



Female Diplomats in Jewish Elephantine? A New Look at a Papyrus from the Yedaniah Archive*

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Abstract

This article reexamines a fragmentary Aramaic letter from the Yedaniah communal archive in Elephantine. The document, TAD A4.4, tells a tale of intrigue involving burglaries, arrests, and failed diplomacy. Many details of the letter escape us because the text is incomplete, but it is clear that five men and six women from Elephantine were seized at the gate in Thebes. Scholarly treatments have tended to discuss the women's presence at Thebes as an ancillary fact, as if they were merely wives and daughters along

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with their men on a business trip. This article analyzes the internal evidence of TAD A4.4, brings to bear contemporary material from Elephantine, and proposes alternatives for the role of the captured women. I argue that TAD A4.4 provides further insight into the roles of women in Elephantine and discuss how and why their roles might differ from those implied in biblical texts of this period.

Keywords: Elephantine, Yedaniah archive, female diplomats, fifth century BCE, Egypt, Second Temple period, Persian period, TAD A4.4, Jewish women.

1. Introduction

It is axiomatic in biblical studies that much of the post-exilic biblical material is not kind to women.¹ The book of Proverbs is preoccupied with ‘loose women’, metaphorical and real. Ezra and Nehemiah describe a newly reconstituted temple community where the leadership is exclusively male and exhort the men of Jerusalem to divorce their foreign wives and disown the children they have had together. In Haggai and Zechariah, too, we get a picture of a community in which women are barely considered at all, and certainly not as actual or potential leaders.

But we get an entirely different picture of Jewish women in the post-exilic period from the Aramaic-language Elephantine documents, a stunning collection of papyri and ostraca from a fifth-century Jewish military settlement on an island in Egypt.² The settlement was

1. For example, see Samuel L. Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings: A Biblical Theology of Manhood and Womanhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, new edn, 2004); Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Yahweh—the Patriarch: Ancient Images of God and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); Bruce Manning Metzger and Michael David Coogan, *The Oxford Guide to People & Places of the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 331.

2. There has been much scholarly discussion surrounding the proper nomenclature for the Israelite people after the exile. That is, at what point is it appropriate to begin referring to this people as ‘Jews’? Is ‘Judean’ or ‘Judahite’ a better designation? Azzoni calls the use of ‘Jewish’ in this period ‘anachronistic’, and she uses ‘Judean’ instead; see Annalisa Azzoni, *The Private Lives of Women in Persian Egypt* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), pp. 106-107. Bob Becking argues for ‘Yehudite’ to describe the Elephantine community, arguing that ‘Jewish’, though a common descriptor for that community among modern scholars, is best avoided when discussing the fifth century BCE; see Bob Becking, ‘Yehudite Identity in Elephantine’, in Oded Lipschits, Gary N. Knoppers, and Manfred Oeming (eds.), *Judah and Judeans in the Achaemenid Period: Negotiating Identity in an International Context* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), p. 404. Diana V. Edelman argues for avoiding the terms ‘Judaism’, ‘Jew’, and ‘Jewish’ until the Hasmonean dynasty and what she argues was that period’s exclusive monotheism; see Diana Vikander

Elephantine, or *Yeb* in Aramaic. Here, the texts routinely give women's names, something that is far from a given in biblical texts of this period or any other.³ The women of Elephantine prayed, owned and exchanged property, contributed money to a fund for the rebuilding of a temple at Elephantine, and had greater rights in marriage and divorce than even Jewish women later in history.

In addition, I would argue that there is a document from Elephantine that hints at a public, official role for some women. This is a text I will refer to by its *Textbook of Aramaic Documents* (TAD) designation, A4.4. The letter comes from the Yedaniah archive of texts, a cache of documents from the collection of the priest Yedaniah, one of the leaders of the Elephantine community. This is also the archive that contains the

Edelman (ed.), *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 23-24. *Contra* these scholars, Joseph Blenkinsopp, 'Judaean, Jews, Children of Abraham', in Lipschits, Knoppers, and Oeming (eds.), *Judah and Judeans in the Achaemenid Period*, pp. 461-82 (467), argues for 'the first century of Persian rule for the emergence of the ethnic-religious connotation of יהודים, justifying the appellation "Jew" rather than "Judean"'. Daniel R. Schwartz adds an important perspective, arguing for the use of both 'Jew' and 'Judean' when speaking about the Second Temple period: Judean 'when the land- or state-oriented reference is salient or functional' and Jew 'in contexts that usually point toward the people or the religion' (p. 87). On the question of nomenclature, see also Jon L. Berquist, 'Construction of Identity in Postcolonial Yehud', in Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming (eds.), *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), pp. 53-66. Throughout this paper, I use the terms 'Jews' and 'Jewish' to describe the YHW-affiliated people who lived in Elephantine. I recognize that these terms are fraught with issues, including the potential for conflation of the beliefs and practices of the people at Elephantine with those of much later Jews. However, I would argue that thinking of these people as Jewish, though imprecise, is the best option available. This is especially true because the alternative terms, to me, connote residency within the borders of Yehud, which does not apply to the people of Elephantine. In addition, Edelman's argument for avoiding 'Judaism' until the Hasmonean dynasty seems to privilege the exclusive monotheism that emerged at this time as the end-point of Yahwistic evolution in antiquity. Characterizing the practices of the Elephantine residents as a form of Judaism, I would argue, sets them more firmly in Jewish history and acknowledges that 'Judaism', in antiquity as in the contemporary world, has never been monolithic.

3. Of course, the biblical texts are by and large literary creations, telling a story fashioned by the elites of society and seemingly intended to tell about the great events and deeds of the community. This focus on public life often means that women go unmentioned or unnamed. The Elephantine corpus, by contrast, represents the more prosaic dealings of the community: letters, land deeds, donor lists, marriage contracts. In that regard, it is not shocking that we see far more women's names in the Elephantine documents than in the Bible.

community's petition to the imperial authorities in Jerusalem reporting the destruction of the Jewish temple at Elephantine by Egyptian priests and asking for permission to rebuild, as well as letters from the authorities to the Elephantine community regarding the temple, sacrifices, and the observance of Passover.⁴ The Yedaniah archive is a priceless witness to the deterioration of relations between the Jews at Elephantine and the surrounding community of Egyptians. The document that is the subject of this study, TAD A4.4, appears to document a series of incidents that further frayed relations between the Jews and other Egyptians. TAD A4.4 is frustratingly fragmentary, but the details we do have—burglary, enormous sums of silver, arrest, imprisonment—are tantalizing. In this study, I present my reading and translation of the text, followed by a discussion of the document in general and women's role in it. I also discuss evidence of the status of women gleaned from other Elephantine texts. Where appropriate, I bring in evidence from outside of Elephantine. Finally, I suggest conclusions about the communal roles of the women named in TAD A4.4 and what this role can tell us about women at Elephantine more generally.

2. Transliteration and Translation of TAD A4.4

Line 1 *gdł ḥ'w'k...k yslḥ... ntn*
 Line 2 ḥ'lyḥ' yš'lw šlmk bkl ḥdn wk'ḥt
 Line 3 ...y br... ḥ'zl lsw'n' w'ḥbd lYHW
 Line 4 y ḥ'srw [by]'b'... brkyḥ h...
 Line 5 ...ḥnwm⁵ h' znh šmht 'nšyḥ' zy ḥ'...⁶

4. The two drafts of a letter to the authorities reporting the destruction of the Temple in Elephantine and asking permission to rebuild and resume sacrifices are TAD A4.7 and A4.8. The authorities' reply authorizing the rebuilding of the Temple, but not the resumption of animal sacrifices, is TAD A4.9. The so-called Passover letter is TAD A4.1, though all references to Passover itself are reconstructed and do not actually appear in the text. The festival of unleavened bread, however, is mentioned in TAD A4.1. It should be noted that there is a document from Elephantine that explicitly mentions *psḥ*, though it is not in the Yedaniah archive. This is the Passover ostrakon, TAD D7.6.

5. Since this partial word appears at the end of a list of names, it is logical to conclude that it is the end of a personal name. Though Porten and Lindenberger and Richards read the name as Pakhnum, with Porten noting that TAD C4.6 mentions a Hanan son of Pakhnum, Cowley and Grelot were more cautious, just reading *ḥēnūm* as the end of a name. I would not read a *pe* before *ḥēnūm*. There is the hint of what may be the downstroke of a *pe*, but it is not clear enough to justify reading the name as Pakhnum.

Line 6 [ʔ]syrn rmy ʔtt hwdw ʔsršwt ʔtt hwšc plwl ʔtt yslḥ rʔy...
 Line 7 ʔtbl brt ʔmšlm qwlʔ ʔḥth hʔ smht gbryʔ zy ʔštkḥw bbbʔ7 bnʔ wʔḥdw
 Line 8 ydnyʔ br gmryh hwšc br ytwm hwšc br ntwm⁸ ḥgy ʔḥwhy ʔḥyyw br mk(y)...
 Line 9 btyʔ zy ʔlw bhñ byb wnksyʔ zy lqḥw ʔtbw ʔm ʔl mryhm lhn dkrw
 lmrʔ[yhwm]...
 Line 10 kršn 120⁹ ʔwd tʔm P ʔd yḥwy lhn tnh šlm bytk wbnyk ʔd ʔlhyʔ yḥwwnn

Line 1 Gaddul [from] your brother Yislaḥ [son of] Natan
 Line 2 May the (g)ods seek your well-being in all times and now
 Line 3 ...y son of... went to Syene and made to YHW...
 Line 4 they were bound (in Elephan)tine... Barekiya, H...
 Line 5 -ḥnum. Here, these are the names of the women who...
 Line 6 prisoners: Rami wife of Hodu, Esereshut wife of Hoshea, Palul wife of
 Yislaḥ, Rei...
 Line 7 Tabla daughter of Meshullam, Kawla her sister. Here, the names of the
 men who were found in the gate and seized:
 Line 8 Yedania son of Gemariah, Hoshea son of Yatom, Hoshea son of Natum,
 Ḥaggai his brother, Aḥio son of Miki...
 Line 9 the houses which they entered in Elephantine, and the possessions which
 they took they surely returned to their owners, but they mentioned it to
 [their] owners
 Line 10 120 karshes. May an additional order no longer be delivered to them here.
 Well-being (to) your house and your children until the gods show...

6. There is a line above this one, but only the bottoms of the letters are visible. It is not enough to make out words.

7. This is an Akkadian loanword. T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Egyptian Aramaic* (Leiden/Boston: E.J. Brill, 2nd rev. edn, 2003), p. 348. Lindenberger and Richards proposed that the ‘gate’ might indicate a court, presumably after the practice of administering justice at the gate in ancient Near Eastern cities. They would then translate, ‘who were tried in the court at Thebes, and were put in prison’; see James M Lindenberger, *Ancient Aramaic and Hebrew Letters* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2nd edn, 2003), p. 70. (Porten comments, ‘Interpret perhaps, but hardly translate’ [*The Elephantine Papyri in English: Three Millennia of Cross-Cultural Continuity and Change* (Atlanta: SBL, 2nd edn, 2011), p. 133, italics in original].) However, they provided no support for this conclusion. Furthermore, we know that the Elephantine Jews had interactions with courts and judges (see Porten, *Archives from Elephantine*, p. 47) but there is no hint that these judges sat at a city gate. One would expect an empire as developed and well-organized as the Persians to hold trials somewhere other than at the city gate.

8. This is presumably an error for Natun. See Grelot, *Documents araméens d’Égypte*, p. 397.

9. It is unclear what the 120 karshes represented. Lindenberger and Richards suggested that it was either a penalty or a bribe and noted that 120 karshes is about 22 pounds of silver, ‘eight years’ income for a small family’; see Lindenberger, *Ancient Aramaic and Hebrew Letters*, p. 70.

3. Discussion of the Text

Only the barest of facts are apparent from this highly fragmentary text. We know that some number of people was arrested in Elephantine. We know that eleven people, five men and six women, were arrested in the city of Thebes.¹⁰ There was a burglary or series of burglaries. There are several questions raised by the text. The most obvious ones are those relating to the who, what, when, and why of the document. We know who has been arrested in Thebes, but we do not have all the names of those arrested in Elephantine. We also do not know who the Elephantine burglars are. Are they identical with those arrested in Elephantine? What was stolen? When did all of this happen? Was it before or after the destruction of the Elephantine temple? Was there any connection between these events and the destruction of the temple? Why did the Jewish delegation go to Thebes, and why were they arrested there? Why did the Elephantine burglars commit their crimes? Unfortunately, as the letter is undated and fragmentary, it is impossible for us to do more than guess at the answers to most of these questions.

What we can do is focus on issues that might seem ancillary to the meaning of the text but which actually go to the heart of life at Elephantine. There is the issue of the personal names in the letter: some are Yahwistic but others do not even look to be Hebrew.¹¹ Two of the three lists of names (1: Barekiya, H..., -khnum; 2: Rami wife of Hodu, Esereshut wife of Hoshea, Palul wife of Yislaḥ, Rei..., Tabla daughter of Meshullam, Kawla her sister; 3: Yedania son of Gemariah, Hoshea son of Yatom, Hoshea son of Natum, Ḥaggai his brother, Aḥio son of Miki...) in this text contain a mix of Hebraic and non-Hebraic names. In the first list, Barekiya looks to be Hebrew, but -khnum is an Egyptian theophoric name. As Porten points out, TAD C4.6 contains a list of names including Hanan son of Pakhnum.¹² If Pakhnum had a son named Hanan, was he Jewish? The second list also contains a mix of names, including several

10. Thebes was the capital of the Persian satrapy in which Elephantine lay. As such, it would have been the local seat of the Persian Empire. For more on imperial organization, see Edda Bresciani, 'Egypt, Persian Satrapy', in W.D. Davies and Louis Finkelstein (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Judaism* (4 vols.; Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), I, pp. 358-72.

11. For more on names at Elephantine, see Michael H. Silverman, *Religious Values in the Jewish Proper Names at Elephantine* (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985).

12. Porten, *Archives from Elephantine*, p. 134.

that appear to be Hebrew or Aramaic in origin, but also the Isis theophoric Esereshut. What is more, Esereshut is married to a man with an unmistakably Hebrew name, Hoshea.¹³ Were -khnum and Esereshut Jewish? Were they converts? Were they Jews whose parents had given them non-Jewish names? None of these possibilities seems implausible. I would argue that the names point to fuzzier boundaries between Jewish and non-Jewish than someone whose only knowledge of Persian-period Judaism comes from the book of Ezra might think.¹⁴

In a similar vein, what does the letter's invocation of 'the gods' (twice) tell us about Jewish religion at Elephantine?¹⁵ From its place in the Yedaniah archive, the names of the writer and recipient of the letter, and its content, the letter is undoubtedly of Jewish provenance. How, then, can we explain the mention of multiple gods? The obvious answer is that the Jews at Elephantine were not entirely monotheistic. Even though they had a temple to YHW, the God of Heaven, they clearly recognized other gods to some extent, a view supported by several other texts at Elephantine. They were willing to invoke 'the gods', plural, in correspondence,

13. Azzoni has a helpful discussion of names at Elephantine, in particular with regard to intermarriage. She argues, 'personal names in the ancient Near East did carry meaning and, because in most cases they were theophoric, they can reveal the religious affiliation of the name-giver'; see Azzoni, *The Private Lives of Women in Persian Egypt*, p. 105. She notes that there are families mentioned in the Elephantine documents where all names are Hebrew and Yahwistic, families where all names are Egyptian, and families where there are a mix of name types (p. 108).

14. Azzoni argues that the onomastic evidence shows that intermarriage between Jews (Judeans) and Egyptians appears to have been well accepted by both groups, both in the case of Jewish men marrying Egyptian women and vice versa; see Azzoni, *The Private Lives of Women in Persian Egypt*, pp. 108-10.

15. TAD A4.4 is hardly the only document from Elephantine that mentions 'the gods'; see, for example, TAD A4.1 (the 'Passover letter') and A4.2. Several documents also mention specific deities who are not YHW. See, for example, TAD B2.8, in which Miptahiah swears an oath by the Egyptian goddess Sati; TAD B7.3, where a man named Menahem swears by Anat-YHW, that is, 'Anat who is associated with YHWH'; and TAD C3.15, which refers to contributions to Eshem-Bethel and Anat-Bethel. I would see these deity names as supporting the idea that the Jews of Elephantine did not adhere strictly to monotheism, but another possibility, raised by Porten and recently given support by Lester L. Grabbe, is that the names represent hypostases of YHW and not independent deities; see Porten, *Archives from Elephantine*, pp. 178-79; Lester L. Grabbe, 'Elephantine and the Torah', in Alejandro F. Botta (ed.), *In the Shadow of Bezalel: Aramaic, Biblical, and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honor of Bezalel Porten* (Leiden/Boston: E.J. Brill, 2013), pp. 125-35 (127-28).

whether this was done out of sincere religious feeling, political expediency, convention, or some mixture.¹⁶

The key question I wish to address here is this: what can we learn about gender roles at Elephantine based on the arrest of the six women in Thebes? Most scholars who have written about this letter do not dwell on the presence of the women among the arrestees. A.E. Cowley referred to the arrest of what were perhaps ‘the chief men of the colony’, but he made no comment about the status of the female arrestees. Bezalel Porten characterizes the letter as detailing ‘the seizure and imprisonment of six Jewish women and five Jewish leaders at the gate in Thebes. The men were apparently implicated in the invasion of private property and theft therefrom’.¹⁷ However, Porten gives no justification for assuming that the men were community leaders and the women were not.

It is not as if the women were all wives or daughters of the men, gone along with their husbands or fathers on a business trip. For the most part, they are unrelated. Esereshut is listed as ‘wife of Hoshea’, so perhaps she was married to either Hoshea, son of Yatom, or Hoshea, son of Natun. Alternatively, Esereshut could have been married to another Hoshea entirely, one who did not go along on the trip; this is especially likely since the rest of the women in Thebes are not there with their husbands. We do not have any information about the husband, father, or brother of the woman whose name begins with ‘Rei’ and is broken off at the end of line six, so maybe she was related to one of the men. But as for Rami, Palul, Tabla, and Kawla, we have no indication that they had connections to the men arrested in Thebes. Rami’s husband Hodu, Palul’s husband Yislah, and Tabla and Kawla’s father, Meshullam, apparently were not

16. For more on religion at Elephantine, see Porten, *Archives from Elephantine*; *idem*, *The Elephantine Papyri in English*; *idem*, ‘Elephantine and the Bible’, in Lawrence H. Schiffman (ed.), *Semitic Papyrology in Context: A Climate of Creativity: Papers from a New York University Conference Marking the Retirement of Baruch A. Levine* (Leiden/Boston: E.J. Brill, 2003), pp. 51-84; Lindenberger, *Ancient Aramaic and Hebrew Letters*; Thomas M. Bolin, ‘The Temple of יהו at Elephantine and Persian Religious Policy’, in Diana Vikander Edelman (ed.), *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 127-42; Karel van der Toorn, ‘Anat-Yahu, Some Other Deities, and the Jews of Elephantine’, *Numen* 39 (1992), pp. 80-101; Reinhard Kratz, ‘Temple and Torah: Reflections on the Legal Status of the Pentateuch between Elephantine and Qumran’, in Gary A. Knoppers and Bernard M. Levinson (eds.), *The Pentateuch as Torah: New Models for Understanding its Promulgation and Acceptance* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), pp. 77-103.

17. Porten, *The Elephantine Papyri in English*, p. 134.

among those arrested in Thebes. Given the available data, the best conclusion is that at least four of the six women, and possibly all six, went to Thebes without their men. Not only does this suggest some official mission for the women, it also tells us that women in Elephantine could likely travel independently of their husbands and fathers.

Furthermore, if the women did not have official business in Thebes, why would they have been arrested? Again, the text is fragmentary, so we do not know why the group from Elephantine traveled to Thebes, but there are theories. On the context of the arrests, Cowley argued that they may have occurred after the community received notice from the Persian governor Bagavahya that they could rebuild the temple. In that case, the arrests would have been 'due to some action taken by the Jews in the way of preparations for the rebuilding of the temple'.¹⁸ It is even possible, he suggested, that amidst the turmoil in Egypt at this time, the Egyptians in the area of Elephantine took the opportunity to force out the Jews by 'making away with (or killing?) the chief men of the colony' by arresting them in Thebes.¹⁹

Pierre Grelot constructed another scenario. Grelot argued that the Jews arrested in Thebes probably had gone there as an official delegation to encourage officials in Thebes to intervene on their behalf in their conflict with the Egyptians, knowing that they would not get anywhere with the leadership in Syene. As a result of the delegation's actions, the burglars in Elephantine, whom Grelot proposed were Egyptians, would have been arrested and forced to pay a fine.²⁰

Porten sees TAD A4.4 as referring to events that took place before and during the destruction of the Jewish temple in Elephantine by the Egyptian priests of Khnum. He writes, 'In Thebes on a mission, possibly in connection with the impending blow, the leaders of the Jewish community suffered a setback. At the same time, the Temple was destroyed.'²¹

I would judge any of these scenarios to be plausible, but we have no way to prove or disprove them. What the proposals by Cowley, Grelot, and Porten have in common, though, is that in all of these scenarios, the people who were arrested in Thebes would have been there on some official business. If Cowley is correct, the Jews were in Thebes on a mission related to rebuilding the Temple. What reason would there be to

18. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.*, p. 126.

19. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.*, p. 126.

20. Grelot, *Documents araméens d'Égypte*, pp. 397-98.

21. Porten, *Archives from Elephantine*, pp. 288-89.

take women along if they did not have some role as representatives of the community? Presumably the women could not have been priests, but imagining them as civic leaders is not too far-fetched. This is especially the case because the context for this letter is not a king sending royal emissaries to conduct diplomacy for the crown. We are not speaking of bureaucrats employed by the state, but of representatives of a small religious community at a military garrison. In this less formal context, why should we not see women as possible ambassadors? If Cowley is right and the arrests in Thebes were orchestrated by Egyptians hostile to the Jews of Elephantine in an effort to weaken the Jewish community by imprisoning its 'chief men', perhaps not all of its 'chief men' were, well, men. Likewise, in Grelot's scenario, if the Jews had gone to Thebes to seek more sympathetic authorities than they could find in Elephantine, this, too, would have been an official trip. Again, the most logical explanation for the presence of the women on the voyage is that they would have been thought to add something to the delegation. And finally, if Porten is right and the Jews had gone to Thebes to try to avert impending disaster at home, this, too, would imply that the female arrestees were somehow contributing to the cause.

4. Women as Diplomats Elsewhere in the Ancient Near East?

There is evidence showing that women were sometimes used as messengers in the ancient Near East, which indicates that there is precedent for women serving that role in Elephantine. Samuel A. Meier has shown that, although the majority of messengers in the ancient Near East were men, there were women who filled that job from time to time. For example, the feminine form of the Akkadian term for messenger, *mārat šipri*, is attested from the Old Babylonian period all the way down through the Persian period.²² Meier notes that women tended to serve as messengers in contexts where women had power in other spheres as well. For example, female religious functionaries in the Old Babylonian period, called *nadītu*, often used female messengers to conduct their business.²³ Meier also points out that the Bible contemplates women as messengers. For instance, 2 Sam. 17.17 has a female servant relaying messages

22. Samuel A. Meier, 'Women and Communication in the Ancient Near East', *JAOS* 111 (1991), pp. 540-47 (545).

23. Meier, 'Women and Communication in the Ancient Near East', p. 546.

between David and Jonathan.²⁴ We do not have to take the David narrative as history to find this verse significant for showing the existence of female messengers. It is enough to say that the author of this verse, whenever in the first millennium BCE he happened to be writing, not only mentioned a woman messenger but apparently felt that this was unremarkable enough to merit no editorial comment or special attention. I would argue that it is only a short step from women as messengers, trusted with conveying important information from one party to another, to women as emissaries, tasked with persuading a party to take a particular action. The use of women as messengers in the ancient Near East therefore provides support for my hypothesis of women as diplomats in Jewish Elephantine.

There may be further precedent for my claim in the person of Barsipitu, a woman who is mentioned significantly in two pieces of royal correspondence from the Neo-Assyrian epistolary finds.²⁵ In *State Archives of Assyria* 17 68, a letter from Ana-Nabû-taklak to Sargon II, Barsipitu is reported to have arrived in Borsippa, and the writer assures the king that Barsipitu is well. The text reads in part, ‘As to what the king, my lord, [wrote to me]: “Why is it that from [the beginning] until now I have seen your message 5 or 6 times, but n[ow] that Barsipit[u] has come to you, I have only seen one of your messengers?”—Barsipitu and Nabû-šuma-iddina arrived to us on the first day of [Shebat]...’²⁶ Barsipitu may be an emissary of the crown with some influence over policy toward this region. The other letter mentioning her name, *SAA* 17 73, comes from Barsipitu herself. She seems to be reporting back to the king on a situation with the tribe of Bit-Dakuri, in southern Mesopotamia. She assures him that she has arrived safely and that the people of Bit-Dakuri greeted her warmly. She writes, ‘...they keep blessing the king, our lord: “Now we know that [[the king]] our lord has rehabilitated Bit-Dakuri and will put it to the lead, as he has sent us the son of our lord!...”’²⁷ Barsipitu seems to be acting, again, as a representative of the king, tasked with interacting with a population on his behalf. Saana Svärd, who brought Barsipitu to my attention, notes that, in the entire corpus of Neo-Assyrian royal letters, she is the only woman who writes directly to the king. While

24. Meier, ‘Women and Communication in the Ancient Near East’, p. 545.

25. Barsipitu’s name is also mentioned in a very fragmentary letter, *SAA* 15 263. See Manfred Dietrich, *The Correspondence of Sargon II* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1987), p. 165.

26. Manfred Dietrich, *The Babylonian Correspondence of Sargon and Sennacherib* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2003), pp. 64-65.

27. Dietrich, *Babylonian Correspondence*, pp. 68-69.

Barsipitu's title, if she has one, is not listed in either of these letters, and her exact role in sorting out the empire's interactions with the Bit-Dakkuri is unclear, it would not be an overreach to claim that she is an envoy of the king.²⁸

5. Women at Elephantine: A Broader View

Perhaps if all we knew about Jews in the Persian period came from the elite, religiously conservative, insular male priests and prophets who wrote the biblical literature of the time, my suggestion of female diplomats might be misplaced. But what we know of Jewish women in Elephantine, from the documents written to commemorate the community's religious crises, lifecycle events, and business dealings, shows that they enjoyed a startling degree of personal autonomy and community status.

For example, we know that Jewish women at Elephantine had enough control of their money and how it was spent to contribute to a temple fund. The document TAD C3.15 lists people who contributed two shekels apiece for the temple of YHW at Elephantine.²⁹ The list contains several women's names, indicating that women could give money for religious causes in their own right.³⁰

28. Saana Svärd, personal correspondence with the author. It should be noted that Manfred Dietrich interprets these two letters differently: 'Letter no. 68 is remarkable as Ana-Nabû-taklak reports that the lady referred to as the "Borsippean" (*fBarsipitu*), the daughter of the local dynast, Balassu, had safely returned to Borsippa from her Assyrian exile. Apparently this occurred after the Assyrians had taken the town from Merodach-Baladan's forces. She confirms as much in letter 73, signed by herself, when she speaks about the warm welcome she received from Ana-Nabû-taklak and the cheering population of the town' (Dietrich, *Babylonian Correspondence*, p. xxv).

29. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.*, p. 66. Some have seen the money as for the Jerusalem temple, some for the Elephantine temple's upkeep, and some for its restoration after the destruction.

30. I draw this conclusion notwithstanding Porten's suggestion that '[t]he more than thirty female donors may be contributing for families whose husbands were away from the island on official business' (Porten, *Archives from Elephantine*, p. 161). Surely we do not have to assume that all of these women had absent husbands as a way of explaining their financial autonomy. As Porten himself notes in a much later article, the women contributors are referred to by their patronymics, not by their husbands' names; Porten notes, 'Even if we assume that they were all unmarried, their representation as independent contributors is certainly noteworthy' (Bezalel Porten, 'Elephantine', in Paula Hyman and Dalia Ofer [eds.], *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia* [Jerusalem: Shalvi, 2006], n.p., online: <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/elephantine>).

From the Yedaniah archive, we know that women had a religious role in the Jewish community at Elephantine. The most famous of the documents in this archive are TAD A4.7 and A4.8, two drafts of a letter from the priests of the Jewish Temple at Elephantine to Bagavahya, the governor of Jerusalem, seeking permission to rebuild the ruined Elephantine Temple. The priests convey the depth of their grief over the Elephantine Temple's destruction by telling Bagavahya that they, their wives, and their children were all engaged in mourning and penance rites over the destruction. According to these documents, the whole community was wearing sackcloth, fasting, and praying. From this, we learn that women played a role in the communal religious response to the Temple's destruction, and that the Jewish priests who wrote this letter found this fact significant enough to include it in their petition to the governor. In addition, the letters each close with an assurance that the whole community—men, women, and children—would all pray for Bagavahya's welfare. This again is an indication that women had a role in the daily religious observance practiced by the Jews of Elephantine.³¹

From a cache of documents known as the Miptahiah archive, after a woman mentioned in many of the letters, we get even more evidence about the power of women at Elephantine. TAD B2.2, a dispute over property rights involves the putative property owner, one Maḥseiah son of Yedaniah, Maḥseiah's wife, and Maḥseiah's son all swearing before a court that Maḥseiah has rights to the land. Porten asks whether the wife and son swore the oath to support Maḥseiah's right to the land, or because they too, as the man's wife and son, had property rights.³² Azzoni argues that, since the wife and son are not mentioned as co-owners and since it does not seem to have been the general practice at Elephantine for non-parties to a document to swear to it, they are probably swearing in their capacity as possible future inheritors. In that case, the wife's oath is remarkable since it shows that she would have inheritance rights even with a son in the picture.³³ In any case, this document speaks to the power of women in Jewish Elephantine.³⁴ If the wife and son swore the oath to

31. Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (Leiden/Boston: E.J. Brill, 2003), pp. 642-43; Porten, 'Elephantine'.

32. Porten, *The Elephantine Papyri in English*, p. 161.

33. Annalisa Azzoni, 'Family Life and Law at Elephantine', in Margaretha Folmer *et al.* (eds.), *Elephantine Papers Presented at the 2013 International SBL Session in St. Andrews, Scotland* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, forthcoming).

34. Azzoni, *The Private Lives of Women in Persian Egypt*, p. 95.

support Maḥseiah's claim, we learn that women's testimony could count in a court of law. If the wife and son swore the oath because they, too, had ownership rights to Maḥseiah's property, we learn that women had claim to their husbands' land and could support that claim in court. And if they swore as the man's heirs to the land, we see that, in practice as well as in documents of wifhood, a woman was expected to inherit her late husband's property even in the presence of a son.

More evidence comes from TAD B2.3, also from the Miptaḥiah archive. This document is a land grant from the same Maḥseiah to his daughter, Miptaḥiah, on the occasion of her marriage. Maḥseiah is giving the same property disputed in the last text I discussed to his daughter, which shows that women could receive and own property. This is not a matter of Miptaḥiah inheriting land only because there is no male heir. First of all, Miptaḥiah gets the land from her father while he is still alive. Secondly, we know from the previous document that Maḥseiah had a son to whom he could have conveyed the property. (In fact, two of Maḥseiah's sons acted as witnesses to the land grant, thereby renouncing their claim to the land and affirming their sister Miptaḥiah's right to it.) This land grant specifies that Miptaḥiah has exclusive right to the property over any of Maḥseiah's other relatives, and that Miptaḥiah may in turn pass the land on to whomever she wants. Interestingly, a related document apparently executed at the same time, TAD B2.4, grants Miptaḥiah's husband—that is, Maḥseiah's son-in-law—the right to use, enjoy, and renovate the house, but not full ownership.³⁵ Ownership rights belonged to Miptaḥiah alone.

Miptaḥiah was able not only to own real estate, but also slaves. TAD B2.11 has Miptaḥiah's sons allocating two of their mother's slaves after her death, and the document indicates that the slaves were branded on their right hands, 'to Miptaḥiah'. It is interesting that the brand, which presumably was a permanent mark, was in Miptaḥiah's name and not the names of either (any) of her husbands. This suggests that, even had Miptaḥiah married again before her death, the slaves would have remained her property instead of automatically passing to her husband.

Perhaps the most remarkable document from the Miptaḥiah archive concerning the status of women is Miptaḥiah's document of wifhood.³⁶ This document of wifhood (TAD B2.6) and others found at Elephantine

35. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, 'Out from the Shadows: Biblical Women in the Postexilic Era', *JOT* 54 (1992), pp. 25-43 (28).

36. Porten, 'Elephantine'; Eskenazi, 'Out from the Shadows', pp. 28-30.

contain reciprocal inheritance clauses, so that each spouse could inherit if the other died first. Like the other documents of wifhood from Elephantine, it also explicitly says that either party may demand a divorce. This is quite different from the situation in surrounding cultures from the ancient Near East.³⁷ (It should be noted that the reciprocal divorce clause also gives Jewish women 2500 years ago greater divorce rights than Jewish women have today, since in modern Judaism only the husband may grant a religious divorce.) There is also a provision in Miptahiah's document of wifhood discouraging her groom, Eshor, from taking another wife or having children with another woman while still married to her, under threat of a sizable penalty in silver. Annalisa Azzoni notes that this clause appears to have been inserted while the document was being written; I imagine that the negotiations that produced such a clause must have been interesting indeed.³⁸ Azzoni also points out that the anti-polygamy clause appears to be unique among ancient Near Eastern marriage documents.³⁹ I would argue that this provision indicates that polygamy was not unheard of in Elephantine or its environs, and that Miptahiah's ability to insert a clause discouraging it shows that it was possible for a woman to have significant power in a marriage.

From a collection of letters and contracts known as the Ananiah archive, there is yet more evidence of the status of women in Jewish Elephantine. A document of wifhood for a woman named Tamet, TAD B3.3, is interesting because Tamet was a slave at the time of her marriage to a man called Anani, and because the couple already had a son together when the document was drawn up. Tamet's document of wifhood, like Miptahiah's, contains a reciprocal divorce clause, showing that even a slavewoman could initiate divorce against her husband in Jewish Elephantine. Azzoni points out that the reciprocal inheritance clause is especially interesting in Tamet's document of wifhood. That is because Tamet and her husband Anani already had a son together at the time the contract was drawn up. This means that, if Anani died first, Tamet would inherit his property, even though there would be a male child in the picture.⁴⁰

37. Azzoni, *The Private Lives of Women in Persian Egypt*, pp. 40-42.

38. Azzoni, *The Private Lives of Women in Persian Egypt*, p. 39.

39. Azzoni, *The Private Lives of Women in Persian Egypt*, p. 40.

40. Azzoni, *The Private Lives of Women in Persian Egypt*, p. 38.

I should also mention another document pertaining to Tamet, TAD B3.2, which is a bill of sale between Tamet and Anani and their son-in-law, confusingly named Ananiah. The document identifies Anani as a ‘*lhn* of YHW’. This word is generally translated as ‘servitor’.⁴¹ That is, Anani is identified a servitor of the temple of YHW. Interestingly, the document goes on to name ‘his wife Tamet, a *lhnh*-woman of YHW, the God who dwells in Elephantine the fortress’. What is a *lhnh*? Can we read Tamet herself as a servitor of the temple of YHW, thus showing that women could have positions as temple workers in Elephantine? As Tamara Cohn Eskenazi points out in her examination of the roles of women in Persian-period Yehud and Elephantine, Ezra and Nehemiah mention ‘male and female singers’, who might be connected to the temple cult, so it is not outside the realm of possibility to imagine Tamet as having some official role in the temple at Elephantine.⁴² Most scholars have seen *lhnh* as a term for the wife of a *lhn* rather than designating a female temple official.⁴³ It is still fascinating, as Emil Kraeling noted, that Tamet, like Anani, is said to be ‘of YHW’, and that YHW’s descriptor, ‘the God who dwells in Elephantine the fortress’, comes after her name and title rather than Anani’s.⁴⁴ I would agree with the scholars who see *lhnh* as a term designating the wife of a *lhn*, because it seems unlikely that both members of a married couple would hold the same job. If we saw the word *lhnh* describing someone other than the wife of a *lhn*, I might see her as a temple servitor herself. As is, I would liken the *lhnh* to a modern-day *rebbetzin*, wife of a rabbi. The *rebbetzin* is not ordained and holds no official synagogue duties, but she is accorded a term of respect and is often expected to perform unofficial roles in the organization, such as attending women’s group functions and hosting Sabbath dinners. As Eskenazi comments, it is significant that Tamet is referred to in official documentation by the title *lhnh*, even if this does not mean she has a temple job.⁴⁵ This adds more weight to my argument that women in

41. ‘Lhn’, in *The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*, n.p. [accessed 30 April 2012]. Online: <http://cal1.cn.huc.edu/>.

42. Eskenazi, ‘Out from the Shadows’, 31.

43. Azzoni, *The Private Lives of Women in Persian Egypt*, p. 92; Eskenazi, ‘Out from the Shadows’, p. 31.

44. Emil Gottlieb Heinrich Kraeling, *The Brooklyn Museum Aramaic Papyri: New Documents of the Fifth Century B.C. from the Jewish Colony at Elephantine* (New Haven: Published for the Brooklyn Museum by the Yale University Press, 1953), p. 274.

45. Eskenazi, ‘Out from the Shadows’, p. 31.

Elephantine had surprising status and rights, and indeed could have been sent on an official diplomatic mission to Thebes.

Another document from the Ananiah archive, TAD B3.8, sheds light on the status of women at Elephantine. This is a document of wifehood concerning Yehoishma, who is Tamet and Anani's daughter. This document of wifehood is noteworthy because it links Yehoishma's husband's right to inherit her property to him not taking another wife. In fact, because of the ordering of the clauses in the document—the husband's right to inherit is followed immediately by a clause forbidding him from taking any wife besides Yehoishma—Azzoni interprets this as making the husband's inheritance rights contingent upon his not remarrying after Yehoishma dies.⁴⁶ If this is the case, the document gives Yehoishma the startling right to dictate her husband's love life from beyond the grave!

The fact that TAD A4.4 is part of the Yedaniah archive lends additional support to the argument that the women mentioned in it played an official role. The Yedaniah archive is a repository of documents concerning the communal life of the Elephantine Jews, entirely lacking in private documents.⁴⁷ In addition to TAD 4.4, the cache includes a letter concerning the observance of Passover, a recommendation that Yedaniah help two Egyptians headed to Elephantine, a fragmentary letter about imprisoned Egyptians, reports of problems between the Jews and the priests of Khnum, petitions for permission to rebuild the Elephantine Temple after its destruction, a possible offer of payment in exchange for authorization to rebuild, and a letter from the imperial authorities giving qualified permission to rebuild. These are all clearly documents concerning the public dealings of the Elephantine community. Whatever the mission to Thebes referenced in TAD A4.4 entailed, it was official business, and whatever the presence of the six women signified, it was related to communal life at Elephantine.

6. Women in the Biblical Material of the Persian Period

The Elephantine documents are not, of course, our only source for Jewish life in the Persian period. We also have the books of the Bible which may have been composed wholly or partially at this time: Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Ecclesiastes, Chronicles, and

46. Azzoni, *The Private Lives of Women in Persian Egypt*, p. 39.

47. Porten, *Archives from Elephantine*, p. 263.

Proverbs.⁴⁸ Scholars have argued that most of these texts are not particularly friendly to women, when the books mention them at all.⁴⁹ Haggai ‘appears uninterested in women—and in men outside of established leadership structures’, and ‘male voices and characters’ dominate the book of Zechariah.⁵⁰ The authors of Proverbs mention women constantly, but the modern-day feminist could be forgiven for wishing they had not bothered. The text at times seems obsessed with the dangers of the ‘strange woman’ (2.16-19; 5.20; 6.23-35; 7.4-27; 23.27-28), and ch. 31’s encomium to the ‘woman of valor’ can read like a handbook for a 1950s housewife. Ecclesiastes ‘categorically condemns all women’ in 7.26-29.⁵¹ Ezra makes the shocking demand that the people who have returned from exile cast out the ‘foreign’ wives they have taken and the half-foreign children produced from these unions.

Scholars have pointed out a few glimmers of female empowerment in the Persian-period biblical material. For example, as Eskenazi has noted, Ezra 2.55 mentions the descendants of someone the text calls *hassōperet*. Most translations render this as a name, even though it literally means ‘the (female) scribe’ and possibly indicates a group that traced its lineage back to a woman who served as a scribe.⁵² Nehemiah 6.14 mentions Nehemiah’s conflict with a prophetess called Noadiah, which hints at a prophetic role for at least one woman in the post-exilic period. Some have

48. Of course, one might argue that all or most of the Hebrew Bible is actually post-exilic. For various versions of this theory, see Philip R. Davies, *In Search of ‘Ancient Israel’* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2nd edn, 1995); Mario Liverani, *Israel’s History and the History of Israel* (London: Equinox, 2005); Niels Peter Lemche, *The Israelites in History and Tradition* (LAI; London: SPCK, 1998); Thomas L. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People: From the Written and Archaeological Sources* (Leiden/New York: E.J. Brill, 1992). I restrict my analysis here to books that describe or purport to describe the realities of life during the Persian period, or books where a scholarly consensus has formed around its whole or partial Persian-period composition.

49. Esther is a major exception in that one of its main characters is a woman. Scholars debate whether Esther is an empowered or empowering heroine, but it is undeniable that her book features women prominently.

50. Julia M. O’Brien, ‘Haggai’, in Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (eds.), *Women’s Bible Commentary: Revised and Updated* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 3rd edn, 2012), pp. 343-45 (343); and in the same volume Julia M. O’Brien, ‘Zechariah’, pp. 346-49 (346).

51. Jennifer L. Koosed, ‘Qoheleth in Love and Trouble’, in Jon L. Berquist (ed.), *Approaching Yehud* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), pp. 183-93 (185).

52. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, ‘Ezra–Nehemiah’, in Newsom, Ringe, and Lapsley (eds.), *Women’s Bible Commentary*, pp. 192-200 (196).

seen the female-personified figure of Wisdom as a positive figure, a 'living argument for recognizing the significance of women's roles for community'.⁵³

What, if anything, can my suggestion of female diplomats in Elephantine add to the state of knowledge about Jewish life in the post-exilic period? This is a tricky question. I would caution against drawing too many conclusions about life for women in post-exilic Yehud from the state of affairs in Elephantine. As Azzoni points out, the impression the Elephantine documents give is 'of an urban community, in which Judeans, Arameans, Egyptians, Persians and other ethnic groups coexisted and interacted. These private archives reveal a complex society, in which different traditions came in contact, thus influencing one another.'⁵⁴ This is not likely to have been the situation in Yehud. If we take biblical texts such as Ezra and Nehemiah at face value, the returning exiles came to an empty land and rebuilt it from scratch, which would mean Yehud was socially and economically very different from the multiethnic, bustling Elephantine. In addition, Elephantine was a military colony. As such, its social organization might have been unusual for the time period; perhaps women even had a bigger role in family and communal affairs because the men were occupied with military affairs. It is unrealistic to expect the same attitudes toward and treatment of women in Elephantine and Yehud. Further, the nature of the documents we have from the two places is so different as to inhibit productive comparisons. Most of the writings from Elephantine are legal documents or letters, evidently written and then sent, kept, or filed away. The biblical material is a mix of historiography, memoir, prophecy, polemic, and instruction, some of it no doubt edited and reedited, reshaped and polished over the centuries. I do not mean to paint the Elephantine material as somehow free from ideology; marriage contracts and personal letters contain assumptions about how society works or should work, just as more overtly political documents do. However, it is clear that in most instances, the biblical materials and the Elephantine documents were authored in very different situations and for very different purposes.

53. Christl Maier, 'Proverbs: How Feminine Wisdom Comes into Being', in Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (eds.), *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 255-72 (267).

54. Annalisa Azzoni, 'Women of Elephantine and Women in the Land of Israel', in Botta (ed.), *In the Shadow of Bezalel*, pp. 3-12 (11).

Perhaps the best way to look at the documents from Elephantine in general, and my proposal regarding TAD A4.4 specifically, is not as a corrective to the biblical material, but as evidence that we should expand our search for the realities of fifth-century Judaism beyond the Bible. Elephantine may have little to tell us about women in Persian-period Yehud and ‘biblical women’, but it does show us that, less than 1000 miles away, women had a remarkably vital role in another Jewish society.

7. Conclusion

I do not mean to imply that Elephantine was a proto-feminist paradise where women enjoyed equal rights with men in all spheres. This would be an unrealistic conclusion not supported by the evidence. However, it is undeniable that in certain religious, financial, and matrimonial matters, Jewish women in Elephantine had surprisingly broad rights. This was a society where women’s religious participation mattered, where women could divorce their husbands, where women could inherit and disburse property, and where they could initiate and pursue legal proceedings in a variety of cases. This is precisely the sort of ancient society where we can imagine that women would have been valued for their potential as diplomatic emissaries.

The logical conclusion is that the women had some official role in the delegation to Thebes. They, like the men, were emissaries on whatever mission occupied the Jews in Thebes. What, aside from our own pre-conceptions about the role of Jewish women in the fifth century BCE, stops us from envisioning a leadership role at Elephantine for these six women? Bernadette Brooten wrote aptly of drawing conclusions about the role of women in a different context, leadership in the synagogue in the early centuries of the Common Era. She suggested, ‘Rather than trying to fit these inscriptions into our pre-conceived notions of what women were (and are) and of what Judaism was, would it not be more reasonable to take these inscriptions as a challenge to our pre-conceptions, as traces of a Judaism of which we know very little?’⁵⁵ Likewise, we should read TAD A4.4’s plain meaning, that a diplomatic mission in fifth-century Egypt involved women as well as men, as a challenge to our preconceived notions of Jewish women’s lives in the Persian period.

55. Bernadette J. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), p. 32.