

Preface

Reading ancient texts is not just a feat of philology. Over the years it has become for me a way to get closer to people who are far away. They are dead. They lived in a different world. But as the young girl said in one of the greatest books of the twentieth century, once they were alive like you and me. I am referring to the preface of Giorgio Bassani's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. The girl was speaking of the Etruscans whose graves she had just seen. The Jews who lived on the Egyptian island of Elephantine in the fifth century BCE are the near contemporaries of those Etruscans. They are, in a way, as strange to us as those Etruscans—even though Jews are still among us and Etruscans are not. But these Jews seem a rare variety. I first read about them many years ago and wondered who they were. What was their story? Would they still have something to tell me? It seemed the kind of curiosity that comes and goes. Mentally you make a note, then forget about it. But the Elephantine Jews refused to be forgotten. They seemed to be waiting for me once I had the chance to return to a scholarly life after years of university administration. I wanted to discover their story.

I could never have anticipated spending three years or more deciphering a papyrus in Demotic characters in order to get closer to the Elephantine Jews. I knew Hebrew and cuneiform. Why should I want to read Egyptian? But it turned out that the descendants of the Elephantine Jews had used the Demotic script to write down some of their ancestral traditions. By good fortune, the language was Aramaic—perhaps not my favorite, but one I felt at ease with. Papyrus Amherst 63 proved to be an amazing source on the traditions of the Aramaic-speaking diaspora communities in Persian Egypt. To me, the Elephantine Jews had been a phenomenon without a history. They were something that just happened, without a before

or after. The after is still unclear, but the Amherst papyrus has plenty to say about the before. It is now possible to tell the story of the Elephantine Jews instead of looking at snapshots.

Some of us like to think of history as a way to get into the skin of those who preceded us. I am incapable of such feats. I do believe, however, that we can get closer and identify patterns of behavior. The latter reflect, at some distance, what is going on in the collective mind of a community. When I was younger I thought we should all aim for authenticity. To be your real self seemed like the highest achievement. As I grow older I find that the real self is quite elusive. We are part of a pattern even as we cherish the illusion of being unique. The Elephantine Jews conformed to a pattern too. The pattern I pay attention to in this book is that of an emerging Jewish identity. As the Aramaic text in Demotic characters shows, the ancestors of the Elephantine Jews came from Samaria, found shelter in an Aramean society toward 700 BCE, and moved to Egypt some hundred years later. These migrants to Egypt did not claim a Jewish identity when they came. Under the double impact of the diaspora experience and the Persian politics of ethnic diversity, they became the Elephantine Jews. This merging of particular historical identities into larger ethnic communities was a pattern in the Persian Empire. Judaism as the world would come to know it was still in the making, but the Jewish people had entered the scene.

This book is about the Elephantine Jews rather than the Elephantine Judeans. Let me explain why. The Aramaic term *yēhūdāy* makes no distinction between “Judean” and “Jew”; it allows of both translations. By distinguishing between “Judean” and “Jew,” then, we have, in a way, created our own dilemma. The choice between the two alternatives corresponds, in what is perhaps the dominant perception, to the difference between ethnicity and religion. It is the difference between *les Juifs* and *les juifs* in French orthography. The Juifs with a capital *J* are an ethnic community, like *les Français* and *les Américains*. The juifs with a lowercase *j*, on the other hand, are a religious group, like *les catholiques* and *les protestants*. From the perspective of the Jews or the Judeans of the fifth century BCE, this is a false opposition. They did not really distinguish between ethnicity and religion, as though the one could be isolated from the other. We, however, have to make a choice. As a translation, neither “Judean” nor “Jew” is entirely felicitous. The former emphasizes Judah as place of origin, whereas the latter seems primarily a reference to religion. After some deliberation, I have chosen to translate *yēhūdāy* consistently as “Jew” or “Jewish.” There are two

reasons. One consideration is the fact that the original nucleus of the Elephantine Jews had its roots in Samaria. To call them Judeans is misleading inasmuch as they are precisely not from Judah. My other reason has to do with the meaning of the terms “Jew” and “Jewish.”

To say that there were no Jews before the invention of the Jewish religion feels to me like a strongly ideological statement. It misrecognizes the fact that religion is part of culture and subject to constant change. Is the Judaism of the second century BCE the real Judaism, or should the Judaism of the Talmud be our norm? Or is Jewish religion an invention of the Western Enlightenment? In my mind, Jewish identity is a mix of ethnicity and culture. Religion is certainly part of that culture, but you don’t need to be religious in order to be a Jew. “Jew” and “Jewish” refer to ethnicity first and to a religious tradition secondarily. It is true that in former times, religion was so much part of culture that the two were inextricable. Like everybody around them, the Elephantine Jews had religion—though they would not call it by that name. To many Jews of a later age, this religion was perhaps hardly Jewish. The Elephantine Jews worshipped Yaho as their ancestral god and several Aramean deities besides him. By our standards, they were polytheists. But that does not make them any less Jewish. Unless one subscribes to an essentialist view of what it means to be a Jew, the religion that Jews have been practicing through the ages has gone through many transformations. Historically, Jewish identity exhibits great variety. The Elephantine Jews represent their segment of the spectrum.

Though research feels at times like a lonely journey, it never is. We are always part of a community of scholars. There are those before us—our teachers and their teachers—and there are those whose time is yet to come—our students and their students. We are, as they say, standing on the shoulders of giants. And one day others will take our discoveries and show that there are ways to go beyond them. We are rooted in a tradition. Such knowledge is at once a lesson in modesty and a source of pride. In the meantime we enjoy the company of our contemporaries. This book has benefited from the input of many colleagues. I could draw up a long list of names of those who helped me over the past few years. Instead I dedicate this book to the members of the Biblical Colloquium. They sum up what it means to me to be part of a scholarly community where people speak without fear, question without condescension, and share in a spirit of intellectual passion and curiosity.

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Becoming Diaspora Jews

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