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The Unity of the Sanctuary in the Light of the Elephantine Papyri

JAMES A. KELSO

WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, PITTSBURGH, PA.

THE existence of a shrine of the God Yahu or Yahweh, at Yeb (Greek: Syene) in Upper Egypt, was first made known to the modern world by the publication of the Assouan papyri in 1906.[1] Two of these papyri contain an incidental allusion to this Jewish sanctuary; in both instances it is mentioned as the boundary of a piece of property —"below it a shrine of Yahu the God" and "east of it a shrine of the God Yahu."[2] About this mere mention of a Jewish place of worship at once grew up a number of hypotheses as to its nature. Sayce and Cowley translated אֲגוּרָא by 'chapel,' a modern, but from a critical standpoint a colorless, rendering, because it does not determine whether it was a high place, a synagogue, or a temple. Schürer[3] advocated the interpretation of אגורא in the sense of בָּמָה or high place, falling back on the later usage of the former term. In the Targums and post-Biblical Hebrew it is used exclusively of heathen altars, but this does not necessarily settle its earlier usage. Words, innocent enough at first, often take on obnoxious shades of meaning and are discarded. To point to a well-known example will suffice: בַּעַל in O. T. is changed to בֹּשֶׁת in proper names, *e.g.* אִשְׁבַּעַל to אִישְׁבֹשֶׁת; that in the days of the golden future, Israel will address her

[1] Sayce and Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri Discovered at Assuan*, London, 1906.

[2] E 14, J 6.

[3] *ThLZ*, 1907, p. 4, "Aber das Wort an sich heisst nur Altar (eigentlich Steinhaufe). Ein *chapel* ist dabei nicht notwendig. Das Wesentliche ist jedenfalls der Altar unter freiem Himmel."

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God as אִישִׁי and not בַּעֲלִי is another significant instance, Hos. 2 18 (Eng. 2 16). Staerk[4] in turn regarded the אגורא as a synagogue. While the data of the Assouan papyri, consisting of a mere allusion, were too meager to determine the exact nature of the sanctuary, the details of the Elephantine papyri show clearly that it was neither a high place nor a synagogue, and warn us once more against the danger of making large and sweeping inductions on the basis of a very few facts.

The first of the three Elephantine papyri[5] contains a description of this Jewish shrine, which completely shatters the views of both Schürer and Staerk. It is a letter, addressed by the leaders of the Jewish colony on the island of Elephantine in Upper Egypt to Bagoses, the Persian governor of Judæa. It is a complaint against a certain Waidrang, commandant of the forces at the fortress of Yeb, which was located on this island. Waidrang, incited by the priest of the Egyptian god Khnub, had destroyed a sanctuary of the God Yahu. Thus the writer is led to describe this shrine: "They entered into that temple, they razed it to the ground. And the pillars of stone, which were there, they destroyed, and it happened that the five stone doors built of hewn stone, which were in that temple, they destroyed, their capitals and their hinges in blocks of marble, the former of bronze, the roof entirely of cedar beams, together with the plaster of the walls of the outer court, and other things which were there, they have burned all with fire. And the basins of gold and silver and the articles

[4] Staerk, *Die Jüdisch-Aramäischen Papyri von Assuan*, Bonn, 1907, p. 21. "In der That kann hier nicht ein offener Altar, sondern nur ein Diasporatempel (Synagoge?) gemeint sein."

[5] Sachau, *Drei Aramäische Urkunden aus Elephantine*, Berlin, 1907. It is well to keep a few facts in mind in regard to these documents. In Feb., 1906, Dr. Otto Rubensohn, who had been excavating among the ruins of the southern extremity of the Island of Elephantine, discovered a number of papyri in the débris. To this find belong the three which are now commonly termed the Elephantine papyri. There are good reasons for associating these documents with the Assouan group, and assigning them to the same original collection.

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which were in the temple, all of them they have taken and appropriated for themselves" (i. l. 9-12).

The sanctuary described in the above words was no mere high place or altar. The pillars of stone were supports of the roof, which carried beams of the costly cedar. They were in all probability arranged in colonnades, as was usually the case in Egyptian temples. The five doors of hewn stone with hinges of bronze imply a building of some size. The use of cedar and marble as building material, and the possession of vessels of silver and gold, suggest considerable wealth. Further, the use of the word אגורי for the Egyptian sanctuaries destroyed by Cambyses makes for the translation of this term by the English word temple,[6] and leads to the conception of a sanctuary of some size, although the imagination is to be restrained from picturing it with the dimensions of the great Egyptian structures. Lagrange, in an article in the *Revue Biblique*, scarcely does justice to the description of the Jewish sanctuary, as he overemphasizes the reference which Bagoses makes to it in his reply. The Persian official calls it a בֵּית מַדְבְּחָא, an *altar-house;* and making this the criterion for the exegesis of the description of Letter I, the distinguished French *savant* maintains that the shrine consisted of an altar, enclosed by walls and a colonnade which shielded it from the gaze of others than worshipers.[7] He supports his contention by saying there was no need for a *naos* to the sanctuary, as the Jews of Elephantine did not possess the ark of the covenant. Are we absolutely sure that they had installed no substitute to symbolize the presence of their national God? or, like the temples of Zerubbabel and Herod, may this one not have had an empty *adytum?* for in both these sanctuaries the Holy of Holies might be correctly described in the words of Tacitus *inania arcana*. Fortunately for our present purposes, it is not necessary to learn the exact size of this Jewish temple, but one feature is

[6] אגורי אלהי מצרין (i. l. 14). We believe Nöldeke is justified in terming it a "grosses glänzendes Heiligtum," *ZA*, 1908, p. 202.

[7] *Rev. Biblique*, 1908, pp. 337 f. Lagrange's own words are "une enceinte fermée ayant au centre un autel."

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certainly established: it was not an altar under the open heaven, as Schürer originally maintained.

It is still clearer that it was in no sense a prototype of the synagogue. The colony claims that, from the fourteenth year of Darius until the seventeenth, no meal offerings, incense, or burnt offerings had been laid upon the altar.[8] As the service of the synagogue consisted in the reading of the Scriptures, prayer, and a sermon, the mere mention of sacrifices excludes any association of the sanctuary at Elephantine with the buildings for public worship which became a feature of later Judaism.

What bearing has the discovery of the existence of this Jewish temple in Upper Egypt on that question fundamentally important for O. T. criticism, namely, *the unity of the sanctuary?* We have but to recall the fact that the place of sacrifice is the theme of the opening chapter of that epoch-making book by Wellhausen — *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, and to remind ourselves that his contentions in regard to the view which the Hebrews took of the unity of the sanctuary constitute the keystone of the arch which he has reared. Scarcely had the Elephantine papyri been published when investigators began to study this problem in the light of new knowledge. That Nestor of Semitic scholars, Nöldeke,[9] has maintained that our papyri contain, as it were, a *Q.E.D.* for the Wellhausen theory. He confesses that he has long struggled against adopting the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis, but his hesitation has finally been overcome by the evidence of these newly discovered Aramaic documents. He now feels assured that the Pentateuch did not reach its present form until the days of Ezra.

[8] i. l. 21. מנחה ולבונה ושלמה; l. 25. ומנחתא ולבונתא ושלמתא. These three forms of sacrifice are enumerated again in ii. l. 20, the burnt offering is mentioned again in ii. l. 24, while the general term דבחין (Heb. זבחים) is added in ii. l. 26. Two of these kinds of sacrifice are alluded to in the reply of Bagoses and Delaiah, ומנחתא ולבונתא, iii. l. 9.

[9] *ZA*, 1909, p. 203. "Die Rezeption des Pentateuchs in seiner definitiven Gestalt war eben noch nicht zu ihnen gedrungen, wenigstens nicht als für sie bindend anerkannt. Damit fällt jede Möglichkeit, jenen Abschluss des Pentateuchs in eine ältere Zeit zu legen als die Ezra's."

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Unfortunately Nöldeke merely states his conclusions without showing the steps by which he advances to them. It is quite evident that he has drawn his inference from the complete disregard of the Deuteronomic command (Dt. 12 5 ff.) by the Jews of Elephantine.

Müller,[10] on the other hand, has denied the cogency of Nöldeke's argument, by drawing our attention to the erection of the temple of Onias at Leontopolis in the middle of the second century (B.C. 152). He emphasizes his contention by pointing to its existence at the same time with that of the great sanctuary at Jerusalem, and even to 73 A.D. Let it be remembered that the temple of Onias was modeled after that of Jerusalem, its ministers were priests and Levites, that it was recognized as semi-legitimate on account of the well-known passage in Isaiah (19 18 ff.). Müller's argument, then, is that the mere existence of a Jewish sanctuary in Upper Egypt in the fifth century B.C. does not, *per se*, prove either the non-existence of the Pentateuch or the ignorance of the law of the unity of the sanctuary on the part of the Elephantine colony, because the temple of Leontopolis enjoyed a position of semi-legitimacy at a later period.

In turn, Stähelin[11] has criticised the position of Müller, maintaining the impossibility of bringing the sanctuary at Elephantine and the temple of Onias within the same category. His grounds are twofold: (1) the shrine at Elephantine was not a temple at all, but merely a high place (בָּמָה); (2) it was founded by the exiles to Egypt after Nebuchadnezzar's victory; in other words, by the lower strata of society (the *élite* of the nation were taken to Babylon, Jer. 29 1 ff., Ez. 17 3-6). On the other hand, the temple at Leontopolis was founded by Onias, a scion of the legitimate high priestly family of Joshua ben Jozadak. Stähelin argues that the rank of the founder gave a certain kind of legitimacy to the sanctuary at Leontopolis.[12] But Stähelin's

[10] *WZKM*, xxi. pp. 416 ff. [11] *ZATW*, 1908, pp. 180 f.

[12] On the temple of Onias, cf. Josephus, *Ant.*, xiii. 3. Onias fled to Egypt on account of persecutions at home, and espousing the cause of Ptolemy VI, Philometer, in his struggle with his brother, was given the privilege of repair-

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position may be disregarded without hesitation, as he is certainly incorrect in styling the Elephantine sanctuary a high place, and most probably wrong in holding that it was founded by the exiles to Egypt whom Jeremiah denounces (Jer. 42–44). There are as good, if not better, grounds for holding that the Jews at Elephantine were originally mercenaries in the service of the Egyptian kings, and that the colony owed its origin to Psammetichus I (663–610 B.C.).

These writers, whose views have just been presented, have missed the bearing of the facts of our papyri on the principle of the unity of the sanctuary, by overemphasizing the mere existence of another Jewish shrine, contemporaneous with the Temple at Jerusalem. The erection of this sanctuary in Upper Egypt in itself does not necessarily imply ignorance of the law of the central and only legitimate sanctuary, as laid down in Deuteronomy or assumed in the Priestly Code. Still less does it prove the non-existence of the law, for the *terminus ad quem* of the promulgation of the Deuteronomic Code is by common consent 621 B.C. It is possible to hold three alternative opinions in regard to the attitude of the Jews of Elephantine to the principle under discussion. (1) They were acquainted with the law, but disregarded it with the conscious purpose of adjusting themselves to a practical situation; (2) with a full knowledge, they had no scruples on the subject; (3) they were absolutely ignorant of the operation of such a principle in the religion of their fathers. By confining our attention merely to the existence of this sanctuary in Egypt, we shall never be able to determine which of these three alternatives is correct. There are other features in these letters which suggest that the third alternative is the most reasonable view of the situation.

The naïveté of the leaders of the Elephantine colony is surprising. Three years previously they had addressed the

ing a ruined temple of Bubastis in the town of Leontopolis, and using it for the observance of Jewish rites and ceremonies. Cf. Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden*, vol. iii. ch. 2; Wellhausen, *Isr. u. jüd. Geschichte*, p. 248; Willrich, *Juden u. Griechen*, pp. 86 f.

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high priest, appealing for assistance in rebuilding their temple which their enemies had destroyed. They evidently expected that swift succor would come to them from their Judæan brethren. To get an idea of the childlike naïveté of their procedure, let us imagine an analogous case, such as an application for aid from a Protestant communion addressed to the Roman Pontiff, or from English dissenters to the supreme prelate of the Anglican Church. Such appeals would be regarded as signs at least of ignorance or arrogance, if not of mental weakness. This Aramaic letter (i) bears no marks of arrogance, but is an earnest and pitiful appeal for help at a critical juncture. "Also since the day of Tammuz of the fourteenth year of Darius, even until this day we have worn sackcloth and fasted, our wives have been as widows, we have not anointed ourselves with oil nor drunk wine" (i. 19–21). In this spirit they wrote in 408 B.C., and it is most natural to suppose that their appeal to Jehohanan, the high priest, and his brother Ostanes in 411 B.C., was couched in similar language and prompted by the same spirit (i. 17).

From what we know of the position of Ezra and of Judaism since his day, we can imagine how Jehohanan and his *confrères* laughed in their sleeves at the simplicity of the Jews at Elephantine. The last thing they would dream of doing would be the rebuilding of a shrine, which would be a rival to their own in the affections of the men of the Egyptian diaspora. No! according to their ideas the temple of Yahu at Yeb was an illegitimate sanctuary; it had better lie in ruins. So no answer was sent to the appeal, silence being the best way out of a dilemma.

If we read between the lines, we see that at last the truth dawned upon the minds of the leaders at Elephantine, and they had an inkling of the situation in Palestine. The second letter, beseeching assistance, is now sent after a lapse of three years, not to the high priest, but to Bagoses, the leading Persian official at Jerusalem, and to Delaiah and Shelemaiah, the sons of Sanballat, who figures in the O. T. as the head of the Samaritan community. The former might be

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expected to assist them, because of the attitude of toleration assumed by the Persian monarchs towards all the religions of their domains. In fact, the act of the Egyptians, in destroying the Jewish temple, would be a serious breach of the peace in the eyes of the Persian law. On the other hand, Delaiah and Shelemiah would be delighted in assisting those who worshiped Yahweh at a shrine other than the Temple at Jerusalem. It would be in line with the policy of their father, Sanballat.

Another significant feature of the colony at Elephantine is that every indication points to the purity of the cultus as practiced in their temple. They were not semi-heathen Jews from the Northern Kingdom, who worshiped Yahweh with the syncretistic rites of Baal. They can scarcely be descendants of the fugitives to Egypt who dragged Jeremiah along with them, and despite his exhortations to a purer worship emphatically announced their continued allegiance to the queen of heaven (Jer. 44 15 ff.); it is difficult to believe that this class of Jews would ever build a temple of Yahweh. The names of the colonists are either identical with those in Ezra-Nehemiah, or of similar formation, *i.e.* theophorous with יה as the last element. In the Elephantine papyri one of the colonists bears such a name; it is that of the Jewish priest at Yeb יְדַנְיָה (i. 4); in the Assouan group we have 26 names of this formation, many of them common among the families who laid the foundations of Judaism in the days of the Return and Restoration.[18] These names, together with

[18] In the Elephantine papyri we have the name of only one of these colonists, Jedoniah (i. 4), and as it is that of the priest, too much stress cannot be laid upon it. In regard to the proper names of the Assouan group the editors speak very definitely: "Their names are compounded with that of Yahweh quite as much as the names of the orthodox Jews who returned to Palestine from the captivity." Sayce and Cowley, *op. cit.*, p. 10. Bacher (*JQR*, xix. p. 447) proposes another theory based on the occurrence of the names Hosea and Menahem, — in the Assouan papyri six individuals bear the latter and eight the former. As these are Ephraimitic names, this scholar argues that the predominating strain in the colony was from the northern tribes, and that it came from Assyria or Babylon. According to Bacher this colony was founded by soldiers in the army of the Assyrian kings who invaded Egypt. Israel Levi (*REJ*, liv. p. 38) agrees with Bacher, and

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all the allusions to their worship and cultus, point to the purer Yahweh worship of the Southern Kingdom as the faith of the founders of the colony at Syene.[14]

Keeping in mind the naïveté of the Jews in addressing the authorities at Jerusalem, and the evidence of a pure form of Yahweh worship at Elephantine, it is possible to draw but one conclusion; namely, that the unity of the sanctuary had not been a recognized principle in Israel from the beginnings of her history. If it had been preached from Moses onwards by the spiritual leaders of the nation, time enough had elapsed since that, until the *terminus a quo* of the founding of this colony, to have allowed this idea to pass into the iron atoms of the blood, so that nothing could efface it. Later history justifies this statement. The Jew has never forgotten religious principles which experience and history have written on his memory, but once learned, they abide forever. The Jews of Elephantine, with a knowledge of the Deuteronomic principle, might have built a sanctuary to keep alive their faith in their national God and thus adapted themselves to a practical situation as Lagrange maintains, but they would never have made the appeal contained in Papyrus I, had they known the position of the hierarchy at Jerusalem.

The facts revealed by our papyri do not deal gently with the two alternate views of Orr and Van Hoonacker. If Orr[15] be correct in his hypothesis, that "the principle of the centralization of worship was involved in the Mosaic system

traces the origin of the colony to Babylon, terming it, "*un essaim de colonie babylonienne.*" I think the view of Bacher and Levi is without adequate foundation.

[14] After I had sketched the argument of this paper, an article by Owen C. Whitehouse came to my notice. Whitehouse takes a view of the religion of this colony identical with my own. "Moreover, the offerings of the temple, burnt offerings, meal offerings, and incense (l. 21, cf. 25), also the custom of fasting in times of sorrow (20), exhibit no suggestion of illegitimate forms of worship. There is no mention of an *asherah*, or of anything that indicated the traditions of a Canaanite high place such as *Ḳedeshim* or *ḳedeshoth*, with which the prophets Hosea and Amos and the Books of the Kings make us familiar." *Exp. Times*, xx. p. 202.

[15] Orr, *The Problem of the Old Testament*, p. 177.

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from the commencement," and the law in Dt. 12 was "not given as a law intended to come into perfect operation from the first," the data of our documents would lead us to infer that this principle of centralization had never been a vital force in the Hebrew religion. On this hypothesis it could have been only an esoteric priestly theory, which never touched the life of the people. Our general knowledge of the development of Semitic religions, together with the situation at Yeb as presented in these papyri, make the view of Orr very unlikely. Unfortunately the data are not of such a nature as to enable us to deny it categorically.

The situation as presented in the Elephantine papyri completely overthrows the theory so ably advocated by Van Hoonacker.[16] According to this scholar the Deuteronomic law was only a development of a principle inherent in the Covenant Code, Dt. 12 4 ff., being another statement of the law implicit in the regulations concerning the three feasts of Ex. 23 14-19. Both of these passages in his eyes refer exclusively to the *official public worship* which could be conducted at the central sanctuary alone. The enactment of Ex. 20 24 in regard to the "altar of earth," which is usually quoted in support of the practice of sacrifice at many shrines and high places during the period of the monarchy, is regarded by Van Hoonacker as applying only to *private worship*. In other words, the ideal of Israel had been one and only one altar for the national ceremonial, but altars many and

[16] Van Hoonacker, *Le Lieu du Culte dans la Législation Rituelle des Hébreux*, p. 27. He sums up his thesis in the following language: "Dans les trois groupes de lois que nous avons examinés, la législation rituelle des Hébreux s'accorde à proclamer qu'il n'y a en Israël qu'un seul lieu servant de demeure à Jéhova et que c'est en ce lieu, pas ailleurs, que doivent être régulièrement accomplis les actes du culte public et national. Le livre de l'alliance connait cette institution aussi bien que le code sacerdotal et le Deutéronome.

"Le livre de l'alliance et le code sacerdotal, à côté de celle-là, en règlent ou supposent une autre se rapportant au culte privé et domestique qui s'exerce dans l'immolation ordinaire du bétail. Cette immolation était accompagnée de certaines actions religieuses que tout Israélite était apte à poser et qui devaient s'accomplir sur des autels de terre ou de pierres non taillées." p. 86.

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shrines many for the cultivation of domestic religion. If Van Hoonacker's contention be correct, our Egyptian temple falls between two stools, as it was a public shrine, and in no sense a private altar. On his theory its erection was a violation of the Deuteronomic command, and at the same time Ex. 20 24 could not be quoted in its defense. In other words, Van Hoonacker's hypothesis has no place for the sanctuary described in our papyri, and is consequently untenable in so far as it fails to account for all the phenomena which history presents.

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