
In the history of research on the Jews of Elephantine, there have been two major eras of scholarly production, and two major paradigms. The first period, dating to the early years of the twentieth century, was that of discovery. Rival archaeological teams, German and French, divided the Nile island in half and searched it up and down for papyri, above all and especially biblical texts: “just a few more spades,” wrote the lead French investigator, “and we [may] uncover a copy of the Sacred Book, sleeping in some secret geniza” (11). Though they failed in this mission, they nonetheless fit the materials they *did* find into biblical coordinates. In Julius Wellhausen’s words, the religion of the Elephantine outpost looked like a “vestige of Hebraism from before the Torah.”¹

The second period began in the 1960s; its flagship publication was Porten’s *Archives from Elephantine* (1968).² Whereas the besieged Bible of Western European modernity had set the template for earlier research, Porten’s watchwords in the newly founded State of Israel were *diaspora* and *homeland*: the Jewish diaspora and Jewish homeland. The Jews of Elephantine spoke Aramaic and paid respects to Aramean gods, but theirs was a story of Jewish struggle and survival outside the Land. They were, first and foremost, *Jews*.

Karel van der Toorn narrates all this in the first chapter of *Becoming Diaspora Jews*. Recent years have seen an uptick of academic interest in Elephantine—“almost one book a year” (2)—but the resulting contributions have not fundamentally displaced Porten’s account. No “comprehensive counternarrative”

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has been forthcoming (143). Until now, that is—because that is what van der Toorn seeks to inaugurate: a third paradigm. Diasporic experience persists as a leitmotif, but on van der Toorn’s telling, it is less a matter of conserving identity than of creating it. Per the book’s title, Elephantine witnesses not so much to remaining Jewish as to becoming Jewish.

* Becoming Diaspora Jews* is thus ambitious indeed. And for its purpose, of overturning the field, a number of features prime it for success. Its prose is lucid and easy, conversational at times. Its chapters build into a rhetorical arc; it is an argument and not a series of studies. Its bibliographic reach is vast, even by scholarly standards, extending deeply into antiquity and widely across modern scholarship. Its publication in the Anchor Bible Reference Library guarantees it some gravitas. No issue will be more decisive for its reception, however, than its interpretation of Papyrus Amherst 63. This interpretation lies at the heart of *Becoming Diaspora Jews*. Its main lines appear in the body of chapter 4; the book’s other chapters revisit other data largely within the terms of van der Toorn’s innovative reading. An appendix presents a complete translation of the papyrus, adapted from van der Toorn’s 2018 critical edition for Ugarit-Verlag.3

Chapter 4 engagingly recounts the text’s early sojourn and gradual decryption. Allegedly found in a jar in Thebes, the papyrus has no certain findspot. The smorgasbord of Aramaic hymns, blessings, laments, and prayers written on its surfaces long resisted decipherment, because they are transcribed in Demotic script. This script is also the most important clue to the object’s date, which van der Toorn puts in the mid-fourth century BCE (62). In spite of the papyrus’s difficulty and heterogeneity—thirty-five compositions (65) invoking a plethora of gods and naming a variety of ancient cities—van der Toorn discerns five sections. His criteria are entirely content-based, and in fact, depend mostly on deity names, also some place-names. The first section of the papyrus he titles “Babylonian” because of its relative emphasis on the gods Nabu and Nanay. The “Syrian” section follows, so called because it addresses the gods Bethel, Anat-Bethel, and Eshem, and it mentions the Syrian sites Hamath and Siyan. Next comes the “Israelite” section, which contains three psalms calling on the god Yaho. The fourth section is mixed. The final, fifth section is a court novella, the Tale of Two Brothers, a story of rival kings known in another form from seventh-century Assyrian sources.

This is interesting and pathbreaking enough, but van der Toorn’s tour de force is to deduce three “textual communities” lying behind each of the

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papyrus’s initial three sections (65). Three real, Aramaic-speaking groups originating from the areas of Babylonia, Syria, and Samaria, respectively, pooled their distinctive traditions into this single document. The fourth, mixed section reflects their long-term co-residence and religious interpenetration: “the traditional deities [of each group] have not disappeared but have been equated with others and find themselves in new constellations” (74). More than that: in among the songs and snippets, van der Toorn proposes to isolate “a historical narrative,” an “eyewitness account” of Samarian soldiers arriving at the gates of an unspecified city; their spokesperson is a Judean (76). Van der Toorn understands that these soldiers were fleeing from Sennacherib’s campaign against Judah in 701 BCE. A reference to “a fortress of palms” in the same section suggests to him the identity of the city where they took refuge: Palmyra. There the Samarians became neighbors to two Aramean military communities from Babylonia and Syria, and there their self-conception began its first transformation: from having been Samarians, they became Arameans. After about a century, Babylon expansion occasioned a migration of this now tripartite Aramean cohort down to Egypt (87).

Other chapters of Becoming Diaspora Jews draw dotted lines between this scenario and the Jews and Arameans resident in Elephantine and Syene. Such lines can only be dotted—hypothetical; a matter of fittingness and not of final proof—because, after all, the Amherst Papyrus is unprovenanced. Its direct relevance to Elephantine is accordingly completely circumstantial. Van der Toorn sometimes acknowledges this (“affinities”; 62), but mostly he does not. Besides this besetting problem, his case that the threefold Arameans of the papyrus coincide with the Elephantine/Syene populace faces several other challenges. First, the Jews of Elephantine call themselves Jews. Van der Toorn’s second chapter therefore seeks to prove the basic Aramean-ness of the Elephantine Jews, and so to reverse Porten’s judgment: the Jews of Elephantine were, first and foremost, Arameans, and only secondarily Jews. The relevant facts are well-known: the Jews of Elephantine spoke Aramaic; they transmitted the Life and Sayings of Ahiqar about an Aramean scribe; and they venerated Aramean gods. Van der Toorn’s presentation of these items is neat: his treatment of the phenomenon of “double identity,” when the same individual is called a “Jew” in one document and, in another, an “Aramean,” is careful and clear. So also with the Arameans of Syene—in order to connect them with the Babylonian and Syrian Arameans behind the papyrus, van der Toorn’s second chapter splits the Syenians in two: on the basis of onomastica, he identifies a “Nabu group” from Babylonia and a “Bethel group” from Syria. Greetings in letters indicate there were two temples in the town, one for Nabu and Banit and another for Bethel and the Queen of Heaven.
The sixth chapter of the book closes the last gap: it explains the path by which the Arameans who had formerly been Samarians came to think of themselves, finally, as Jews. Van der Toorn points to several factors: an influx of Judeans into Egypt (cf. Jer 43-44) changed the overall balance of Judeans vis-à-vis Samarians. Judeans also settled in all the major Egyptian cities, and, like many immigrant communities, formed a network to help and support one another. Joining this network, even as affiliate members, “Judeans by association,” promised to advantage Samarians. Most importantly, around 420 BCE, the Persians officially recognized the Jews as a semi-autonomous, self-regulating nation within the empire. This further incentivized becoming Jewish. And so that is what the Samarian-Arameans of Elephantine did. Contra Porten, they did not maintain Jewishness at cost but adopted Jewishness for gain.

Boldness and ingenuity are, it should be clear, amply on offer here; van der Toorn’s arguments will inspire fresh discussion of Elephantine, the Amherst Papyrus, and early Judaism. That said, Becoming Diaspora Jews will stand or fall by its characterization of the papyrus and its reconstruction of a trio of Aramean communities aback of it. Previous scholars failed to make out the five sections, according to van der Toorn (85). But others will soon weigh in: Tawny Holm is preparing a translation (3); Bob Becking and Aaron Koller have been working on the text. For my part, the existence of a “mixed” section somewhat spoils van der Toorn’s schema. I also admit to having reservations about the practice of reading a community’s backstory out of its psalmody. At one and the same time it seems to be susceptible to overestimating the “historical allusions” (73) these texts preserve and underestimating the extent to which particular details travel. That is: can one really gauge the relative recency of a traumatic event from, say, a poetic line about “my father and my generation” (two generations! 68)? Or again: when the same composition includes a reworked Assyrian court tale from centuries prior, how confident can one be that Babylonian deity names reflect the tradents’ Babylonian origin; or that laments remember only one, definite past cataclysm? Finally, too, for all the book’s disciplined reverse-engineering, significant lacunae remain. Why would the Aramean authors of the papyrus have written it in Demotic script? Why, after becoming Jewish, would they unselfconsciously recall the difference between Samarians and Judeans (76)? Is there any further evidence or argument that would help to darken in the dotted lines that link the papyrus with Elephantine in the first place?

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