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Judeans and their neighbours in intercultural contexts: places, middlemen, transcultural contacts – sixth to second century BCE

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Religious Interactions in Achaemenid Elephantine and Syene as Reflected in the Aramaic Documents

Introduction

In 1906, some Aramaic papyri dated to the 5th century BC were published by Arthur Cowley and Archibald Sayce with the title "Aramaic papyri discovered at Assuan".[1] It turned out that the papyri were found not in Syene/Aswan, but rather in Elephantine, the small island in the Nile in front of Aswan, where archaeological excavations were immediately carried out both by a German and by a French expedition. The difference between Syene and Elephantine might seem minimal, but it is indeed crucial, for we have very few texts from Syene, or about Syene, whereas we have hundreds of texts from Elephantine. The non-official documents from Elephantine concern almost exclusively a Judaean community, whereas the scanty texts related to Syene pertain apparently to an Aramaic-speaking pagan community. The members of both communities were mostly soldiers working for the Achaemenid Empire, but it must be stressed that there is a huge disproportion in the documentation.

None of the texts from Elephantine is religious in character, no quotation nor passage from the Bible occurs, and the form of religion which emerges from them was immediately perceived as different from that offered by the Torah. Their monotheism does not seem to have been rigid: they had their own temple on the island, and important features of later Judaism, for example Sabbath keeping, seem to be interpreted by the Elephantine community in a rather flexible way.

The differences between Elephantine Judaism and Biblical Judaism have been often put on a Procrustes' bed, for attempts have been made to make the documents compatible with "orthodox" contemporary Judaism, either downplaying the differences between their Judaism and the Judaism known from the Bible;[2] treating the Judaeans of Elephantine as fossils, remnants of the pre-exilic time;[3] or considering them prone to external influences, mainly from the so called "Aramaean" part of

1 Sayce, Cowley (1906).

2 E. g. Porten (1968), in many respects still the milestone of Elephantine studies; the differences with "orthodox" Judaism are here ascribed to external influences.

3 E. g. Cowley (1923): XX; Dion (2002).

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the community, and ultimately champions of a syncretistic religion.[4] It is indeed because of this heterodoxy, and because some people are alternatively called "Judaean" and "Aramaean", that the term "Judaeo-Aramaeans" has been created by Albin von Hoonacker,[5] and is still in use.[6] However, the term is misleading. The nisbe "Aramaean" is not used as an ethnic label, but seems to indicate an Aramaeophone, more specifically an Aramaeophone serving in the army.[7] Besides, the documents concerning the Judaean community in Elephantine, and the documents concerning the "pagan" community in Syene are rather clearly separated.

To be sure, we know that pagan Aramaeophones were living in Syene, and that they interacted with the Judaeans of Elephantine as comrades and parties in contracts. This information is provided by the documents from Elephantine, in which several people with pagan names are recorded, mainly as witnesses. Moreover, several texts demonstrate that Semitic pagan cults were practiced in Syene. However, this information does not come from Elephantine, but from documents from other regions, mainly from the letters from Hermopolis (TADAE A2.1–2.6) and from the sarcophagus of a priest of Nabu from Syene found in Saqqara (TADAE D18.1). In other words, the documents from Elephantine, which represent 57% of the Aramaic documents from Egypt, do not mention any Semitic foreign cult either in Elephantine or in Syene, and Semitic and Egyptian deities are recorded rarely, with the only exceptions being the Egyptian gods Khnum and Yahweh. These texts are the product of a Judaean community; pagan Aramaeophones lived in Syene, and their own documents are largely lost.

It must be stressed that the relationship between the Judaean community and the Aramaeophone pagan community seems to be routinary and friendly. The same kind of relationship may be seen with other foreign groups, for example Bactrian, Carian, or Choresmian neighbours or parties in contracts. Also the relationship with the Egyptians seems to have been peaceful (mixed marriages are apparently also attested), with the dramatic exception of the temple affaire, the destruction of the temple of Yahweh apparently promoted by the priests of Khnum, with the help of the Persian governor Vidranga and his son Nefaina, commander of the troops in Syene.[8] Some incidents may nevertheless occur: for example, Malkayah son of Yašobyah must swear that he did not make violence and theft in the house of a man with an Iranian name, Artafrada [*ʾr*]*tprd* (B7.2). Interestingly, he must swear by Ḥerem-Betʾel. The mention of this deity, apparently a non-Judaean one, leads us

4 E. g. (with different nuances) Vincent (1937); Grelot (1972); Becking (2003).

5 Von Hoonacker (1915).

6 For example, see Rohrmoser (2014).

7 See Grassi (2022).

8 This topic will not be dealt with in this paper, both because it would require a whole article, and because I am convinced that it is not ultimately a religious affair.

to the main question. Besides the good or troubled relationships with neighbours and comrades, and even taking into account mixed marriages, do the texts reveal profound cultural influences? The nature of the material makes a clear answer very difficult. The Judaean community surely adopted some Egyptian habits, but they apparently also retained their own traditions, and a distinguishable ethnic identity.

"Ethnicity" has been much studied during the last decades; and this extends to the study of ancient societies; and although several definitions have been produced, ethnicity remains a discussed and elusive concept.[9] However, as far as the content of ethnic identity is concerned, many scholars would agree with the notion of individuating as discernible features a common name, a myth of common ancestry, a link with a homeland, shared historical memories, solidarity, and shared cultural traditions, in particular religion and language.[10] This paper is therefore focused on religious interactions. In its first part, it deals with the Aramaic texts from Elephantine, i. e. with the Judaean community; in the second part, it deals with the scanty Aramaic texts related to Syene, i. e. with non-Judaean foreigners.

Elephantine

Semitic deities

As already pointed out, the religion of the Judaean community has been generally considered as either syncretistic or an archaic expression of Judaism. The texts, however, show in my opinion a different situation.

Yahweh is the most frequently cited god in the non-literary Aramaic texts from Egypt, occurring in 39 texts, but all these texts originate from Elephantine and concern the Judaean community. In other terms, there is no evidence of a cult of Yahweh among non-Judaeans.

The nature of the texts does not allow a full analysis of the religious practices related to Yahweh, because very few documents are primarily concerned about the cult, and none, even among the scanty literary texts, is theological. However, some details can be grasped. Letter A4.7/A4.8 shows Yahweh listening at the prayers of the Judaeans and supporting them both by punishing their enemies and rewarding their friends. Yahweh occurs in greetings formulas at the beginning of private letters, once as simply Yahweh (D7.21), once as "the temple of Yahweh" ([*b*]*yt yhw*: A3.3), whereas "the god of heaven" is slightly more common (A3.6; A4.3; A4.7/8). The

9 For an introduction to the various schools and theories about Ethnicity, see for example Banks (1996), Fabietti (2013).

10 See e. g. the very similar definitions in Jones (1997): 84; Smith (1997: 65); Knapp (2014: 35).

imprecation *ḥylyhh*, "for the life of Yahweh!" (rarely written *ḥy lyhh*), is relatively frequent in the ostraca from Elephantine (CG14, 33, 41, 56, 174, J8, possibly X16), and it is worth noting that Yahweh is the only god occurring in imprecations in the whole corpus.[11] The theonym Yahweh Ṣabaʾot (*yhh ṣbʾt*), the only epigraphic mentions of the deity, occurs a couple of times in Elephantine (CG167, both in the old and in the new text (palimpsest); CGJ8; perhaps CG 186 (D7.35)), once probably as responsible for the infertility of a woman.[12] Finally, the centre of his cult was a temple on the island, well known in Egypt also outside Elephantine, as is demonstrated by a letter sent from Migdol (A3.3).

No other deity plays such a prominent role in the corpus. However, there are other gods occurring in the texts.

The most famous deities related to the Judaean community are ʿAnat-Betʾel and ʾEšem-Betʾel, mentioned in the list of donors, to whom may be added two more deities occurring in oaths, the above mentioned Ḥerem-Betʾel, and ʿAnat-Yaho (an occurrence of Ḥerem alone is possible, but partially restored in B7.3).

In the list of donors C3.15, a sum of money is collected for Yahweh, for ʿAnat-Betʾel and for ʾEšem-Betʾel. The reason for collecting the money is not specified, but each deity receive a precise sum, similar for Yahweh and ʿAnat-Betʾel, significantly lower for ʾEšem-Betʾel. This suggests a hierarchy in which Yahweh and ʿAnat-Betʾel are more important than ʾEšem-Betʾel. The possibility that ʿAnat-Betʾel and ʾEšem-Betʾel are wife and son of Yahweh, may be considered likely. It has been suggested that this might be due to an Egyptian influence, but triad is a usual structure of the pantheon in the Ancient Near East as well.

ʾEšembetʾel and ʿAnatbetʾel seem to be linked to the Judaean community, and indeed the first editor and the first commentators did not doubt that there was a link between these deities and the Judaean community.[13]

If we look at the names contained in the list, it will be clear that the vast majority of them can be considered Judaean. The only theonym used in the donors' names is Yahweh, i. e. there is no pagan deity in compound names, with one possible exception (a *ʾšm*-name in l. 41). Names without a divine element can mostly be explained as Hebrew. Some of them are linguistically Aramaic, but religiously neutral since no god is named. Non-Semitic names are few. As far as the names of the fathers and grandfathers of the donors are concerned, the situation is similar, even if we may find some more Egyptian names and a couple of pagan names.

ʿAnat-Yaho occurs in the oath B7.3 (end 5th century BC), in which Menaḥem bar Šallum swore or will swear by ʿAnat-Yaho to Mešullem bar Natan about a she-ass.

11 For this swear, see also Dupont-Sommer (1947: 185–8).

12 See Grassi (2017).

13 Sachau (1911, I: 85); Cowley (1923: XVIII–XIX); Vincent (1937).

We may notice that the names of the parties are typical of the Judaean community, as the vast majority of the names of the list of donors C3.15.

A link between these deities and the Judaean community seems obvious, but it has been sometimes denied, in my opinion on very fragile grounds.[14] Another way to consider ʾEšembetʾel, ʿAnatbetʾel, ʿAnat-Yaho, and Ḥerem-Betʾel not properly "Judaean" is to postulate a mixed Judaeao-Aramaean community, and an Aramaean origin of these gods.

However, an Aramaean origin is questionable for Betʾel, and very unlikely for ʿAnat.

ʿAnat is mainly known from Ugarit and from Phoenician and Punic texts. The first attestations of the goddess ʿAnat occur early in the second millennium BC. She is attested in the Amorite onomasticon,[15] and venerated in Mari, i. e. on the Middle Euphrates region, where her cult can be detected up to the 8th century BC.[16] In the second millennium BC, ʿAnat is mainly known from the coastal region and the area adjacent to it. Already in the 18th–16th centuries ʿAnat-names are recorded in Hazor,[17] and in the Amarna letter a person from Byblos is called Anati.[18]

The best source for understanding this goddess are the literary texts from Ugarit (13th century BC), where she plays an important role as an aggressive, independent maiden warrior. ʿAnat maintains some characteristics he had in Ugarit also in Egypt, where she was introduced from the Hyksos period and was particularly popular in the Ramesside era.[19] Her introduction in Egypt as foreign deity together with Astarte, with whom she is often paired, is important for the investigation of her role in the Persian period, because it cannot be ruled out that she was not imported from the Near East; but rather that she was already present in the region, and that her cult was revitalized by the West Semites living there.

Several toponyms in the Egyptian texts containing ʿAnat are likely to be located in the Levant.[20] An ostracon dated to the 19th dynasty (13th century BC) and sent from a scribe stationed with the Egyptian garrison at Gaza records "the festival of ʿAnat of Gaza".[21] Although the information provided by the text is not enough to establish whether the cult was local, or imported to Palestine by the Egyptian

14 See e. g. Porten (1969: 120–1); Joisten-Pruschke (2008: 94).

15 See e. g. Streck (2000: 264, 266).

16 Day (1999: 39–40).

17 Hallo, Tadmor (1977: 4–5).

18 Day (1999: 38).

19 For ʿAnat in Egypt, see Stadelmann (1967: 88–96); Leclant (1975); Lloyd (1994: 63–136); Tazawa (2009: 72–82).

20 Day (1999: 38).

21 Lloyd (1994: 88–9); Cornelius (2004, Cat. 3.1 and 3.2).

garrison,[22] it demonstrates that ʿAnat was known in Palestine in the 13th century BC. The Northern Temple of Ramses III in Beth Shean contained a stele dedicated by an Egyptian official in which ʿAnat is represented.[23] ʿAnat-names are recorded in Phoenician (two arrowheads from the Beqaʿ and from the environs of Bethlehem[24]) and Punic (Carthage, Hadrumetum[25]), in the Bible (Šamgar ben ʿAnat; Judg. 3:31), on an unprovenanced Hebrew seal,[26] on a bowl from Ekron dated to the 7th century BC;[27] we may further note that in the Roman Near East some ʿAnat-names are perhaps recorded in the Greek transcriptions in the region of Mount Ḥermon; whereas in the Hellenistic age the Zenon archive seems to locate the toponym Βαιτανατα.[28]

ʿAnat-names can thus be found in Amorraean, Ugaritic, Phoenician, Punic, Hebrew, Aramaic (in Neo-Assyrian transcription), as well as probably in Greek transcriptions from Mount Ḥermon.

As far as Aramaic texts are concerned, the only possible anthroponym formed with ʿAnat is *ʿnty*, found twice in our corpus and nowhere else, once in a letter of Hermopolis (A2.1) and once in the list of donors (C3.15), but it is doubtful if it is built on the theonym, since the element *ʿnt* never occurs in compound names. The Aramaic assimilated form *ʿt*/*ʾt* (<*ʿnt*) is recorded in a number of anthroponyms.[29]

Attestation beyond proper names may still be found in the first millennium BC. Her cult is attested on the Middle Euphrates in the 8th century BC.[30] Four Phoenician inscriptions from Cyprus mentioning the goddess can be dated between the 5th and the late 4th–early 3rd century BC,[31] and a Punic inscription from Malta published in the late 1990s contains perhaps her name.[32]

Aramaic is absent from the list of the occurrences of ʿAnat outside Egypt. Even in Egypt, her occurrences are scanty. Her name is attested once in Papyrus Amherst 63 (VIII 9) and occurs in two inscriptions, which are however controversial. A short inscription (TAD D24.4) on a small wooden vase (9,5 cm h.), possibly from the

22 Lloyd (1994: 89).

23 Lloyd (1994: 90–92).

24 Milik (1956); Yeivin (1958); Cross (1980: 5–7).

25 Halff (1965: 74 (note 45), 88, 127, 132); Benz (1972: 63, 382).

26 Avigad, Sass (1997, No. 345; see also page 488).

27 Gitin, Dothan, Naveh (1997: 13–14 (Fig. 7)).

28 Aliquot (2008: 114).

29 A certain *ʾtʿdry* (patronym lost) is witness in the contract B4.4, a text with mixed onomastics, *ʿtḫt* may perhaps be read in fragmentary D1.16 and *ʾtḫtʾ* in C3.4, all from Elephantine. In Saqqara, *ʿthnwry* occurs in a fragment (Segal 1983, 122–3, No. 144).

30 Day (1999: 40).

31 Three of them can now be found in Bianco, Bonnet (2016). For the fourth one (RÉS 1209a), see Magnanini (1973: 116 (Idalion 1)).

32 Frendo (1999).

region of Memphis and published by Edda Bresciani in 1958,[33] is likely a forgery, like several other pieces from the Michaelidis collection.[34]

A second, interesting text (TADAE D21.17) is a small memorial stela of limestone (20,5 x 16,5 x 4) seen for the first time by Aimé-Giron (sceptical about its authenticity) in Cairo in 1926, and then found and bought by Dupont-Sommer in Paris ca thirty years later.

The inscription, allegedly from Memphis,[35] is dated by Dupont-Sommer to the end of the 6th century BC. The text runs:

1. lʾnn br ʾlyš
2. kmrʾ zy
3. bʿl bʿlʿnwt

1. Belonging to *ʾnn* son of *ʾlyš*
2. priest of
3. Baʿal of *bʿlʿnwt*.

The anthroponyms *ʾnn* and *ʾyš* are remarkable, and, as stressed by Aimé-Giron, they are likely renderings of *ḥnn* and *ʾlyšʿ*, i. e. product of a dialect which did not have ḥ and ʿ as phonemes (*ʾlyšʿ* could alternatively be related to Punic names *ʾlšʾ/y*, according to Benz from *ʿlšʾ/y*[36]). We would expect these forms in Phoenician and Punic, where *ʾnn* is indeed attested (Carthago), but not in Aramaic.

As regards the deity, Baʿal is known among the Aramaeans, but his importance in the Phoenician pantheon is well known. Finally, the discussed term *bʿlʿnwt* at the end likely contains a vocalization which, albeit unexpected, seems more Canaanaean than Aramaic, namely ô (<ā), or even o (>a).[37] If the inscription is

33 Bresciani (1958: 281–3 and plate III).

34 TADAE D: 299. The object is in itself suspicious: Bresciani considers it "del tutto originale", and surely not Egyptian, but rather a Phoenician importation – although I must say that I could find no Phoenician parallel for it. The text runs *mšhʾl kmrʾ zy ʿnt*. This would be the only occurrence of a priest of ʿAnat in the whole corpus. As regards the proper name *mšhʾl*, it is a hapax legomenon, and its first part is not easy to explain. Silverman suggested "a free invention after biblical Mîšāʾēl", which is a problematic name: if its first element is the interrogative pronoun *my*, the name cannot be Aramaic and is hardly Phoenician (*my-* in proper names is not recorded in Benz 1972).

35 « Au mois de décembre 1926, j'ai eu quelques instants entre les mains, sans pouvoir en prendre copie, une petite stèle de calcaire qu'on disait trouvée à Memphis » (Aimé-Giron 1931: 107).

36 Benz (1972: 379). We can further note that the original *ṯ would have already be written t in Imperial Aramaic, but this might be due to conservativism in anthroponymy.

37 Dupont-Sommer explains the form as dialectal, and compares the Biblical toponyms Bêt ʿAnāt (Jos. XIX:38; Judg. I:33) and Bêt ʿAnôt (Jos. XV:59), usually thought to be formed on theonym ʿAnat (see however Day 1999: 4–5). We may note that if Hallo and Tadmor (1977: 4–5) are correct in interpreting the names Mar-Ḫanuta and Sum-Ḫanuta found in a lawsuit from Hazor (18th–16th

not a forgery, we might simply think that, even if it was written in Aramaic, the author(s) had more familiarity with a Phoenician dialect than with Aramaic.

Whether the last term of the inscription contains the theonym ʿAnat is disputed. The polysemy of the term *bʿl* makes the word difficult to understand. It is a theonym, like in the previous word, but it also means "Lord", "owner", "husband", and "citizen". In this inscription, we may either think that *bʿl* means "husband", followed by theonym ʿAnat/ʿAnôt, or that it means "citizen", followed by a toponym: in the first case, Baʿal would be called "Husband of ʿAnat", in the second, "Citizen of ʿAnôt". Dupont-Sommer, who considers both explanations possible, favours the first one.[38]

According to Dupont-Sommer, Baʿal and ʿAnat were husband and wife. Albeit it is possible that in Ugarit these gods are consorts, this view has been sometimes challenged.[39] In Egypt, where the goddess was imported in the Hyksos period, ʿAnat is considered the wife of Seth, who is equated with Semitic Baʿal. This does not automatically mean that the same was true for Ugarit, but it makes possible that Baʿal could be "husband of ʿAnat" in 6th-century Egypt. However, the use of defining a god or a goddess "husband" or wife of another god/goddess is otherwise unattested in our corpus, although it is likely that the same meaning is conveyed in Elephantine by a much more elliptical form, a *status constructus* in which ʿAnat is the first element of two theonyms, ʿAnatyaho/ʿAnatbetʾel.

A further argument in favour of the interpretation of *ʿnwt* as a theonym is the disposition of the inscription on the stone. The first line reports name and patronym, the second the qualification "priest of", whereas the third has the words *bʿl* and *bʿlʿnwt*; although there was enough space to write *bʿl* after *zy* at the end of line 2, and the surface does not seem damaged from the photo.[40] This division would have been more logical, if the purpose was to write "priest of Baʿal, citizen of ʿAnot".

To sum up, ʿAnat is a West-Semitic deity, already present in Amorraean, but much more significant in the Canaanaean than in the Aramaean pantheon. Moreover, she was well known not only in Israel, but also in Judaea well before the Aramaeans were deported there. If the presence of ʿAnat in the pantheon of the Judaeans has to be considered an external influence, then both the Phoenicians and the Egyptians are much more likely than the Aramaeans as promoters of her cult.

However, an external influence is not the only possibility. That the religion of the Judaeans and Israelites was not so different from that of the "Canaanites" has

BC) as ʿAnat-names, forms of theonym ʿAnat with o rather than a would be attested already in the second millennium BC.

38 Dupont-Sommer (1956: 83–4).

39 E. g. Walls (1992); Day (1999).

40 See also Dupont-Sommer (1956: 83).

been now generally accepted.[41] Another aspect has been the focus of interest in the last decades: the important role played by goddesses both in the Bronze and in the Iron age, "even in the supposedly monotheistic culture of Israel".[42] Many studies have been devoted to this subject since the ground-breaking monograph by Patai in 1967,[43] who supported the idea of a goddess through the history of Israel and Judah. The discovery of many figures of goddesses in Palestine, and of the inscriptions of Kuntillet ʿAğrud (Northern Sinai)[44] and Ḫirbet el-Qom (near Ḥebron),[45] dated respectively to the end of the 9th and to the middle of the 8th century BC, gave new inputs to the discussion.

I am sceptical about an Aramaean origin of this cult, both because ʿAnat is not typically Aramaean, and because traces of her worship may be found in Palestine; as well as the presence of a paredra besides Yahweh. In other words, the cult of a consort of Yahweh is not unprecedented, only the name ʿAnat-Yaho is. If it has been created under some external influence, then it is not her role, but just her name which constitutes an innovation. In this case, both a Phoenician and an Egyptian influence are possible: in the first millennium BC, ʿAnat may be found especially in the Phoenician-Punic area, and in Egypt, where she has been imported as a foreign deity, but was soon integrated in the Egyptian pantheon, had her own temples, and was worshipped until the Roman period.

God Betʾel/Baitʾil (*btʾl*) is attested in one of the most ancient Aramaic documents from Egypt, the letter of Hermopolis A2.1, where he is the titular deity of a temple in Syene. The deity is also attested in Papyrus Amherst 63, where he plays an important role. Moreover, Betʾel occurs as a theonym in several proper names of the corpus, all dated from the end of the 6th to the end of the 5th century BC. Finally, Betʾel is the second element of the theonyms ʿAnat-Betʾel (*ʿntbytʾl*), attested in Elephantine, and ʾEšem-Betʾel (*ʾšmbytʾl*) and Ḥerem-Betʾel (*ḥrmbytʾl*), recorded in Elephantine and in Papyrus Amherst 63.

God Betʾel, together with ʿAnat-Betʾel, is attested for the first time in the Neo-Assyrian period, in two treaties of Esarhaddon: the treaty between Esarhaddon and Baal, king of Tyrus (dated shortly after 676 BC),[46] and the so-called "succession treaty", concluded in 672 to secure the succession of his son Assurbanipal. The occurrence of their names in the latter, which has been disputed, is now certain, since they are preserved in the copy recently found in Tell Taynat, albeit with

41 Literature is overwhelming. For a recent discussion with further bibliographic references, see Thomas 2017.

42 Ackerman (2003: 391).

43 Patai (1990 [1967]).

44 Meshel et al. (2012).

45 Hadley (1987).

46 SAA 2: 5, IV, l. 6′.

some errors,[47] which may testify the scarce knowledge the scribe had with these gods.

^{d}*ba-a-ti*-DINGIR.MEŠ ^{d}*a-na-ti-ba-*$^{\ulcorner}$*a*$^{\urcorner}$-[*a-ti*-DINGI]R.MEŠ
ina ŠU^{II} UR.MAH *a-ki-*$^{\ulcorner}$*li*$^{\urcorner}$ [*lim-nu-u-k*]*u-nu*
Esarhaddon's Treaty with Baʿal, King of Tyrus (676 BC), iv 6'–7'

^{d}*ba-a-a-ti*(text: *bal*)-DINGIR <^{d}>*a-na-an-ti-*$^{\ulcorner d \urcorner}$*ba-a-a-ti*-DINGIR
ina ŠU^{II} UR.MAH *a-ki-li lim-nu-ku-nu*
Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty (672 BC), Tell Taynat vi 48–49

May Bait-ili and Anat-Bait-ili
Hand you over to the paws of a man-eating lion

In both texts, several deities are asked to punish any breach of the treaty, and among them Baitʾel and ʿAnat-Baitʾel, who should hand the culprit "to the paws of a man-eating lion". It is likely that they are meant here to be a couple, but this is not entirely clear, and it must be stressed that in the standard curse section of the succession treaty it is the only case in which two deities are mentioned together, without any further specification.

In the treaty with Baʿal, Baitʾel and ʿAnat-Baitʾel are mentioned after Mulliššu, Ištar, Gula and the Pleiades (but the beginning is broken and several deities were likely mentioned before Mulliššu) and immediately before the conclusion "May the great gods of heaven and earth, the gods of Assyria, the gods of Akkad and the gods of Eber-nari curse you with an indissoluble curse". After this statement, Phoenician deities are evoked: Baʿal Šamaim, Baʿal Malagê, Baal Ṣaphon, Melqart, ʾEšmun, and ʿAstarte. Due to the ambiguous position in which the two deities occur, Betʾel and ʿAnat-Betʾel have been considered either Phoenician[48] or Aramaean.[49]

In the Succession treaty, after a long list of Akkadian gods, are mentioned the Pleiades (possibly West Semitic rather than Akkadian), Aramiš, Baitʾel and ʿAnat-Baitʾel, and finally Kubaba. Kubaba, non-Semitic in origin, but attested in the Aramaic inscriptions of Zincirli, is explicitly said to be the goddess of Carchemish. Aramiš was thought to be a North-Syrian god, since some rare personal names containing Aramiš are associated with Northern Syria in Neo-Assyrian sources. However, in the copy of Tell Taynat the god is called "lord of the city and land of Qarnê (and) lord of the city and the land of Azaʾi"; these titles suggest rather

47 Lauinger (2012: 102, T vi 48).
48 Milik (1967).
49 Van der Toorn (1992).

a South-Syrian origin of the god, because Qarnê is the Assyrian province south of Damascus.[50] Since Bait^{2}el and ^{c}Anat-Bait^{2}el are mentioned between Aramiš and Kubaba, it is possible that they are supposed to "cover" the remaining region, Central-Northern Syria, but unfortunately nothing is said about their origin, and they are not related to a specific toponym.

Northern Syria, and more precisely the region of Aleppo and/or the reign of Arpad have been cautiously suggested as the place of origin for both of them.[51] However, there are in my opinion several problems. First of all, Bait^{2}el and ^{c}Anat-Bait^{2}el are not linked to a specific city or region in the treaties of Esarhaddon. Secondly, and most importantly, Aleppo was likely part of the Aramaean reign of Arpad (modern Tell Rif^{c}at, ca. 30 km northwest from Aleppo), or at best an independent city, over which however the king of Arpad seems to have had suzerainty (Sefire III, 5). From Arpad we have two important royal inscriptions. One is the Bar-Hadad stele, showing a clear Phoenician influence both in the iconography, and in the god depicted and mentioned, Melqart. The second inscription is the longest extant Old Aramaic inscription, the Stele of Sefire. As usual in treaties, the text presents a long list of the deities of both parties. The first part of the list contains mainly Akkadian gods, whereas the second mentions the deities of Arpad, beginning with Hadad of Aleppo ([*hdd ḥ*]*lb*: Sefire IA, l. 10). In the list there is no trace of Bet^{2}el and ^{c}Anat. If the first inscription shows that the reign of Arpad could be exposed to Phoenician influences, the second demonstrates that Bet^{2}el and ^{c}Anat-Bet^{2}el were not central deities in the reign of Arpad – or at least makes it rather unlikely.[52]

Albeit the origins of Bet^{2}el and ^{c}Anathbet^{2}el cannot be established, the region in which they were known was likely rather vast, and included areas now in modern Lebanon, Syria, and Israel. The Bible states that Bet^{2}el was an important god in Israel. In Jer 48:13 is stated: "Moab shall be ashamed of Kemosh as the house of Israel was ashamed of Beth-^{2}El, their refuge" (ובשׁ מואב מכמוש כאשׁר-בשׁו בית ישׂראל מבית אל מבטחם). Differently from other passages of the Old Testament, in which the toponym Beth^{2}el might be meant (Am 3:14, 5:5), here Beth^{2}el is obviously a god. This passage further suggests that Beth^{2}el was an important deity in Israel, since Kemoš was the main god of the Moabites.

Although no Phoenician nor Punic inscription mentions this god, his name is preserved in the most informative literary text dealing with Phoenician religion, namely *The Phoenician History* (*Phoinikikà*) by Philo of Byblos, active between the reign of Hadrian and the reign of Antoninus Pius. The text is only partially

50 Lauinger (2012: 119).

51 van der Toorn (1992).

52 The same argument, i. e. the absence of textual evidence, is used by van der Toorn to reject a Tyrian origin of the deities.

preserved, and the main source is the *Praeparatio evangelica* by Eusebius of Caesarea (4th century AD).

According to Philo, the main deity was Baalshamim, and other pre-eminent gods were Elioun and his consort Berouth, parents of Ouranos. Grandson of Elioun and son of Ouranos/Sky and his wife Ge/Earth was Elos, identified by him with Chronos, and brothers of Elos were Atlas, Dagon, and Baitylos:

> Παραλαβὼν δὲ ὁ Οὐρανὸς τὴν τοῦ πατρὸς ἀρχὴν ἄγεται πρὸς γάμον τὴν ἀδελφὴν Γῆν, καὶ ποιεῖται ἐξ αὐτῆς παῖδας τέσσαρας, Ἥλον τὸν καὶ Κρόνον καὶ Βαίτυλον καὶ Δαγὼν ὅς ἐστι Σίτων καὶ Ἄτλαντα.
> *Philo of Byblos (Eusebius, Praeparatio evangelica 1.10.16)*

"Ouranos, having succeeded to his father's rule, took in marriage his sister Ge, and had from her four children: Elos, who is also (called) Kronos, Baitylos, Dagon, who is Siton, and Atlas".

Thus, Baitylos is clearly considered by Philo a part of the Phoenician pantheon. The mention of Betʾel by Philo of Byblos, and the fact that ʿAnat was apparently related to him could suggest that his ultimate origin was closer to a Phoenician than to an Aramaean area. It is then conceivable that Betʾel was known in a vast region, and was not just "Aramaean", although Aramaean culture in Babylonia seems to have given impulse to the use of this theonym in proper names.

The majority of Betʾel-names come indeed from Babylonia during the Neo-Babylonian period, and no Betʾel-name is attested before, nor after the 5th century BC. I suspect that the spread of Betʾel-names in the Neo-Babylonian period is due to a Babylonian influence. Betʾel means "house of god", "temple", and this is the only meaning this compound has in Aramaic. Hyatt suggested long ago that the name meant originally "temple", then more specifically "temple of ʾEl", and in a further development it designated the deity living in it. Ultimately, the temple itself was deified, and could be conceived as a deity.[53] This suggestion seems convincing. Differently from other theonyms, but similarly to god names as Baʿal or ʾEl, Baytʾel/Betʾel is semantically clear. It is conceivable that Baytʾel/Betʾel meant originally simply "temple", and then became an hypostasis of god ʾEl, rarely attested as such in the first millennium BC. This would also explain the total absence of this god in the second millennium BC, due to the fact that the theonym developed in a second stage. The clear meaning of the theonym could have promoted his transmission in the whole area; and even parallel developments cannot be ruled out. However, in order to explain the popularity of Betʾel-names from the Neo-

53 Hyatt (1939: 91).

Babylonian period, I think, again with Hyatt,[54] that a Mesopotamian impulse could have been crucial.

Proper names formed on the temple are extremely rare in West Semitic, but popular in Mesopotamia, where the word for "temple", Bītum, or the name of a specific temple (for example the Eanna or the Esagila), could be used as theophoric element.[55] Indeed, in Mesopotamia the temple could be addressed as if it were alive, and it and its elements could be considered divine.[56] Temples are even mentioned in blessing formulas in the letters in Southern Babylonia,[57] as it happens in the Aramaic letters from Egypt, possibly another Babylonian influence. It is thus conceivable that a theophoric element meaning "temple" was considered suitable for the Mesopotamian onomastic system. It is worth noting that after the end of the 5th century BC, no Betʾel-name is recorded. In other words, Betʾel disappears from Semitic anthroponymy, and even the mentions of the deity are more than scanty. Betʾel/Baitʾel is unlikely a pure Mesopotamian creation as is most probably Amurru, a god unknown to the Amorraeans but created as Amorrean god by the Mesopotamians.[58] However, Betʾel/Baitʾel knew a real spread only after a Mesopotamian sojourn and is first mentioned in Mesopotamian texts, thus demonstrating the role that Mesopotamia played in his launching.

The presence of Betʾel among the Judaean pantheon of Elephantine is thus not necessarily due to an Aramaean influence in Elephantine or in Israel: it could be rather the effect either of a common heritage, and/or of a long stay in the region in which Betʾel-names reached their peak, namely Babylonia. It is worth observing that in the corpus published by Pearce and Wunsch Bītil-names occur particularly in the documentation of Al-Yaḫudu properly, or in texts which mention Judeans,[59] although none of these names can be safely considered to have been borne by a Judean.

There is a similar problem in the Betʾel-names from Egypt, even if a couple of Betʾel-names were likely borne by Judaeans. Betʾel-names have been considered "Jewish" by Silverman,[60] but in most cases the "Jewishness" of the bearer is uncertain or even unlikely: there are only two or three cases in which a Betʾel-name occurs with a Hebrew name within a family (*bytʾlntn br yhwntn* in B6.4 and *hwšʿ [br byt]ʾlnwry* in the list of donors for the temple (C3.15); more ambiguous is *ḥrmntn br bytʾlntn br ṣḥʾ* in B6.4). These few cases, scanty as they are,

54 Hyatt (1939: 92).
55 Roberts (1972: 17–18).
56 Hundley (2013: 76).
57 See Arnold (1992: 384).
58 Beaulieu (2005).
59 Pearce, Wunsch (2014: 13).
60 Silverman (1985: 223).

demonstrate that Betʾel had some importance for the Judaean community of Elephantine.

Among the characteristics of Yahweh and of his cult in Elephantine, two seem relevant for our purpose: the centrality of the temple, and the presence of Yahweh, who is explicitly said to reside in Elephantine. In B3.3 (l. 2), ʿAnanyah is called "servitor of Yahweh the god who is in Elephantine the fortress" (*lḥn zy yhh ʾlhʾ zy byb byrtʾ*). Other cases are more ambiguous, but given the construction in B3.3, they most likely referred to Yahweh. Furthermore, his wife Tapemet is once designated as "Servitor (f.) of Yahweh the god dwelling (m.) in Elephantine the fortress" (B3.12, l. 3; *lḥnh zy yhw ʾlhʾ škn yb byrtʾ*). Yahweh was thus thought to dwell in Elephantine, and his most obvious house there is the temple. It is possible that Betʾel was identified with Yahweh in his specific role as the dweller of the temple. This would explain why the wife of Yahweh could be called also ʿAnat-Betʾel, and not only ʿAnat-Yaho, and their son could be named ʾEšem-Betʾel.

As far as the elements ʾEšem and Ḥerem in the theonyms ʾEšem-Betʾel and Ḥerem-Betʾel are concerned, their interpretation is doubtful. In my opinion, the most likely explanation is that *ʾšm* is related with *šm*, "name", and *ḥrm* with God Ḫarīm, which in Akkadian names is usually considered to designate "the sanctuary" or "the deified sacred enclosure".[61] As far as Ḥerem-Betʾel is concerned, element betʾel has been interpreted here as "baetyl", i. e. as "standing stone". This idea should however be rejected, and for several reasons. Firstly, in no Semitic language *bytʾl* indicates a standing stone. Even the frequently quoted biblical passage is misleading.

61 Zadok (1977: 60); Roberts (1972: 30). Van der Toorn recently suggested a correlation with Akkadian *ḫarīmtu*, "prostitute", or better "single woman" (Assante 1998). Van der Toorn maintain that *ḥrm* and *ḫarīmtu* are formed on the root *ḥrm*: "The name Herem (*ḥrm*) must somehow be connected to the sacred marriage ceremonies. The etymology of *ḥrm* is uncontested; it derives from the common Semitic root ḤRM, which refers to the sphere of the sacred – awe-inspiring, forbidding, fascinating" (2016: 677). There are however several problems. The word is vocalized in Akkadian *ḫarmu*, not *ḫarīmu*, and is moreover applied exclusively to Tammuz and Apsu (CAD Ḫ: 104). We should then postulate a neologism, in which on the feminine *ḫarīmtu* a masculine form *ḫarīmu* was created. A form *Ḫarīmu* does exist in Akkadian, but it only designates the above-mentioned theonym of likely West Semitic origin that occurs in Old Akkadian (CAD Ḫ: 102) and Neo-Babylonian. The second problem is related to the etymology of the terms. Root *ḥrm* is not Protosemitic, but rather Proto-West-Semitic, and had originally the meaning "to forbid" (Kogan 2015: 84). The root is not attested in Akkadian, where verb *ḫarāmu*, "to separate", usually considered related to *ḫarīmu*, is barely attested (CAD Ḫ: 89–90) and cannot be related to a Proto-Semitic *ḥrm*. In fact, Proto-Semitic ḥ went lost in Akkadian, where the expected form of PS *ḥrm* would be **erēmum*. This is the reason for which the theonym *Ḫarīm* found in proper names in Sargonic age is considered West Semitic rather than Akkadian (Roberts 1972: 30). It must be stressed that *ḫarāmu* means only "to separate", and it does not have any religious connotation. Also *ḫarīmtu* is not a religious term, but rather an administrative label denoting an independent woman not subdued to the authority of a man, who "could be anything from a virgin to a prostitute" (Assante 1998: 13).

In Gen 28:22, as Jacob, after his dream, erects a stele with the stone he used as a pillow during the night, he states "and this stone (*ʾeḇen*), which I have erected as stele (*maṣṣēbāh*), will be a house of god (*bêṯ ʾĕlohîm*)", calling the place Bethel (והאבן הזאת אשר-שמתי מצבה יהיה בית אלהים). The same word, "the house of god", may be found in 28:17, when Jacob, scared by his dream, exclaims: "How dreadful is this place! This is none other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven!" (מה-נורה המקום הזה אין זה כי אם-בית אלהים וזה שער השמים). It is obvious that the scope of the passage is not to establish an equivalence between *bêṯ ʾĕlohîm* and the stone, but rather to explain the toponym. The stele is called *maṣṣēbāh*, a noun well attested also in Aramaic, with the meaning "stele" or "column". Secondly, in Classical authors the *baetylos* is a small, round, magical stone, mainly connected with sky, or the stone swallowed by Chronos (mainly among lexicographers); it is definitely not a stele, nor a column, and nor is there anything of this kind in any Greek or Latin source.[62]

To sum up, I think that these deities cannot be taken as proof of syncretism. It cannot be ruled out that Betʾel entered the Judaean pantheon because of an Aramaean influence, and ʿAnat because of an Egyptian or Phoenician one, but an internal development seems more likely, for both deities were already known in Palestine.

These are the only Semitic deities other than Yahweh occurring in the texts pertaining to the Judaean community. The only exception is a famous ostracon mentioning Nabu, Shamash and Nergal together with Yahweh (CG 277; D7.30), first published by Dupont-Sommer in 1944.[63] The text, dated to the beginning of the 5th century BC, runs:

1. ʾl ʾḥy ḥgy ʾḥwk
2. yrḥw šlm ʾḥy
3. bl wnbw šmš wnrgl

1. To my brother Ḥaggay your brother
2. Yarḥo. The well-being/peace of my brother
3. Bel and Nabu, Šamaš and Nergal (will ask all time?).

This ostracon presents some peculiarities. The text is complete as it is, although there is no verb: the last two letters of *nrgl* are written below the last *š* of *šmš* and conjunction *w*, which means that the ostracon was broken after the text had been written. It is possible that the verb of the salutation formula and the core of the letter were written on another ostracon, but this is not likely, because the ostraca, the

62 As stressed already by Moore (1903); see also Gaifman (2008) and Grassi (2022b).

63 Dupont-Sommer (1944: 28): « recueilli à Éléphantine par l'égyptologue H. Gauthier, au cours d'une campagne des fouilles que celui-ci a conduite sur le site célèbre durant l'hiver 1908–1909 ». The director of the third campaign was however not H. Gauthier, but Joseph-Étienne Gautier.

dimension of which may be considerably different, were usually chosen according to the length of the text. In the corpus there are apparently no cases in which the scribe chose to write the text on two different ostraca. This poses the question as to what the text was intended for. As suggested by Lozachmeur, it is possible that the text was a scribal exercise, or a model for an apprentice scribe.[64] We may also surmise that it was simply the draft of a letter.

The two possibilities, that is that the text is a scribal exercise/model, or a draft, have different implications. From its publication, the text has been taken as paradigmatic to represent the degree of syncretism in everyday life in Elephantine. If the text is a draft, this is a possibility, but if the text is just a model, there are almost no religious implications bar the fact that these deities were known in the colony – as is clear from the proper names.

The text has also been described as "Greetings from a Pagan to a Jew",[65]– and Yarḥo has been frequently called "Aramaean",[66] whereas Ḥaggay would have been Judaean. These names are much more complex than commonly assumed. There is no proof that Ḥaggay was exclusively borne by Judaeans,[67] although in Elephantine the name, which is very common, is mostly associated with Yahwistic names. Yarḥo is definitely not an Aramaean name: in Old and Imperial Aramaic, *yrḥ* is not recorded in proper names but in the Amman inscription (*yrḥʿzr*), which is culturally Ammonite,[68] whereas *yrḥ*-names are known in Ugaritic, Phoenico-Punic, and Ammonite.[69] As far as Hebrew is concerned, Moon-names are not frequent, but they are attested: *ʿbdyrḥ* is known from a seal (CWSS 34),[70] and for Biblical Yārôaḥ a derivation from *yrḥ* has been proposed by Dupont-Sommer.[71] An indirect indication that cult of the Moon was practiced in Palestine are the prohibitions contained in the Bible (Deut. 4:19; 17:3; 2 Kgs 23:5; Jer. 8:2), and further references

64 Lozachmeur (2006: 88, 411). Lemaire, who also considers the text a scribal exercise, prefers the translation "Shalam my brother. Bel and Nabu, Shamash and Nergal" (Lemaire 2013: 60–1). It seems however more logical to consider the deities part of the salutation formula, and not a separate list.

65 Ginsberg (1969: 491).

66 Porten (1968: 166); Grelot (1972: 349).

67 See e. g. Zadok (1979: 24). However, there is no proof, either, that the name was borne by non-Judaeans and in Al-Yaḥudu the name is at least once borne by a Judaean (Pearce, Wunsch 2014: 52–3). There is no doubt that the name is mostly attested among communities with Judaean elements.

68 This inscription has been considered sometimes Ammonite sometimes Aramaic. See recently Fales, Grassi (2016: 244–6).

69 Gröndahl (1967: 145); Benz (1972: 326); Aufrecht (2019: 494).

70 The man has been sometimes considered an Ammonite: see commentary in Avigad, Sass (1997: 62, No. 34).

71 The etymology of the name is disputed (s. Noth 1928: 226; Zadok 1988: 133) and, although Dupont-Sommer's proposal is usually neglected, a derivation from *yrḥ* cannot be ruled out.

in the Bible support the importance of this cult.[72] As far as ending -w is concerned, it must be stressed that, if it is rare in Hebrew proper names,[73] it is almost unattested in Aramaic but for the transcriptions of Arabic anthroponyms (e. g. in Nabataean), in which -w represents their nominative ending. All in all, the possibility that the name is borne by a Judaean, as originally suggested by Dupont-Sommer, seems to be the most likely.

To sum up, it is difficult to judge whether this ostracon represents proof of religious syncretism, because it is a unique piece in several respects. It must be however stressed that Nabu, Shamash and Nergal are recorded nowhere else in Elephantine.

Khnum

Albeit there is no proof of syncretism as far as Semitic deities are concerned, it is clear that the Judaean community was not rigidly monotheistic. The attitude towards the main Egyptian deity of Elephantine, the ram god Khnum, is significant in this respect.

In Elephantine, his temple was located near the temple of Yahweh. The neighbourly relations were apparently peaceful for most of the time, but at the end of the 5th century BC the priests of Khnum were responsible for the attack on the temple of Yahweh. This is of course one of the reasons for which Khnum occurs rather frequently in the documents of the Judaean community, but this is not the whole story, since the proximity of the temple and its importance apparently favoured a certain affection for the god on the part of the Judaeans. It is worth stressing that Khnum is the only god beside Yahweh appearing in a blessing formula, the unique exception being the already discussed ostracon D7.30. It should be also observed that, even in the most dramatic moments of the conflict between the Judaeans and the priests of Khnum, the god himself is mentioned with respect.

It should be noted that Khnum is always called "the god", *ʾlhʾ*, just as Yahweh, although the scribes, when their name is legible (this is not the case for B3.7), bear names which are typical of the Judaean community: Ḥaggay son of Šemayah (B3.4; 3.10; 3.11) and Maʿuziah son of Nathan (B3.5).

We would look in vain for any anathema or disdain. Quite the contrary, from the scarce evidence it is clear that Khnum was considered powerful.

In a letter likely sent from Abydos at the end of the 5th century BC (A4.3), a worried Maʿuziah son of Nathan (the scribe of contract B3.5 mentioned above) wrote to "Yedaniah, ʾUriah and the priests of Yahweh the god" in Elephantine to inform

72 See Schmidt (1999).

73 Zadok (1988: 157–8).

them about the difficult experience he had just lived. He had been imprisoned in Abydos under an accusation of theft. Unfortunately, no detail is provided about the situation, which was evidently not only a matter of theft, because in a sibylline sentence he states "To you it is known that Khnum is against us since Ḥananiah has been in Egypt until now" (*lkm ydyʿ zy ḫnwm hw ʿlyn mn zy ḫnnyh bmṣryn ʿd kʿn*, l. 8). Whatever the reason for the conflict, it is interesting that not the priests of Khnum are said to be against the Judaean community, but the god himself. The involvement of the god is emphasized by the presence of the pronoun *hw*, which is normally used to give prominence. It is possible that Maʿuziah ultimately meant that the priests of Khnum were acting against the Judaeans of Elephantine; but he wrote the name of the god and stressed the same by the use of the pronoun, thus implying that he recognized him as god and as fearful force.

Much more benevolent is thought to be the force of Khnum on an ostracon (D7.21/CG70),[74] found during the French campaign in Elephantine in 1907 and dated to the first half of the 5th century BC. The ostracon runs as follows:

1. ʾl mry mykyh ʿbdk
2. gdl šlm wḥyn šlḥt
3. lk brktk lyhh wlḥnwm
4. kʿn šlḥly lbšʾ
5. zy ʿlyk wʾ/yḥṭnh
6. lšlmk šlḥt sprʾ

1. To my Lord Mikayah your servant
2. Gaddul. Peace and life I sent
3. to you. I blessed you by Yahweh and Khnum.
4. Now, send me the garment
5. that you wear, so that he/I will sew it.[75]
6. About your welfare I sent the letter.

Milkayah is a Yahwistic name, and Gaddul a frequent anthroponym among the Judaean community. The mention of Yahweh together with Khnum is unique in the corpus, but it clearly shows the respect of the Judeans toward the main deity of the island.

Further evidence that Khnum was appreciated also by people of likely West Semitic origin may perhaps be found in contract B2.7, dated 446 BC, although the reading of the theonym is disputed. In this contract, Maḥseyah son of Yedanyah gives her daughter Mipṭaḥyah a house. The boundaries of this house are said to

74 First published by Dupont-Sommer (1945).

75 The reading *y* seems to be more likely than ʾ according to the photo: "and he will sew it".

be the house of Yaʾuš son of Penuliah, the temple of Yahweh, the house of Gaddul son of ʾOšeʿa, and the house of Ḥarudj or Ḥaruṣ son of Palṭu, most likely priest of Khnum the god. The name of the god is partially reconstructed. Since *kmr*, "priest" (of a god other than Yahweh), and *ʾlhʾ* are legible, what follows *kmr zy* is obviously the name of a god. The first editors, Arthur Cowley and Archibald Sayce, suggested *kmr* [*lḥnw*]⌜*m*⌝ [*ws*]*ty ʾlhyʾ*, "the priest of the gods [Khnûm and Sa]ti",[76] whereas Porten and Yardeni do not restore the theonym: *kmr zy ḥ*[…] *ʾlhʾ*. Judging from the plate published in the first editions, *ʾlhʾ* is almost certain, and there is moreover not enough space in the lacuna to contain two theonyms. The traces after *kmr* are fully compatible with *zy*. The first grapheme of the god name is almost surely *ḥ*, and the traces of the second grapheme are compatible with *n*. The third grapheme is completely lost, whereas traces of the fourth are still visible. A reading *ḥn*[*w*]*m* seems then to be preferable, although both *n* and *m* are not entirely certain. Moreover, we know that this priest lived in the Elephantine, near the temple of Yahweh, and this means near the temple of Khnum as well.

To sum up, all the evidence suggests that *ḥrwṣ br plṭw* was a priest of Khnum. Although *ḥrwṣ* may be interpreted either as Egyptian or as Semitic, *plṭw* is surely Semitic, and both names are attested in Hebrew (albeit the second with suffix *-y* and not *-w*).[77] It is thus possible that this priest of Khnum was of Judean origin.

Syene

The letters of Hermopolis and the burial texts from Saqqara

As already pointed out, very few documents have been found in Syene. As regards the Semitic cults attested there, our main sources are the letters sent to Syene from Memphis, which for unknown reasons were left in Hermopolis, located near the boundaries between Upper and Lower Egypt. In these letters, Makkibanit son of Psami and Nebušezib son of Peṭeḥnum, likely half-brothers,[78] wrote to their family

76 Sayce, Cowley (1906: 40–1, (translation and notes), 66 (transliteration), Text E).

77 For Ḥārûṣ (Father-in-law of king Manasseh)/*ḥrwṣ* and its different etymologies, s. Silverman (1985: 148), Zadok (1988: 110), HAHAT, 396. For Palṭî/*plṭy* and similar names, s. Silverman (1985: 170), Zadok (1988: 74), HAHAT, 1054–5.

78 Their father is different and their mother apparently the same (A2.1; A2.4). However, "father" and "mother" seem to have been used sometimes as honorific titles, as in A2.1, where Nebušezib addresses Psami as "my father". Perhaps, "father" and "mother" can sometimes be used with the meaning "father/mother in law", and Makkibanit and Nabušezib could be, as suggested by Bresciani, Kamil (1966: 365) and Grelot (1972: 147), brothers-in law. Many family relations remain unclear because of the ambiguity of the term "brother" and "sister", the meaning of which is fluid and

in Syene, and in the opening formulas they mention the temples of their home city: the already mentioned temple of Bet$^{?}$el and the temple of the Queen of Heaven (A2.1: *šlm byt bt$^{?}$l wbyt mlkt šmyn*), the temple of Nabu (A2.3: *šlm byt nbw*), the temple of Banit (*šlm byt bnt bswn*: A2.2 and A2.4; in 2.2 is mentioned also "perfumed oil for the temple of Banit" (*mšḥ bšm lbt bnt*), bought by Makkibanit). This formula is usually translated as "Greetings to the temple of Bet$^{?}$el and the temple of Malkat Shamayn/Banit in Syene/Nabu", and then "from X to Y". I find more convincing the suggestion by Fales,[79] who considers *šlm byt* DN related to the second part: "The peace/well-being of the temple of X to my sister Y from your brother Z". In this interpretation, the sender is asking for the peace/ well-being emanating from the temple to be conveyed upon his relative. If *šlm byt* DN is interpreted as greetings to the temple, the construction is, as far as I know, unprecedented. If a kind of blessing is asked through the temple, then this formula shows a possible Babylonian influence, for the concept of appealing to a temple for a blessing is attested in South Babylonia. One of the governors of Uruk used this kind of blessing in his letters: "May Uruk and Eanna bless the king of the land my lord" (*Uruk u Eanna ana šar mātāti bēlīja likrubū*).[80]

A Mesopotamian influence is visible also in some of the mentioned deities, Nabu and Banit. Nabu is by far the second most common Semitic deity after Yahweh in the Aramaic texts from Egypt, and in their anthroponymy. A further mention of his cult in Syene is provided by the clay sarcophagus found in Saqqara Sud by Gustave Jéquier, which mentions a priest of Nabu from Syene (TADAE D18.1): *lš$^{?}$yl kmr$^{?}$ zy nbw ytb tqm$^{?}$ bswn*. Ša$^{?}$īl, a man bearing an Aramaic name, is thus "priest of Nabu", and *bswn*, "in Syene", makes clear that the cult of the god was in Syene. Participle *ytb*, "residing", is usually referred to Ša$^{?}$īl, but it could refer to god Nabu as well.[81]

Nabu is a deity of Mesopotamian origin, as well as Banit. The name of this goddess may represent either Akkadian *banītu*, "Beautiful one", or Akkadian *bānītu*, "Creatress" (CAD B, 94–95). Banītu and Bānītu are found as epithets for Nanay (CAD

indicates generically a strong relation: in letter A2.7 – which is not part of the Makkibanit/Nebušezib correspondence – the sender defines himself "brother" and the recipient "mother" on the inside and "sister" on the outside.

79 Fales (1987).

80 Arnold (1992: 384).

81 In the first case, the difficult term *tqm$^{?}$* has been interpreted either as an adverb, "ordinarily" (prefix *t* + root *qwm*; these formations *t* + *qwm* are indeed well attested, however to my knowledge not in adverbial sense), or as the usual word for "ricin oil" (Egyptian loanword), here in the sense of "the castor place". In the second case, *tqm$^{?}$* would be a substantive with the meaning "sanctuary" (for both interpretations, see DNWSI, 1228).

B, 81, 3'),[82] although the latter is more frequently used for Ištar.[83] An identification with Nanay, the spouse of Nabu, seems quite reasonable.[84]

We have already discussed about Bet^{ʾ}el and the impulse that Mesopotamia likely gave to the spread of his worship. As regards the "Queen of Heaven", her identification is difficult, because the epithet is used for several goddesses and is rather generic. This "Queen" has been identified either with Astarte[85] or with ^{ʿ}Anat,[86] although a combination of the two cannot be ruled out, and the use of generic epithets might be "a symptom of a religious atmosphere in which the qualities of a deity are held to be of more importance than her name",[87] and already in 1967 Milik observed that a mixed religious milieu could have facilitated the use of shared epithets, without the loss of one's own traditions.[88]

Albeit these deities are all Semitic, the blessing formula contains always the name of the Egyptian god Ptaḥ: "I/we bless you (m./f./pl.) by Ptaḥ, who may/will show me your (f., m., pl.) face in peace" (*brktky*/*brktk*/*brknkn lptḥ zy yḥwny*/*yḥzny ʾpyky*/*ʾpyk*/*ʾpykn bšlm*), and the formula shows perhaps a Demotic influence.[89] It is likely that Ptaḥ was chosen because he was the main god of the city, Memphis, in which the letters were written and the two "brothers" Makkibanit and Nabušezib were at that time conducting their business. It is indeed very common that the Egyptian deities mentioned in the Aramaic texts are related to the place in which the texts were written.[90]

These letters clearly show on one hand that the members of this family were willing to use an Egyptian god (more specifically, the god of the city in which they were staying) in the blessing formula, and on the other hand that they were still attached to "their" temples of Semitic deities in Syene. The anthroponymy of their letters shows the same tendency. Several names, and among them Makkibanit and Nabušezib, contain as theophoric elements the very same deities who had their temples in Syene. There are moreover some other names containing Semitic theophoric elements, but there are also Egyptian names, sometimes containing Egyptian theophoric elements.

82 Tallqvist (1938: 386).

83 Tallqvist (1938: 70–1).

84 See Holm (2017: 24–5).

85 Bresciani, Kamil (1966: 400).

86 Porten (1969: 120).

87 Houtman (1999: 679).

88 Milik (1967: 563).

89 Vittmann (2017: 252). Particle *zy* can be translated either as a relative particle, as in Demotic, or as declarative particle, as it is usually translated.

90 We have already seen that the most common Egyptian deity in Elephantine is Khnum. We may further notice for example the mention of Osiris in the *proskynemata* from the Osirieion of Abydos (D22.9–27) and the *proskynemata* to Min in Abu Qwei (Eastern Desert; D22.29–32).

There are clearly two cultures that have been intermingled in these texts. The Semitic background of the people involved is still strong, as demonstrated by many anthroponyms, by the mention of the temples of Semitic deities and by the choice of the language. Several names are however Egyptian, and Egyptian is the deity chosen in the blessing formula. In spite of their openness towards Egyptian culture, all the temples in Syene are temples of Semitic deities, and their mother tongue apparently still dominated over Egyptian. The picture provided by these letters portrays a phase in which Semitic culture was still dominant, in spite of the fact that Makkibanit and Nabušezib were hardly recent immigrants, given the Egyptian names of their fathers.

The Sarcophagi

Whereas we have no burial inscription from Elephantine, the situation is slightly better for Syene.

Among the scanty inscriptions found in Aswan, three occur on interesting limestone anthropoid sarcophagi in the Egyptian style, likely dated to the 5th century BC. They were all found near the temple of Isis in 1963 during the excavations by El-Hetta. Each coffin is different, as it may be seen from the photo published in 1967 in the edition princeps by Kornfeld.[91] The represented deities are all Egyptian: Apis, Isis and Nephtys, Maat, the Ba-bird, the four sons of Horus. These sarcophagi, together with some Egyptianizing stelae with Aramaic inscriptions found elsewhere in Egypt,[92] betray the influence of Egyptian Afterlife conceptions and practices on Aramaic-speaking immigrants.

As for the Egyptianizing stelae, no Semitic deity nor Semitic religious iconography can be found in these objects, which however at least in one case seem to indicate a non-Egyptian craftmanship.[93] Again, Semitic and Egyptian names coexisted. *šbty* in D18.18 is a West Semitic name, possibly but not necessarily Judaean, *ḥwr* in D18.17 is a common Egyptian name, and *ʾbyty*[94] *brt šmšnwry*, a woman, bears a Semitic anthroponym, as well as her father.

Given the fact that Aramaic was chosen, and that at least in one case the iconography seems to be untypical for Egypt, it may be assumed that the three coffins were destined to Orientals. However, no detail is provided about the excavations. It is

91 Photos and descriptions may be found in Kornfeld (1967); see also Porten, Gee (2001: 273–9).

92 For these stelae, see Vittmann (2003: 106–115); Porten, Gee (2001); Schipper (forthcoming); for the Salt stele, see recently Grassi (2021).

93 E. Winter apud Kornfeld (1967: 15); Vittmann (2017: 254); *contra* Porten, Gee (2001: 279): according to them, the craftmanship of the coffins is purely Egyptian, and only the inscriptions were misplaced by the non-Egyptian purchasers.

94 Kornfeld (1967: 13): *ʾbrty*, palaeographically possible but unlikely.

thus unclear if there was a cemetery, or a part of the cemetery dedicated to foreign communities. Kornfeld comments that the sarcophagi were used by members of the Judaean community of Elephantine, and that they demonstrate that their religion was syncretistic.[95] As already pointed out, not every member of the colony was Judaean. Other Aramaeophone groups of the colony are simply underrepresented. Nothing in these coffins suggests a Judaean origin of the deceased but the name *šbty*, which may however be found also among non-Judaeans (for example in the Hermopolis letters). On the contrary, a name as *šmšnwry* does not favour a Judaean origin for its bearer.

However, at least one text suggests that mummification was practised by Judaeans in Elephantine, for a wooden mummy label was found during the excavation by Rubensohn with the Aramaic text *šbh br hwšʿ* (D19.7; Sachau (1911: text 84/13, Pl. 71/13). The patronymic is a short form of *hwšʿyh*, and both names are Hebrew and very common among the Judaean community, whereas they do not seem to be borne by "Aramaeans".

It is thus clear that Egyptian(izing) funerary practices were widespread among Orientals (and perhaps also among Judaeans[96]), who were at the same time willing to maintain a bond with their antecedents, expressed by their choice of language.

A rare votive inscription

The dedication made by the Persian troop commander of Syene (D17.1) is a unique item of the corpus. It comes allegedly from Syene, but no further detail is provided

95 Kornfeld (1967: 14).

96 Note that one of the Egyptianizing steles from Saqqara could contain a Yahwistic name. This fragment was published by Aimé-Giron (1939: 40–43 and Pl. III, No. 114), but its fate is unknown. The fragment (h 13,2 cm x w 11,00 cm x d 4,5 cm) contains part of two registers, but the upper one is broken, and only some jars and the bottom part of two human or divine bodies are visible (legs and skirts, once long and once short). I cannot detect the third human figure mentioned by Aimé-Giron. I suspect that what he described as a third frontal man is rather an object. Comparing this iconography with the other stele, I would cautiously suggest that the object could be a vase, and that the two men/deities (Anubis?) were part of an embalming scene close to that represented in the Vatican Stele, where the two depicted Anubis and their attendants wear skirts of different length. The underlying register depicts wailing women with "Syrian" hairdressing. The two registers are separated by the Aramaic inscription (TADAE D20.4): *brk pṭʾs*[*y*] *br yhʾ*[...], "blessed be Peteese son of *yhʾ*[...]". The first name is Egyptian. As far as the second one is concerned, Aimé-Giron suggested that it could be either Egyptian or Yahwistic; although he favoured the first interpretation, he did not rule out the short form of *yhwʾwr*, here misspelled *yhʾ*[*wr*] (1939: 42). Indeed, the only proper names in the corpus beginning with the sequence *yh-* are Yahwistic, and the error postulated by Aimé-Giron remains in my opinion the most likely explanation.

by its first editor, Melchior de Vogüé.[97] It is fragmentary, being mutilated both in its upper and its lower part; its current measures are 27.5 cm h x 44.2 cm w x 12.5 cm d, and it is now in Cairo (J. 36448). The text, engraved on red sandstone, contains five lines, and traces of the upper part of a sixth line, completely illegible. The surface had been prepared by tracing horizontal traits.

1. brzmdnʾ znh (...)[...]
2. rb ḥylʾ zy swn ʿbd
3. byrḥ sywn hw mḥyr
4. šnt šbʿ ʾrtḥšsš mlkʾ
5. [..](.)wpr/dn⌜ḥ⌝ty ʾlhʾ drwk
6. [...]

1. This *brzmdnʾ* (...)[...]
2. the troop commander of Syene made
3. in the month of Siwan, i. e. Meḥir,
4. year seven of Artaxerxes the king
5. [to? ...]*wpr*/*dnḥty* the god. Peace
6. [...]

The name of the troop commander is lost: although it has been suggested to restore Vidranga,[98] the author of the attack on the temple of Yahweh, this reading seems impossible judging from the photo. Artaxerxes is likely Artaxerxes I (458 BC; Lemaire prefers Artaxerxes II, i. e. 398 BC,[99] but this seems less likely).

The object dedicated is called *brzmdnʾ*, a Persian loanword which is however only indirectly transmitted. According to Bogoljubov, its meaning is "house of rites" (*brazman*, "rite" and **dāna*, "house"), hence "shrine".[100] However, the etymological analysis proposed by Bogoljubov has been criticised, for the precise meaning of Old Persian *brazman* is still debated, and the second part of the noun may be explained with the element *-dāna-*, "holder, container", which is used also to build architectural lexicon; the word would then mean the "holder of devotion".[101] An analysis of the second element as *-dāna-*, "holder, container" was proposed by

97 De Vogüé (1903). Note that Seymour De Ricci, in his Appendix II. Bibliography of Egyptian Aramaic Papyri in Sayce, Cowley (1906: 27–34), indicates rather Elephantine as the provenance (page 32).

98 Lemaire (1991).

99 Lemaire (1991: 200–201).

100 Quoted in Lemaire (1991: 200); Tavernier (2007: 438).

101 Tavernier (2007:438). The word *brz*[*mn*]ʾ, with the meaning "ceremony" (Lemaire, Lozachmeur 1998: 308–14), has been reconstructed also in one Aramaic inscription from Meydancikkale (Cilicia), which is however very fragmentary.

Andreas, who saw in the first part of the noun the element **barzma*, "holy twig", hence "holder of the holy twigs" ("der Behälter für die heiligen Zweige");[102] it should be noted that the word is attested in Syriac as well as in Mandaic (*bwrsm*ʾ), where it denotes indeed the twigs used by the Persian magi during their ceremonies.[103] Tavernier considers this meaning unlikely for Aramaic *brzmdn*ʾ, apparently not for the etymology, but for the fact that the inscription should indicate a kind of building. However, the verb used in the inscription is ʿ*bd*, "to make", which may be used for a temple, but also for any other object, from an altar to a statue. Since the archaeological context of the inscription is unknown, it cannot be taken for granted that it is a building inscription. Even if *brzmdn*ʾ defines a religious building, it is in my opinion more likely that it designates something specifically Iranian rather than a generic "shrine".

As far as the deity is concerned, Andreas suggested that the name of the god could be interpreted as a transcription of ʾ*nh*(*y*)*ty*, Anahita, or *spnd*(*t*)ʾ*rmt*, *spontā aramatiš*,[104] but Lidzbarski rightly observed that both of these readings are impossible.[105] Grelot thought that the deity was Ahura Mazda,[106] but his suggestion is once again impossible according to the photo. It must be observed that already the first editor read [*l*].*w*.*rn*.*ty*, with a reading very close to [*l*.].*wpd*/*rnḥty* of Porten and Yardeni. Almost all the letters are clear from the photo. This rules out the attractive reading suggested by Lemaire, [*l*].*w*⌜*s*⌝*rn*⌜*ḫ*⌝*ty*, to Osirnaḫty, "Osiris the strong".[107] The second part could be a transcription of Egyptian *nḫt*, "strong", but the first part (.*wpr*/*d*) does not seem to provide any satisfactory parallel. The problem is that no deity seems to be known with this sequence of graphemes, not in Egypt nor in Persia. Albeit his name remains obscure, the following ʾ*lh*ʾ makes clear that he is a male god.

Although it is nowadays assumed that the deity is Egyptian, in my opinion an Iranian origin cannot be ruled out. Syene was the residence of the troop commander, who was Persian and had likely Persian officials at his orders. It is thus conceivable that the commander and his subordinates had an Iranian cultic shrine at their disposal. If it is true that the name of the deity is unknown, it must be observed that we know Egyptian deities better than Iranian ones. Moreover, if the shrine/the cultic object was dedicated to an Egyptian god, both the use of Iranian loanwords, in particular for the dedicated object/building, and the choice of writing in Aramaic,

102 Andreas apud Lidzbarski 1908: 222, note 1. Grelot (1972, 333–4) follows this interpretation.

103 SL, 131–132; MD, 57.

104 Apud Lidzbarski (1908: 223, note 1). He does not explain it. I suppose that he means the goddess Speñta Aramaiti, but ʾ*lh*ʾ is clearly masculine.

105 Lidzbarski (1908 : 223, note 1).

106 Grelot (1972: 333–4, No. 75).

107 Lemaire (1991).

and in Aramaic only (unless the text is the extant part of a bilingual inscription), would be difficult to understand. Although Aramaic was one of the official languages in the Achaemenid Empire, the use of Egyptian in this case would have been more natural, whereas Aramaic is an understandable choice for an inscription addressed to an Iranian god outside Persia.

It must be stressed that we have very few texts directed by Persians to Egyptian deities, and that they seem to have been written by sons of mixed marriages.[108]

Moreover, a further characteristic of the devotion manifested by Persians to foreign deities is the relationship with local cults, although the similarity between an Iranian and a local deity could have been a further stimulus.[109] Both these factors would lack in this case with a (palaeographically difficult) reading Osiris, for neither Osiris is the local deity of Syene/Elephantine nor he is similar to any Persian god.

Why should a Persian high official dedicate at Syene a temple or a cultic object to Osiris, using Aramaic for the writing of the inscription, and make recourse to a Persian loanword to define the dedicated object/building (and a further Persian word for "peace", *drwk*[110])? This scenario is in my opinion hard to conceive, unless the idea was exactly to dedicate an Iranian cultic tool to an Egyptian god, be he Osiris or a still unknown Egyptian local deity. In this case, the willingness to treat the local deity appropriately could explain the offering, and the willingness to stress the origin and culture of the donor could explain its Iranian nature. If the deity is Egyptian, I think it is unlikely that the offering is a shrine. Apparently, Persian kings, or at least their satraps, were involved even in the granting of permission to build or rebuild/repair temples to non-Iranian deities, as is the case for the temple of Yahweh in Elephantine. It is thus unlikely that the troop commander could have built a temple to an Egyptian god without the approval, or even the support, of the king and the satrap. The inscription is incomplete, but the commander is the subject of the verb, and he incontestably plays the most important role, the king being mentioned only in the dating formula.

To sum up, I would not rule out the possibility that the deity was Iranian; if Egyptian, then the dedicated object could hardly have been a temple or shrine.

Whether directed to an Iranian or to an Egyptian god, the inscription is unique. It would be the only dedication to an Egyptian god in Aramaic together with an offering table from Saqqara (D20.1), and as far as I know, it would have been the only dedication to an Iranian god in Egypt. The implications would be obviously different.

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108 See Kuhrt (2013: 157–8). For the stela of Djeherbes, found in Saqqara in 1994, see recently Wasmuth (2017), who analyses also other cultural traditions in the stele, due either to the owner's wish or to the artist's background.

109 Kuhrt (2013: 158).

110 *drwk* (**Druvata*-), "blessing, peace": Tavernier (2007: 403), and see already Andreas apud Lidzbarski (1908: 223, note 2).

A dedication to an Egyptian god would point either to a certain acculturation, or to the desire of keeping the local deities, and possibly their worshippers, favourable to the Persian rulers, whereas the presence of an Iranian cult would reflect the official religion of the Empire, and of its officials and functionaries far from home.

Conclusions

As far as the Judaean community is concerned, their form of Judaism, albeit clearly different from the model proposed in the Bible, is hardly syncretistic. Yahweh is by far the main deity. Few other Semitic gods are recorded, two of them, Ḥerem/Ḥarim and Betʾel/Baytʾel, are probably somehow connected with the temple, which was the centre of the Judaean cult. In my opinion these Semitic deities do not necessarily indicate a form of syncretism, because they can be interpreted simply as remnants of a common Canaanite religious heritage. Indeed, the two deities mostly considered to be "Aramaean", namely Betʾel and ʿAnat, are better attested in the Canaanaean pantheon than in the Aramaean one. Also the presence of a paredra of Yahweh is documented in Palestine in the 9th and 8th century BC. On the contrary, the most widespread Semitic god in the Achaemenid age, Nabu, is recorded just once in Elephantine, in an ostracon which is in many respects an unicum. Other gods and goddesses known from the letters of Hermopolis and from anthroponymy, for example Banit or Nanay, are absent in the documents pertaining to the Judaean community.

Judaeans were clearly respectful towards other gods, and they regarded Khnum, a powerful deity, as the most important Egyptian god of Elephantine. They seem also to have accepted Egyptian funerary customs, although the evidence from Elephantine is scant.

In a nutshell, the religion of the Judaean community seems to have been strongly Yahwistic, albeit not monotheistic in a proper sense, and thus quite different from Biblical Judaism. This might be due simply to the fact that official religion and everyday, domestic religion was kept separate[111]. However, the possibility that Biblical Judaism was still not the rule should be taken into strong consideration.[112]

As far as Syene is concerned, the scanty evidence comes from other sites, with the exception of the sarcophagi and the dedication by the Persian chief of the army.

Two Semitic deities venerated in Syene were of Mesopotamian origin, namely Nabu and Banit, whereas Betʾel is not Mesopotamian, but his cult was probably

111 Becking (2011: 408–9).

112 As pointed out by Kratz (2013: 196): "Nicht Elephantine und die Judäer in Ägypten, sondern die Hebräische Bibel und das biblische Judentum waren selbst in persischer Zeit noch die Ausnahme und nicht die Regel".

launched in Babylonia during the Neo-Babylonian period. Properly Aramaean deities, such as Baʿal Shamayn and Hadad, who were important in Old Aramaic inscriptions, are almost unattested in Syene and in whole Egypt even in proper names. It seems likely that at least part of the community of Syene had some contacts with Mesopotamia before the emigration. The letters found in Hermopolis demonstrate that the cult of Semitic deities was important in Syene at the end of 6th/beginning of 5th century BC, and the burial inscription of the priest of Nabu confirms that his cult was still practiced in the late 5th century BC. In the meantime, Aramaic-speaking immigrants were attracted by Egyptian cults and practices. The god Ptah is mentioned in the Hermopolis letters sent from Memphis, and a local criterion is visible in the Aramaic inscriptions and graffiti in Egypt, for they often mention local deities. Albeit less impressive than the stelae found in Lower Egypt, the sarcophagi found in Syene testify once again to the main area in which Egyptian religion was attractive to Aramaic-speaking foreigners, namely the Afterlife.

Dedicatory inscriptions in Aramaic are surprisingly scarce in the whole of Egypt, and Syene/Elephantine is no exception. For this reason, the sacred object dedicated in Syene by the chief of the army is most remarkable, even if neither the nature of the object nor the deity (Egyptian or Iranian) are entirely clear.

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