka aus Elephantine*, Leipzig, 1911
A. Cowley, *Jewish Documents of the Time of Ezra*, 1919

appoint thee before Darius, the king, and the princes of the palace more than at present a thousand times, and long life may he grant to thee, and joy and strength, at all times! Now they servant, Jedonaih, and his associates thus speak:: In the month Tammuz, year 14 of Darius, the king, when Arsames departed and went unto the king, the priests of the god Khnub, who were in Yeb, the fortress, made an agreement with Waidrang who was acting governor here! it was as follows: The temple of Yahu (Jehova), the God, which is in Yeb, the fortress they would remove from there. Afterward this Waidrang wickedly sent a letter unto Nephayan, his son, who was commander of the army at Syene, the fortress, saying: "The temple which is in Yeb, the fortress they shall destroy." Afterward Nephanyan, mustering Egyptians with the other forces, came to the fortress Yeb with their quivers (?); they entered into this temple, they destroyed it to the ground, and the pillars of stone which were there they brake. Also it came to pass (that) five

gates of stone, which were there they brake. Also it came to pass (that) five gates of stone, constructed of cut stone, which were in this temple, they destroyed, and their swinging doors and the bronze hinges of these doors. And the roof which was of cedar wood, all of it, together with the rest of the furnishings and the other things which were there, the whole they burned with fire. And the vessels of gold and silver and the things were there in this temple, the whole was taken, and they made it their own. In this temple, the whole was taken, and they made it their own.

Now from the days of the kings of Egypt, our fathers built this temple in Yeb, the fortress, and when Cambyses came to Egypt this temple was found built, and the temples of the gods of Egypt were overthrown, but not a thing in this temple was harmed. And after they (i.e. Waidrang and the priests of Khnub) had done this, we and our wives and sons were clothed in sackcloth and were fasting and praying to Yahu, God of heaven, that he would show us this Waidrang, the cur, with the anklets torn from his feet, that all the goods which he possesses might perish, and all the men who desired the pollution of this temple—all might be killed, and we might see (our desire) upon them. Also formerly, at the time this shameful deed was done to us we sent a letter to our lord, and unto Jehohanan, the high priest, and his associates, the priests who are in Jerusalem, and unto Ostan, the brother of Anani and the elders of Judah, but a letter they have not sent unto us. Also from the month Tammuz of the 14th year of Darius the king even unto this day we have worn sackcloth and fasted, our wives have been made like widows, we have not anointed ourselves with oil, wine we have not drunk; also from the 17th year of Darius the king a meal-offering and incense and a burnt-offering they have not offered in this temple. Now thy servants Jedoniah and his associates and the Jews, all who are citizens of Yeb, thus speak: If unto our lord it seems good to think on this temple to rebuild it, because they will not permit us to rebuild it, look upon these who share they favor and kindness who are here in Egypt—let a letter be sent unto them concerning the temple of Yahu God, to build it in Yeb, the fortress, in the way it was built formerly, and meal offerings and incense and burnt-offerings let them offer upon the altar of Yahu God in they name, and we will pray for thee at all times, we and our wives and our sons and the Jews, all who are here. If thus they do until this temple is built, then merit (righteousness) shall be thine before Yahu, God of heaven, more than (that of) the man who offers to him burnt-offerings and sacrifices of the value of a thousand pieces of silver. And concerning gold for this we have sent information. Also the whole is told in a letter we sent in our name to Dalajah and Shelmjah, sons of Sanballat, governor of Samaria. Also concerning this which is done to us, all of it Arsames does not know.

On the 20th of Marcheswan, year 17 of Darius the king.

To this letter Baghoi (Bagoas) sent the following reply:

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Memorandum of Bagohi and Dalajah. They spoke to me a memorandum for them: It shall be thine to say among the Egyptians before Arsames concerning the place of sacrifice of the god.....of heaven, which was built in Yeb the fortress formerly before Cambyses, which this wicked Waidrang destroyed in the year fourteen of Darius the king, to build it in its place like as it was before, and meal-offerings let them offer upon this altar in the manner it formerly was done.

The first of these documents is dated in the 17th year of Darius II, i.e., the year 407 B.C. It states that the temple at Elephantine (Yeb) had been destroyed by Waidrang and had lain in ruins for three years. The community which worshiped in the temple had previously written in vain. They now write to Bagohi himself, and also to the two sons of Sanballat, governor of Samaria (cf. Neh. 2:10, 19, etc.), with the result that the request is granted and authority is given to rebuilt the temple.

The fact that there was a temple at Elephantine at all is new and startling. Its significance is differently interpreted by different scholars. More conservative scholars claim that it is opposed to the date which the critical school assigns as the date of Deuteronomy, viz.: 621 B.C., because, if the law against more altars than one had been introduced then, Jews would not have so soon violated it by building this shrine. Critics, on the other hand, hold that it fits well with their views, since they believe that Deuteronomy was accepted by Jews as a whole only gradually, and after considerable struggle.

One thing is clear: at the time the temple at Elephantine was overthrown, the Jews at Jerusalem looked upon it with disfavor. They took no steps to lay the matter before the Persian governor. It was not till the aggrieved Egyptian Jews wrote to the heretical Samaritans, Dalajah and Shelemjah, sons of Sanballat, who would naturally be glad to encourage another rival to the temple at Jerusalem, that the matter was pushed and permission given to rebuild the temple.

This appeal to Sanballat's family throws interesting light on the progress of the schism between the Jews and the Samaritans. (Compare Neh. 4:1, ff.; 6:1, ff; and 13:28.)

The existence of this temple has an interesting bearing upon the date of Isaiah 19. Some scholars have held that prophecy,

which refers to a temple of Jehova in the land of Egypt, is late and must refer to the temple built by Onias III, about 170 B.C. (Cf. Josephus, Antiquities, xiii, 3:1,6.) It is now possible to suppose that the reference may well have been to this hitherto unsuspected temple at Elephantine.

2. Hananiah's Passover Letter.

To my brethren, Jedoniah and his associates, the Jewish garrison, your brother Hananiah. The peace of my brethren may God....And now this year, the year 5 of Darius the king, there was sent from the king unto Arsames.....Now ye thus shall count fourteen.....and from the 15th day unto the 21st day [of Nisan].....be ye clean and guard yourselves. Work ye shall not [do].....ye shall not drink, and all which is leavened ye shall n[ot eat].....from the going down of the sun unto the 21st day of Nisan.....take into your rooms and seal between the days of.....

This letter is from some Hananiah who seems to have stood high in authority among Jewish communities. Several Hananiahs are mentioned in the post-exilic literature. One of them was a military commander in Jerusalem in the time of Nehemiah (Neh. 7:2), but as that was at least twenty-five years before the date of our letter, it would be precarious to assert that that Hananiah was writer of this letter, though it is possible that he was.

From the letter it is clear that the writer is informing the Jewish garrison at Elephantine concerning the details of the provisions for the Jewish garrison at Elephantine concerning the details of the provisions for the observance of the Jewish Passover, as they are laid down in Exodus 12 and Leviticus 23. It seems strange that these Jews at Elephantine who were faithful enough to Jehovah to have a temple in his honor, should have needed to be informed of such

details, if they had copies of the Pentateuch. Adherents of the modern school of criticism see in this fact a confirmation of their view that the Levitical law had been introduced into the Jewish community at Jerusalem only in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, for, they urge, this letter shows that it was unknown to the garrison at Elephantine until the reign of Darius II. To this, conservative scholars reply that it was customary among the Jews to make yearly proclamation of the approach of the festival, and that this may be simply such a proclamation. They also urge that ignorance of the law on the part of some Jews is no proof that it did not exist.

3. Letter Showing that the Jews of Egypt Were Unpopular.

To my lords, Jedoniah, Uriah, and the priests of the God, Jehova, Mattan, son of Joshibiah and Neriah son ofthy servant Mauziyah; the peace of my lords.....and be favored before the God of heaven. And now, when Waidrang, the chief of the garrison, came to Abydos, he imprisoned me on account

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of a certain precious stone which they found stolen in the hands of the traders. At last Seha and Hor, who were known to Anani, exerted themselves with Waidrang and Hornufi, under the protection of the God of heaven, until they secured my release. Now behold they are coming thither thing Seha and Hor attend to them whatever they may desire. And whatever thing Seha and Hor may desire of you, stand ye before them so that no cause of blame may they find in you. With you is the chastisement which without cause has rested upon us, from the time Hananiah was in Egypt until now. And whatever you do for Hor you do for yourselves. Hor is known to Anani. Do you sell cheaply from our houses any goods that are at hand; whether we lose or do not lose, is one to you (?). This is why I am sending to you: he said to me: "Send a letter before us." Even if we should lose, credit will be established because of him in the house of Anani. What you do for him will not be hidden from Anani. To my lords, Jedoniah, Uriah, and the priests and the Jews.

This is a letter sent by a member of the Jewish colony of Elephantine to his Jewish brethren there, highly recommending to them two men. He especially anxious to make a good impression upon these because they were acquaintances of a certain Anani. This Anani apparently was a man of influence at the Persian court would be improbable. This letter shows that since Hananiah came to Egypt, the Jews have been in affliction, and the writer of this letter is anxious to make a good impression upon the friends of Anani, so that this affliction may be removed.

Scholars of the critical school see in this letter a confirmation of their view that the Levitical law had but just been introduced into the Egyptian community. The reference to the "chastisement:" or "affliction" which had rested on the community is thought by them to be, probably, the friction between Jews and Egyptians caused by the less friendly relations toward foreigners, which the Levitical law imposed on its devotees. It is, of course, possible that the "chastisement" may have been due to something quite different. It should be said, too, that the papyrus is torn somewhat just where the word rendered chastisement occurs, so that the word itself is not certain.

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