

# Aramaic Letters

TRANSLATOR: H. L. GINSBERG

## Letters of the Jews in Elephantine

### "THE PASSOVER PAPYRUS"

A very defective strip of papyrus with writing on both sides. Text: Sachau, 6; Ungnad, 6; Cowley, 21. Date: 419 B.C.

[To] my [brethren Yedo]niah<sup>1</sup> and his colleagues the [J]ewish gar[rison], your brother Hanan[iah].<sup>2</sup> The welfare of my brothers may God<sup>3</sup> [seek at all times]. Now, this year, the fifth year of King Darius, word was sent from the king to Arsa[mes<sup>4</sup> saying, "Authorize a festival of unleavened bread for the Jew]ish [garrison]." So do you count fou[rteen days of the month of Nisan and] obs[erve the passover],<sup>5</sup> and from the 15th to the 21st day of [Nisan observe the festival of unleavened bread]. Be (ritually) clean and take heed. [Do n]o work [on the 15th or the 21st day, no]r drink [beer,<sup>6</sup> nor eat] anything [in] which the[re is] leaven [from the 14th at] sundown until the 21st of Nis[an. Br]ing into your closets [anything leavened that you may have on hand] and seal it up between those date[s. By order of King Darius.

To] my brethren Yedoniah and the Jewish garrison, your brother Hanani[ah].

### CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE CULT OF YAHO

A very broad sheet of papyrus with 7 columns of Aramaic; traces of palimpsest. Text: Sachau, 17-19; Ungnad, 19; Cowley, 22. Date: 419 or 400 B.C.<sup>7</sup> See the special study of U. Cassuto in *Kedem*, 1, pp. 47-52.

On the 3rd of Phamenoth,<sup>8</sup> year 5. This is (*sic!*) the names of the Jewish garrison which (*sic!*) gave money to the God Yaho, [2 shekels] each.

(Lines 2-119, 126-135 name 123 contributors of both sexes.)

(120-125) Cash on hand with Yedoniah the son of Gemariah on the said day of the month of Phamenoth: 31 *karash*, 8 shekels. Comprising: for Yaho 12 *k.*, 6 sh.;<sup>9</sup> for Ishumbethel<sup>9a</sup> 7 *k.*; for Anathbethel<sup>10</sup> 12 *k.*

<sup>1</sup> A priest and head of the Jewish community (military colony) of Elephantine.

<sup>2</sup> Apparently a secretary for Jewish affairs to Arsames. See n.4.

<sup>3</sup> Literally "the gods," but with Hananiah this is obviously nothing but a fossilized formula.

<sup>4</sup> Satrap of Egypt from 455/4 to at least 407.

<sup>5</sup> The word *ps'h* in two ostraca from Elephantine may mean "passover (offering)." See Sukenik and Kutscher, *Kedem*, 1 (1942), 53-56.

<sup>6</sup> This restoration is only correct if Hananiah's tradition, like rabbinic law, included under "leaven" fermented grain but not fermented fruit (wine). The Samaritans take a more rigorous view.

<sup>7</sup> Depending on whether the fifth year is that of Darius II or of the native Egyptian king Amyrtaeus (cf. Cowley, 35).

<sup>8</sup> A month in the Egyptian calendar.

<sup>9</sup> Since 1 *karash* = 20 (light) shekels, this is the correct total for 123 contributions of 2 shekels each. The monies for the other two deities were

### SETTLEMENT OF CLAIM BY OATH

Text: Sayce-Cowley, F; Cowley, 14. Date: 440 B.C.

The Jewess Mibtahiah (*Mbthyyh*) had apparently married the Egyptian Pi' and then the marriage had been dissolved. The marriage had meant Mibtahiah's exit from the Jewish community and adoption into the Egyptian. Even its liquidation necessitated her swearing by an Egyptian deity. The witnesses to this document are neither Jewish nor Egyptian.

On the 14th of Ab, being the 19th day of Pahons, in the year 25 of King Artaxerxes, Pi' the son of Pahi (*Phy*), builder, of the fortress of Syene, said to Mibtahiah, daughter of Mahseiah the son of Yedoniah, an Aramean of Syene of the detachment of Varizata (as follows): In accordance with the action which we took at Syene, *let us make a division* of the silver, grain, raiment, bronze, iron, and all goods and possessions and marriage contract. Then an oath was imposed upon you, and you swore to me concerning them by the goddess Sati. I was satisfied with the oath which you took to me concerning your goods, and I renounce all claim on you from this day for ever.

### GREETING FROM A PAGAN TO A JEW

Ostrakon. Published by A. Dupont-Sommer, *RHR*, cxxviii (1944), 28-39. The sender's name, *Yrhw*, resembles the Palmyrene personal name *Yrhy*, which in turn is connected with that of the Palmyrene god *Yrhwul*. His Aramean nationality is also betrayed by the gods he invokes, Mesopotamian deities favored by Arameans.

To my brother Haggai, your brother Yarho. The welfare of my brother (may) Bel and Nabu, Shamash and Nergal (seek at all times).

### LETTER FROM ONE JEW TO ANOTHER OF SUPERIOR STATION

Ostrakon. Published by A. Dupont-Sommer, *RHR*, cxxx (1945), 17-28.

To my lord Micaiah, your servant Giddel. I send you welfare and life. I bless you by Yaho and Khn[ub].<sup>11</sup> Now, send me the garment that is on you and they will mend it. I send the note for your welfare.

### PETITION FOR AUTHORIZATION TO REBUILD THE TEMPLE OF YAHO

A well-preserved papyrus with writing on both sides, apparently a copy of one sent to Jerusalem. Text: Sachau, 1-2; doubtless contributed by non-Jews, Yedoniah (see n.1) acting as treasurer or banker for all the Arameans of Elephantine.

<sup>9a</sup> Male divinity.

<sup>10</sup> Probably female divinity.

<sup>11</sup> A famous male deity of Elephantine. If the completion is erroneous, the writer in any case invokes another deity besides Yaho.

Ungnad, 1; Cowley 30. Date: 407 B.C. (Another, defective copy, with some variants: Sachau, 3; Ungnad, 2; Cowley 31.)

To our lord Bagoas, governor of Judah, your servants Yedoniah and his colleagues, the priests who are in the fortress of Elephantine. May the God of Heaven seek after the welfare of our lord exceedingly at all times and give you favor before King Darius and the nobles a thousand times more than now. May you be happy and healthy at all times. Now, your servant Yedoniah and his colleagues depose as follows: In the month of Tammuz in the 14th year of King Darius,<sup>12</sup> when Arsames (5) departed and went to the king, the priests of the god Khnub, who is in the fortress of Elephantine, conspired with Vidaranag, who was commander-in-chief here, to wipe out the temple of the god Yaho from the fortress of Elephantine. So that wretch Vidaranag sent to his son Nefayan, who was in command of the garrison of the fortress of Syene, this order, "The temple of the god Yaho in the fortress of Yeb is to be destroyed." Nefayan thereupon led the Egyptians with the other troops. Coming with their weapons to the fortress of Elephantine, they entered that temple and razed it to the ground. The stone pillars that were there they smashed. Five (10) "great"<sup>13</sup> gateways built with hewn blocks of stone which were in that temple they demolished, but their doors *are standing*, and the hinges of those doors are of bronze; and *their* roof of cedar-wood, all of it, with the . . . and whatever else was there, everything they burnt with fire. As for the basins of gold and silver and other articles that were in that temple, they carried all of them off and made them their own.—Now, our forefathers built this temple in the fortress of Elephantine back in the days of the kingdom of Egypt, and when Cambyses came to Egypt he found it built. They knocked down all the temples of the gods of Egypt, but no one did any damage to this temple. (15) But when this happened, we and our wives and our children wore sackcloth, and fasted, and prayed to Yaho the Lord of Heaven, who has let us see our desire upon that Vidaranag. The dogs took the fetter out of his feet,<sup>14</sup> and any property he had gained was lost; and any men who have sought to do evil to this temple have all been killed and we have seen our desire upon them.—We have also sent a letter before now, when this evil was done to us, (to) our lord and to the high priest Johanan<sup>15</sup> and his colleagues the priests in Jerusalem and to Ostanes the brother of Anani<sup>16</sup> and the nobles of the Jews. Never a letter have they sent to us. Also, from the month of Tammuz, year 14 of King Darius, (20) to this day, we have been wearing sackcloth and fasting, making our wives as widows, not anointing ourselves with oil or drinking wine. Also, from then to now, in the year 17 of King Darius,<sup>17</sup> no meal-offering, in[cen]se, nor burnt offering

have been offered in this temple. Now your servants Yedoniah, and his colleagues, and the Jews, the citizens of Elephantine, all say thus: If it please our lord, take thought of this temple to rebuild it, since they do not let us rebuild it. Look to your well-wishers and friends here in Egypt. Let a letter be sent from you to them concerning the temple of the god Yaho (25) to build it in the fortress of Elephantine as it was built before; and the meal-offering, incense, and burnt offering will be offered in your name, and we shall pray for you at all times, we, and our wives, and our children, and the Jews who are here, all of them, if you do thus, so that that temple is rebuilt. And you shall have a merit before Yaho the God of Heaven more than a man who offers to him burnt offering and sacrifices worth a thousand talents of silver and (because of)<sup>18</sup> gold. Because of this we have written to inform you. We have also set the whole matter forth in a letter in our name to Delaiah and Shelemiah, the sons of Sanballat the governor of Samaria.<sup>19</sup> (30) Also, Arsames knew nothing of all that was done to us. On the 20th of Marheshwan, year 17 of King Darius.

#### ADVICE OF THE GOVERNORS OF JUDAH AND SAMARIA TO THE JEWS OF ELEPHANTINE

Text: Sachau, 4; Ungnad, 3; Cowley, 32.

Memorandum of what Bagoas and Delaiah said to me: Let this be an instruction to you in Egypt to say before Arsames about the house of offering of the God of Heaven which had been in existence in the fortress of Elephantine (5) since ancient times, before Cambyses, and was destroyed by that wretch Vidaranag in the year 14 of King Darius: to rebuild it on its site as it was before, and the meal-offering and incense<sup>20</sup> to be made on (10) that altar as it used to be.

#### PETITION BY ELEPHANTINE JEWS, PERHAPS TO ARSAMES

Text: Sachau, 4; Ungnad, 4; Cowley, 33.

Your servants Yedoniah the son of Ge[mariah] by name 1, Ma'uzi the son of Nathan by name [1], She-maiah the son of Haggai by name 1, Hosea the son of Yatom by name 1, (5) Hosea the son of Nathun by name 1, 5 men in all, Syenians who [ho]ld proper[ty] in the fortress of Elephantine, say as follows: If your lordship is [favo]rable, and the temple of ou[r] God Yaho [is rebuilt] in the fortress of Elephantine as it was for[merly built], (10) and n[o] sheep, ox, or goat are offered there as burnt offering,<sup>21</sup> but (only) incense, meal-offering, [and drink-offering], and (if) your lordship giv[es] orders [to that effect, then] we shall pay into your lordship's house the s[um of . . . and] a thous[and] *ardabs* of barley.

<sup>12</sup> Erroneous anticipation of the following "because of." cf. also M. Vogelstein, *JQR*, xxxiii (1942), 89-92.

<sup>13</sup> The well-known contemporary of Nehemiah.

<sup>14</sup> The Mazdean Arsames was likely to react more favorably if no mention was made of burnt offering, since it involved the profaning of fire by contact with dead bodies.

<sup>15</sup> See preceding note.

<sup>16</sup> 410 B.C.

<sup>17</sup> So emend according to Cowley, 31:9.

<sup>18</sup> Perhaps a mistake for "his feet out of the fetter."

<sup>19</sup> No doubt the Johanan of Neh. 12:22, 23.

<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the Anani of I Chron. 3:24; if Ostanes is an alternative name of one of the brothers mentioned there, or if "brother" here means merely "kinsman."

<sup>21</sup> 407 B.C.