INTRODUCTION

The first time I heard about the presence of Yahwists on the island of Elephantine in Southern Egypt in the Persian period was while reading as an undergraduate Theo Vriezen's outline of the religion of ancient Israel.[1] I became aware of Aramaic documents excavated in the beginning of the twentieth century CE that revealed the presence of many Yehudites in the Persian border garrison during the fifth century BCE. Traditionally, they have been construed as Jews, albeit it with a slightly different form of Yahwism. This acquaintance started a lifelong engagement with a fascinating topic. Two questions have been puzzling me. How and why did the "Jews" migrate to Southern Egypt? Is their nonstandard form of Yahwism a relic of the religion in their homeland, Israel, or should it be construed as a syncretistic aberration as a result of being far away from Jerusalem and its temple?

In his 2014 monograph, the historian Simon Schama started his narrative on the story of the Jews in Egypt—not, however, with Moses and the Exodus, but with the community in Elephantine.[2] The reason for this unexpected starting point is twofold. On the one hand, Schama detected in the written documents an open-minded Jewish community with many references to daily life. On the other hand, he uses the antagonism between inclusive and exclusive Judaism—Ezra versus Elephantine—to describe the ongoing tensions within that religion. Reading Schama's book, my initial questions were only partially answered. I found his depiction of Elephantine slightly perfunctory, but I have to admit that twenty-four pages is a restricted space in which to tell the whole story.[3]

It was therefore a great pleasure for me to participate in the Elephantine in Context research project, sponsored by the Deutsche Forschungs Gemeinschaft

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1. Vriezen, *De godsdienst van Israël* (translated into English as *The Religion of Ancient Israel*).
2. Schama, *Story of the Jews*.
3. Schama, *Story of the Jews*, 4–27.

(2015–18). I have learned much from the open discussions we had during our meetings at the Theologicum of the Humboldt Universität. I therefore thank the other protagonists in this project, Reinhard Gregor Kratz, Giulia Francesca Grassi, Bernd Ulrich Schipper, and Ann-Kristin Wigand, for the openminded atmosphere in which we could exchange ideas. I also thank the group of excellent scholars who contributed with papers and discussions that put our work on the Aramaic documents in context: Collin Cornell, Sebastian Hoedt, Tawny Holm,[4] Sylvie Honigman, James D. Moore, Joachim Friedrich Quack, Kim Ryholt, Karel van der Toorn, and Alexandra von Lieven. The presence of Verena Lepper, who is leading a team aiming at the publication of all documents from Elephantine—those published and those as yet unpublished—has been of great help. And finally, I thank three scholars who have earned their spurs in this area of research, "Mr. Elephantine" Bezalel Porten, Margaretha Folmer, and Ingo Kottsieper, for sharing with me their insights.

This book was born from my attempts to answer the questions formulated above. The process of carefully reading the texts and putting them in context has refined and redirected these questions. The aim of this book is to put the Yehudite—some say Jewish—community of Elephantine in its historical, social, and religious context. The majority of research on Elephantine in the Persian period overlooks the presence of other ethnic groups on the island and at the adjacent riverside city of Syene. In this book, I present my construction of the past. I am of the opinion that it is impossible to offer an exhaustive reconstruction of everything that happened. The reader will find my reenactment of the past subjective and open to challenge. I have tried, wherever possible, to present the primary source information to allow the reader to evaluate for him- or herself.

Chapter 1 constructs the way in which the Persians conquered Egypt and makes clear that Persian control over Elephantine and its environs had a hands-off character. As long as the yearly taxes were paid, the Persians generally did not interfere in local affairs. Of great importance to the Persians was the protection of their trade interests. For that reason, a garrison was stationed at Elephantine to protect the southern border and, more importantly, to control the trade with sub-Saharan Africa.

Chapter 2 discusses the Yehudite presence at Elephantine. Historically, it is unclear when they settled, and many possible options have been suggested, ranging from Judeans who escaped the fundamentalist policy of Josiah to recruitment by the Persians. I argue that the Yehudites came in waves. As for the identity of this group, they were Yahwists venerating Yahô in their own local sanctuary. They were familiar with the Sabbath and Passover, and they had a local *marzeaḥ* (a regular meeting of upper-class people meeting that included

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4. I would like to thank Tawny Holm for her helpful remarks on chapters 5 and 7.

a banquet). Their form of Yahwism was probably aniconic, but certainly not monotheistic or monolatric. Other deities were accepted, as is clear from the salutation formulas in the letters from Elephantine. In addition to Yahô, some minor deities—Anat-Yahô, Eshem-Bethel, and Ḥerem-Bethel—were venerated.

Chapter 3 examines the variety of ethnic groups other than the Persians and the Egyptians. It appears that people from all corners of the Persian Empire were recruited to serve in the local garrison. In addition, there are clear references to Phoenicians and Ionians who visited the island for trade interests. Other groups—for instance, Carians, Libyans, and Philistines—served as laborers or slaves.

Chapter 4 sketches the relatively peaceful coexistence of all these ethnic groups. The groups were intertwined through endogamous marriages. They had common trade interests. Oath texts reveal that these Yehudites accepted the deities of others as witnesses to oaths. The documents evoke the image of a successful multiethnic society under the aegis of the *pax persica*.

How was this *pax persica* possible, and with which instruments was it maintained? Chapter 5 refers to a series of mechanisms the Persians used to control the local community. It is hypothesized that this friendly coexistence of several ethnic groups was only possible as an effect of Persian presence. Argument for this thesis are found in "literary" texts, such as as the Sayings of Aḥiqar (the narrative as well as the proverbs) and the Besitun inscription (an Aramaic version was found on Elephantine), both of which were used in school textbooks training local scribes. These texts functioned as propaganda, ingraining in the scribes an ideology of obedience and loyalty. In addition, the Persians controlled the balance between the groups through their military presence and judicial instruments.

Chapter 6 presents the breakdown of this multiethnic harmony. From 420 BCE onward, the situation changed. Several incidents bear witness to the decline of Persian power and the collapse of solidarity between the groups. A Yehudite was accused of stealing a precious stone, with consequence for the rest of the Yehudite community. Other Judeans were connected with a burglary as a consequence. Even more indicative of this breakdown is the destruction of the Yehudite temple by the priests of Khnum in collaboration with the garrison commander Vidranga. A closer analysis of the documents reveals that this act of destruction was not an isolated incident directed at the Yehudites. The destruction of the Temple of Yahô was part of a broader set of attacks against vital elements of the Persian administration aimed at destabilizing Persian power. Among these targets was the *ywdn' zy mlk'*, the granary of the king, where the taxes were collected in kind, and the well used to supply the garrison with water.

Chapter 7 tries to put this shift in interethnic relations into its historical and ideological context. First, I examine the difficult-to-understand Papyrus

Amherst 63, which dates from the late fourth century BCE but whose traditions go back earlier to a multiethnic community situated in the "fortress of palms" (or, as I alternately read it, "oasis in the desert") in the seventh century BCE. From this source, I argue that the Yehudite community of Elephantine was joined by additional Yehudite immigrants around 425 BCE, which led to a reformulation of their group identity and, in response to this, a backlash from the Egyptian community, especially the priests of Khnum. Second, I show that there was a recurrent Egyptian desire for independence, evidenced by a series of revolts dating back as far as the reign of Cambyses. I sketch the history of Egyptian resistance to Persian power and look at the political and economic background of these uprisings. I suggest that during the last quarter of the century, a sense of Egyptian self-esteem and anti-Persian feelings became more and more openly voiced. Together, these two factors contributed to the deterioration of multiethnicity harmony in Elephantine and its environs.

Chapter 8 looks at the aftermath. After the Egyptians achieved independence, the presence of the Yehudites as well as the other ethnic groups disappears from the documents. Aramaic, the official language of the Persian Empire, was replaced by the indigenous Demotic. The last Aramaic document is dated to 398 BCE. The fate of all the non-Egyptians from Elephantine and Syene can only be guessed at, but I explore and evaluate some of the possibilities that have been suggested.

I have written this book in a period in which the so-called Western democratic world has entered into a transition period. With the election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States of America, his political struggle to "make America great again," and the rise of alt-right on both sides of the Atlantic, the concept of an open society in which persons from different ethnic groups, diverging religious convictions, and a variety of views on same-sex marriages has begun to corrode. Studying the documents from Elephantine in their political, historical, and social context has strengthened my belief that such a society is possible. The possibly utopian dream, however, comes at a price and will always be vulnerable to the avarice and selfishness of those human beings who do not concede the "other" his or her freedom and way of life.[5]

5. See Lincoln, *Religion, Empire, and Torture*, who after discussing the "other side of paradise"—that is, the ideology of the Bisitun inscription—made some intriguing remarks on the American practice of torture in the Second Gulf War.

Sample Chapter | Eisenbrauns