
ANAT-YAHU AND THE JEWS AT ELEPHANTINE

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(Received 25/02/2013: Revised 15/11/2013)

ABSTRACT

Important Aramaic papyri documents have been discovered at the fortified city on the island of Elephantine in the Nile River. These documents describe, inter alia, the lives of a group of Jewish mercenaries and their families who lived there during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. They probably originated from the former kingdom of northern Israel. Documents attest to an excavated Jewish temple where sacrifices were offered to YHW. The inhabitants of the seventh century B.C.E. northern Israel consisted mainly of Israelites and Aramaeans. They worshipped many deities or forms of divine manifestation. This religious pluralism was presumably carried over to Elephantine. Several of these papyri contain references to YHW, the most significant being an oath in the name of Anat-Yahu. The aim of this article is to illustrate that the possible veneration of Anat-Yahu by the Jews at Elephantine could support the much-debated theory that the Israelites believed that Yahweh had a consort.

INTRODUCTION

Jewish mercenaries and their families lived on the island of Elephantine in the Nile River during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. They probably originated from the former kingdom of northern Israel. The inhabitants of the seventh century B.C.E. northern Israel consisted mainly of Israelites and Aramaeans who shared Aramaic as their common language. The deities they worshipped included Anat-Bethel and Yahweh or Yahu. Northern Israel's religious pluralism was presumably carried over to Elephantine and Syene. Documents attest to an excavated Jewish temple where sacrifices were offered to YHW.¹ This temple was demolished by Egyptian troops in 410 B.C.E.

Important Aramaic papyri documents have been discovered at the fortified city on

¹ A letter from the second quarter of the fifth century B.C.E. refers to "the [T]emple of YHW in Elephantine" (Porten & Yardeni 1986:30).

Elephantine. Several of these recovered documents have references to “YHW”, the most significant being a recorded oath in the name of Anat-Yahu – “by the place of prostration and by AnatYHW” (Porten 1996:266). Although Anat was known as a goddess in Egypt, there is no evidence for her veneration in Israel. Anat-Yahu is not mentioned other than in the Elephantine papyri. It is therefore improbable that an association of Anat with Yahweh (Yahu) has any ancient roots in Israel. Nevertheless, a deity, Anat-Bethel, is mentioned twice in Neo-Assyrian treaties, which might shed some light on the roots of Anat-Yahu.²

During the last number of years, many debates ensued amongst scholars after the discovery of inscriptions on two pithoi at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, a site in the north-eastern region of Sinai, as well as an inscription on a pillar of a burial cave close to Khirbet ’el-Qom, southeast of Lachish. These inscriptions gave rise to the question whether the Israelite God, Yahweh, had a consort. The particular engravings at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud respectively mention

may you be blessed by Yahweh
of Shomron and his Asherah (Scheffler 2000:102),

and

Amaryo said: Tell my lord, may you be well
and be blessed by Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah.
May he bless and keep you and be with you” (Scheffler 2000:105),

and, at Khirbet ’el Qom

² The name Anat-Bethel, or Anat of Bethel, signifies “Anat, the consort of Bethel”. The name Bethel – “House of El” – originally may have referred to open cult places (Röllig 1999:174). Esarhaddon’s Treaty – the treaty between the Assyrian king Esarhaddon and Baal I, the king of Tyre – mentions *ḏBa-a-ati-dingir.meš* and *ḏA-na-ti-Ba-a[a-ti-dingir].meš*, probably pronounced Bayt-’el and Anat-Bayt-’el. This treaty was probably concluded after the conquest and destruction of Sidon in 676 B.C.E. The same names appear in the list of divine witnesses invoked in the Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon in 672 B.C.E. (van der Toorn 1992:83). The text of the treaty between Esarhaddon and Baal I can be found in Borger (1956:109 § 69 iv 6), and that of the Succession Treaty as text no 6 in Parpola & Watanabe (1988; cf. van der Toorn 1992:99). Records from the Amorite Kingdom at Mari, during the reign of Zimri-Lim (ca. 1780-1758 B.C.E.) attest the cult of Anat. She was closely associated with the city Ḫanat, south-east of Mari, which might have been her cult centre. Extant Ugaritic texts are an important source to characterise the goddess (Maier 1992:225-226).

For 'Uriyahu the governor, his inscription.
 Blessed is 'Uriyahu by Yahweh.
 From his enemies he has been saved
 By his Asherah.
 (Written) by 'Oniyahu (Dever 2005:131-132).

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that the oath-reference in the papyrus document justifies the view that the Elephantine Jews venerated a deity Anat-Yahu, and that, in the light of the above-mentioned inscriptions, could support the theory of a number of scholars, namely that many of the Israelites believed that Yahweh had a consort.

COMMUNITIES AND TEMPLES AT ELEPHANTINE

Elephantine and the Jewish mercenaries

The early fortified city of Elephantine was situated on an island in the Nile River, opposite the ancient village of Syene.³ As the southernmost city of Egypt, Elephantine was a military stronghold and trade centre. It also held the seat for the royal officials responsible for the important ivory trade from Nubia;⁴ the name Elephantine is thus probably a reference to this ivory trade. Elephantine was locally known as Yeb, and apart from a possible reference to the ivory trade, the name could also have been inspired by the surrounding large smooth black rocks. In a river near the island these boulders resemble bathing elephants (Rosenberg 2004:6).

Excavations revealed a Jewish military colony and a Jewish temple from Persian times, as attested in documents. Papyri texts and documents in no less than seven languages and scripts were also discovered on the island.⁵ These papyrus texts

³ Modern Aswan. Like Elephantine, mainland Syene was a fort forming a geological, ethnic and political border. It was valued in the whole of Egypt for its red granite that was utilised for building blocks and the manufacturing of statues and sarcophagi (Porten 1996:xi, 1).

⁴ Also known as Ethiopia. The country is mentioned the first time in the Hebrew Bible as Cush (Gn 2:13), and in ancient times it was known as Nubia. It lies between the second and fourth cataracts in the Nile Valley (Negev & Gibson 2001:169).

⁵ As from 1815 individual pieces of documents from Elephantine appeared at various places and in the hands of different people. Major collections of papyri and ostraca are now mainly in Cairo, London, Europe and Brooklyn. The first fifth century B.C.E. Aramaic papyri, historically the most significant of all the Aramaic documents, were discovered in

describe, inter alia, the lives of a group of Jewish mercenaries and their families, who lived there during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. They were initially on the payroll of the Egyptians and later on that of the Persians. Their function was to guard the southern border of Egypt at the first cataract of the Nile. Although their date of arrival at Elephantine is unknown, they were well established by 525 B.C.E.⁶ If they arrived on the island during the reign of Manasseh in Judah, the middle of the seventh century B.C.E., to assist the Egyptians in their campaign against Nubia, it would have given them ample time to establish a communal temple before 525 B.C.E.⁷ These Jews probably originated from the former kingdom of northern Israel, which came, together with Judah, under Egyptian rule after the death of Josiah. Jewish soldiers were now fighting under Egyptian instruction and could possibly also have been taken, forcibly or voluntarily, to serve in Egypt.⁸ Stationed on Elephantine, they erected a shrine, probably not on the lines of the Solomonic temple but more likely in the form of the Tabernacle (! kvm), as it remained in the memory of the northern Israelites; possibly also in defiance of Josiah's centralisation in 622 B.C.E. (Rosenberg 2004:12). Although these people from Elephantine called themselves Jews, for them it meant something rather different than for their Yehudite contemporaries. In addition to being excluded like the Samaritan communities, the Elephantine Jews were also excluded from participation in Judah, thus, in all likelihood, causing tension between the

1907. Regrettably, the site and mode of burial of the hundreds of papyri on Elephantine are unknown. It is, however, known that they lay in close proximity to each other. For a detailed discussion of the recovery of the documents at Elephantine and Syene, see Porten (1996:1-27).

⁶ A papyrus, dated 407 B.C.E., mentions that the Jewish temple stood on Elephantine before the Persian conquest of Egypt by Cambyses in 525 B.C.E. The papyrus states that Cambyses destroyed many temples but saved the Jewish temple (Rosenberg 2004:6). See also a reference in this regard in a letter from the priest Jedaniah [Yedaniah] to Bagohi [Bagavahya], governor of Judah (Porten & Yardeni 1986:75).

⁷ A temple for a Semitic god could only have been established there if ordained by the act of some pharaoh (Kraeling 1962:84), and probably subsidised by the pharaoh (Porten 1996:18).

⁸ Josiah, king of Judah, died in 609 B.C.E. (Kitchen & Mitchell 1982:197; 2 Kings 23:28-30). Rosenberg (2004:12) is of the opinion that the style and layout of the Jewish Temple on Elephantine "suggests that the Jewish mercenaries originated in the former northern kingdom of Israel and not in Judah in the time of Manasseh, or later, during the conquests of Jerusalem". Under Egyptian orders, Jewish soldiers were fighting in Babylon and elsewhere. These troops, originally from the northern kingdom, were thus probably later taken voluntarily or forcibly to serve in Egypt, as indicated above.

Jerusalem/Yehudite and Elephantine Jews (Ben Zvi 1995:141).

Cult centre of the deity Khnum

Excavations at Elephantine revealed two Egyptian temples and a temple for the god Khnum, whose main sanctuary was on Elephantine.⁹ In 410 B.C.E. the priests of the Khnum temple petitioned the aid of Egyptian troops to demolish the Jewish temple; no reasons for this destruction were given. The explanation is probably complex, including the idea that the priests of the Khnum temple were outraged that the Jews sacrificed animals that were sacred to Khnum, the ram-headed Egyptian god. Archaeological workers found a cemetery of rams on Elephantine. The priests were in the process of extending Khnum's temple that would have brought it directly opposite the Jewish temple. The main thoroughfare of the island, the King's Highway, lay between the two temples. Presumably, the priests got permission to restore the street, already dangerously blocked, by removing the Jewish temple courtyard wall (Rosenberg 2004:8). A draft petition for the reconstruction of the temple refers to a wall built in "the midst of the fortress of Elephantine" (Porten & Yardeni 1986:62).

Jewish temple and its demolition

During 1997 a piece of tiling excavated was duly identified as the floor of the Jewish temple on Elephantine; this was confirmed by information in papyri documents. In these documents the temple is described as an *egora* or shrine.¹⁰ The building, which was not the usual synagogue, was called an *aguda* or meeting place, and *misgada*, place of worship (Negev & Gibson 2001:156). This temple bore a closer resemblance to the Wilderness Tabernacle than to the descriptions of the Solomonic Temple, as mentioned in 1 Kings 6 (Rosenberg 2004:10). According to Porten (1968:110), the measurements of the Elephantine Temple "were reminiscent of Solomon's Temple (1

⁹ This temple dated from the period of Alexander the Great (334-323 B.C.E.) (Negev & Gibson 2001:156). Khnum, known in Greek as Khnoumis, was a god of the cataract-region. He was a creation god, portrayed as a "ram-headed man with long wavy horns", who fashioned men and gods on his potter's wheel. He symbolised the Nile, which fertilised the earth (Guirand 1996:37).

¹⁰ An *egora* implies a plain, roofed shrine that could be entered by several doorways, or an open-air altar. "The shrine had a roof of cedar wood and five stone-lined doorways with bronze hinges" (Rosenberg 2004:6).

Kgs 6:2)”.¹¹ No altar was found but, possibly, it had been standing on an area of the site that had been lost due to erosion or subsidence. Detailed descriptions of the Jewish colony in a “fairly tight-knit complex around the temple” are given in the papyri (Rosenberg 2004:4, 6-7). The Jews offered sacrifices to YHW in their temple.¹²

In some legal documents from Elephantine, as well as certain Aramaic letters, details can be traced of the career of a “corrupt Persian official named Vidranga”.¹³ In 410 B.C.E. the aid of Vidranga was solicited by Khnum priests to ravage the Jewish temple. Nefayan,¹⁴ Vidranga's son, and the Egyptian troops under his command, accordingly destroyed the temple (Lindenberger 2001:134-136). In an undated letter Vidranga is accused of “receiving a large bribe from the Khnum priesthood”, while watching idly as the soldiers vandalised the temple.¹⁵ The Jewish community responded by putting on sackcloth, fasting, and praying and for some three years abstained from sex and from drinking wine, or anointing themselves with oil (Lindenberger 2001:137). They furthermore incorporated a ritual of cursing, directed to Vidranga, consistent with the curse-tradition of the ancient Near Eastern world.¹⁶

¹¹ For an architectural description of the Jewish temple at Elephantine and a comparison to the Israelite sanctuary tradition, see Rosenberg (2004:10-12).

¹² The well-known Passover Papyrus, dated 419 B.C.E., sets out instructions by Darius II to the colony regarding the celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Rosenberg 2004:8). See also Porten and Yardeni (1986:54) for the Passover Letter, translated in Hebrew and English.

¹³ Also known as Waidrang (Rosenberg 2004:7).

¹⁴ Nefayan had succeeded his father, Vidranga, as military commander at Syene (Lindenberger 2001:136).

¹⁵ The raid on the temple was carried out by professional soldiers who razed the temple to the ground and carried away the gold and silver vessels (Lindenberger 2001:135). See Porten and Yardeni (1986:75).

¹⁶ Lindenberger (2001:151). A passage from the “Vidranga section” in the Aramaic papyrus – see Lindenberger (2001:137-152) for a detailed discussion – implies a curse and evil wish that “Vidranga be done to death by vicious animals”(Lindenberger 2001:148), or alternatively, that his corpse be devoured by animals. These brutal types of curses were well known in the ancient Near East. One clause in the “Vidranga text” can be freely translated as “may the dogs tear out his guts from between his legs” (Lindenberger 2001:148-149). It is not clear whether Vidranga died in 410 B.C.E. due to mutilation by animals. According to another papyrus text, Vidranga was still alive in 399 B.C.E. (Lindenberger 2001:141). In ancient Israel, punishment by devouring animals was a well-known threat. It is, however, a misconception to read the passage about Vidranga and the dogs “as a factual narrative concerning his fate, and to try to interpret it against an imaginary background of Persian judicial procedure” (Lindenberger 2001:149-150, 152). Related biblical curses are well known (Lindenberger 2001:150-151).

Three years later Yedaniah, leader of the Jewish community, sent a petition to Bagavahya, governor of Judah, for support from the Jerusalem Temple for the rebuilding of the shrine.¹⁷ The request was not acceded to; they did however receive permission for the reconstruction of the temple, subject to certain conditions (Rosenberg 2004:8-9). Although the temple was rebuilt, the colony disappeared shortly thereafter (Porten 1996:18).

ARAMAIC PAPYRI FROM ELEPHANTINE

Papyrus was the main material on which sacred and secular matters were written in Egypt. The papyrus texts from Elephantine consist of letters, contracts, literary texts, historical texts, accounts and lists. The most significant of all the Aramaic texts discovered at Elephantine is a recorded oath in the name of Anat-Yahu, “by the place of prostration and by AnatYHW”. The oath was written on a piece of papyrus scrap. Due to the lack of conclusive documents or witnesses regarding the transaction for a donkey, the court ordered a certain Menahem to swear in respect of the deal.¹⁸ This oath was sworn by Menahem to Hodaviah “affirming his rights to dispose of a she-ass and denying the plaintiff’s charge that his father had acquired half ownership” (Porten 1992:453). The oath had to be taken in a sanctuary and the results to be reported back to the court (Porten 1996:266). The particulars of this “oath (by the deity Herem?, in/by the place of prostration, and by AnathYHW) are quite unique and raise questions of religious symbiosis and swearing by a non-Jewish deity” (Porten 1996:266).¹⁹

A large number of the Elephantine papyri are legal texts. Most of these texts are

¹⁷ This petition to Bagavahya was written and rewritten with care to ensure that the desired objective was reached (Porten 1996:78). For the complete first and second draft letters of recommendation (translated in Hebrew and English), see Porten and Yardeni (1986:70-75).

¹⁸ Nathan, father of the plaintiff Meshullam, had discussed with Menahem, son of Shallum, the acquisition of half ownership of a female donkey, owned by Menahem A male donkey, or some other remuneration, would be exchanged for the transaction. In the meanwhile, Menahem transferred his donkey to the Egyptian Pamise, son of Pamet. With the decease of Nathan, Meshullam, his heir, laid claim to half ownership of the donkey, on the assumption that that the deal had been concluded. Due to the lack of conclusive documents or witnesses regarding this transaction, Menahem was ordered by the court to swear that the deal had never been concluded, and that he was therefore entitled to dispose of the animal as he saw fit (Porten 1996:266).

¹⁹ For a detailed discussion of this Aramaic text, see Porten (1996:266-267).

from the archives of two families, namely from Mahseiah bar Yedoniah and from Ananiah bar Azariah, the latter probably being a temple servant of “Yahu” [YHW] (Kraeling 1962:84). The Aramaic papyri, from both Elephantine and Syene, were compiled over a period of no more than a century during the years of the Persian domination²⁰ with Aramaic as *lingua franca* of the empire. The documents were written by skilled scribes for Jews and Aramaeans, as well as for settlers sharing the Aramaic language (Porten 1996:74). Several of the legal documents and letters have references to YHW:

“the temple of YHW in Elephantine” (Porten 1996:107, 147).

“YHW the God” (Porten 1996:108, 137).

“priests of YHW the God” (Porten 1996:130).

“the Temple of YHW the God which is in Elephantine the fortress” (Porten 1996:140).

“praying to YHW the Lord/God of Heaven” (Porten 1996:142).

“on the altar of YHW the God” (Porten 1996:143,147).

“YHW the God of Heaven” (Porten 1996:144).

“the Temple of YHW the God which is in Elephantine” (Porten 1996:146).

“Temple of YHW the God” (Porten 1996:146, 151, 196, 217).

“the priests of YHW” (Porten 1996:147).

“swore to me by YHW the God in Elephantine” (Porten 1996:159).

“you swore to me by YHW” (Porten 1996:160).

“servitor to YHW in Elephantine” (Porten 1996:205).

“servitor to (of) YHW the God” (Porten 1996:212, 216, 223, 237, 241, 242, 245, 248, 251).

“Temple of YHW” (Porten 1996:213, 249).

“servitor of YHW” (Porten 1996:246).

“servitor of YHW the God dwelling (in) Elephantine the fortress” (Porten 1996:246).

“in/by the place of prostration and by AnathYHW” (Porten 1996:266).

²⁰ 539-331 B.C.E. (Kitchen & Mitchell 1982:198).

REFERENCES TO YHW IN EARLIER EGYPTIAN RECORDS

The designation YHW was apparently not unknown in Egypt. Amenhotep III's fourteenth century B.C.E. Topographical List from Soleb in Nubia,²¹ as well as a thirteenth century B.C.E. text, written during the reign of Ramesses II,²² mentions "Yhw [Yahu] in the land of the shasu" (Nakai 2003:141). Nakai (2003:141) indicates that this reference to Yahu provides "the earliest evidence for the god Yahweh and linking him with these nomadic people" [the Shasu]. According to Egyptian sources, the Shasu appeared over a widespread area, but were identified as coming forth from Edom in southern Transjordan (Zevit 2001:118). Additional Egyptian evidence from Ramesses II²³ and Ramesses III,²⁴ connects the "land of the Shosu" [Shasu] and Seir. In Papyrus Anastasi VI²⁵ the earliest known reference to the land Edom is recorded. The letter mentions the arrival of the Shasu tribes and their flocks at one of the Egyptian border fortresses, which had been constructed during the Ramesside period: "4.13 Another information for my lord that we have just let the Shasu tribes of Edom pass the Fortress of Merneptah-hetephermaat, ... in order to revive themselves and revive their flocks from the great life force of Pharaoh, ..." (Hallo & Younger 2002:16-17). It is therefore apparent that both Edom and Seir were peopled by Shasu (Bartlett 1989:37-38). A strong tradition in the Hebrew Bible links Edom and Seir.²⁶ In the light of the aforementioned Egyptian references, it thus seems that the origin of Yahweh [Yahu] worship should be searched for among the Shasu of Edom and the

²¹ The Topographical List from Soleb in Nubia (Nakai 2003:141) is dated during the reign of Amenophis III (van der Toorn 1999:911); Amenophis III is the same person as Amenhotep III (Aldred 1998:10), dated 1386-1349 B.C.E. (Clayton 1994:112).

²² The reign of Ramesses II is dated 1279-1212 B.C.E. (Clayton 1994:146).

²³ During the thirteenth century B.C.E. pharaoh Ramesses II (1279-1212 B.C.E.) was described as "a fierce raging lion, who has laid waste to the land of the Shosu, who has plundered Mount Seir with his valiant arm" (Bartlett 1989:41-42).

²⁴ In the twelfth century B.C.E. Ramesses III (1182-1151 B.C.E.) boasts that "I brought about the destruction of Seir among the Shosu tribes. I laid waste their tents with their people, their belongings, and likewise their cattle without number", see *ANET*³ 262 (Bartlett 1989:42).

²⁵ Papyrus Anastasi VI is "one of four unique scribal exercises compiled in a single papyrus" (Hallo & Younger 2002:16). Although the "opening protocol" of the papyrus alludes to the reign of Seti II, the regal year mentioned therein was probably that of his predecessor Merneptah (Hallo & Younger 2002:16). Seti II is dated 1199-1193 B.C.E. (Clayton 1994:156).

²⁶ Links in the Hebrew Bible are, for example, in Numbers 24:18; Judges 5:4 (Bartlett 1989:41-42, 178).

regions of Mount Seir, as early as the end of the fifteenth century B.C.E. or the beginning of the fourteenth century B.C.E.

THE DEITY ANAT AND ANAT-YAHU AT ELEPHANTINE

Although Anat was known as a goddess in Egypt, there is no direct references to the Ugaritic deity Anat in the Masoretic text; there are, however, a few possible allusions to her.²⁷ Available evidence indicates that she was originally a North-West Semitic deity presented in the Ugaritic texts as a fertility goddess and consort of Ba'al. However, narratives allegedly signifying Anat's fertility role are so damaged that scholars are inconclusive about this function (Handy 1994:103-105). Mythological texts portray Anat as a volatile and independent warrior and hunter, active in male spheres of combat and hunting (Day 1999:37-39).

Anat evidently developed amongst the North-Syrian Aramaeans and was introduced into Egypt during the mid-second millennium B.C.E. by the Hyksos who infiltrated Egypt and eventually took over.²⁸ After the expulsion of the Hyksos, Anat's cult continued to flourish in Egypt (Guirand 1996:76). During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties²⁹ she appeared in the Egyptian sources as a significant goddess of war who was incorporated into the Egyptian mythology.³⁰ It seems that Ramesses II

²⁷ Day (2000:136-141) mentions that there are dubious allusions to Anat in the Hebrew Bible. Scholars have suggested that the sound of shouting/singing, *'annôt*, in Exodus 32:18 refers to the goddess Anat. However, this is speculation without supporting evidence. Scholars likewise argue that "the description of Deborah in Judges 5 has been influenced by imagery associated with the goddess Anat found in the Ugaritic texts"; in this instance five parallels are indicated, inter alia, that, like Anat, Deborah was a leader of warriors (Day 2000:137). A number of scholars maintain that the expression, "I look upon a virgin", in Job 31:1 is an allusion to the "virgin Anat". Day (2000:132-140) is not convinced that the woman in the "Song of Songs", as has been claimed, is the goddess Anat, and is of the opinion that possible references to Anat mainly occur in place names, such as Beth-anath (Js 19:38; Jd 1:33); Beth-anoth (Js 15:59); Anathoth (Js 21:18; 1 Kg 2:26; Is 10:30; Jr 1:1; 11:21, 23; 32:7, 8, 9). The name Shamgar ben Anat appears twice in the book of Judges (Jd 3:31; 5:6). According to 1 Samuel 31:10 Saul's armour was taken to the temple of Ashtaroth at Beth-shan after his death. There is the possibility that the temple in question was that of Anat which has since been discovered at Beth-shan.

²⁸ The Hyksos were Semitic-speaking people who infiltrated Egypt from the Levant (Hoffmeier 1994:270).

²⁹ Eighteenth and nineteenth dynasties: 1570-1185 B.C.E. (Clayton 1994:98).

³⁰ Day (1986:388-389). Violent quarrels between the Egyptian gods Horus, the sky god who

had a special preference for Anat. An inscription on a relief from Thebes refers to Qudšu, Astarte and Anat, indicating a fusion of these goddesses (Day 1986:389).

Van der Toorn (1992:81, 83) is of the opinion that the name Anat-Yahu, which is not mentioned elsewhere than in the Elephantine papyri, could be interpreted as a genitival construction, meaning Anat of Yahu; he mentions that a few unconvincing attempts have been made to interpret Anat as a noun instead of a proper name. Day (1999:38) also denotes that “scholars are divided over whether the component *A-nat-ti*”, as in the Esarhaddon treaties,³¹ “should be understood as the name Anat or as a common noun.”

In the light of the virtual absence of the worship of Anat in Palestine and Phoenicia, van der Toorn (1992:83) furthermore argues that “it is unlikely that the association of Anat with Yahweh (Yahu) has ancient roots in Israel”. On the surface it thus seems Anat-Yahu was created by the Egyptian Jews living in a syncretistic environment. It is, however, improbable that a Jewish minority group, who otherwise preserved their traditional religious culture, would invent a new deity. The goddess, on the other hand, has a parallel in Anat-Bethel, or Anat of Bethel, signifying Anat, as the consort of Bethel.³² As mentioned earlier in paragraph 1, Anat-Bethel is referred to twice in Neo-Assyrian treaties that pre-cede the Elephantine documents by more than two centuries.³³ The origins of Anat-Bethel, who was introduced into Egypt by West Semitic immigrants, may, therefore, shed some light on the roots of Anat-Yahu (Van der Toorn 1992:83).

Porten (1996:266) endorses the view of Röllig (1999:174) that the name Anat-Yahu is a parallel in structure to Anat-Bethel, indicating Anat as the wife of Bethel, or of Yahu. Alternately, Anat is also the name or face of Bethel or Yahu, as in the names “Astarte Name of Ba’al” and “Tinnit Face of Ba’al”. This symbiotic deity could thus be regarded “as a creation of Arameans settled in Israel and later migrating to Egypt.

took on the form of a falcon, and Seth, the evil brother of the Egyptian god Osiris, were occasionally central elements in Egyptian myths. In a letter to the divine council during such a quarrel, Neith, goddess of war and hunting, proposed that two foreign goddesses, Anat and Astarte, be given to Seth as compensation for his renouncing of the throne to Horus (Willis 1993:44, 51).

³¹ See footnote 1 in §1 regarding the Esarhaddon Treaties.

³² The name Bethel, “House of El”, originally may have referred to open cult places (Röllig 1999:174).

³³ See in this regard footnote 1 in §1.

Not Anath was attached to YHW, but YHW was attached to Anath in a parallel construction to Anathbethel” ((Porten 1996:266).

Although Bethel is mentioned in the list of oath-gods in the Neo-Assyrian treaties, it does not necessarily mean that this deity was of Mesopotamian origin. Several Aramaic personal names of the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid periods are composed with the name of Bethel,³⁴ which could indicate that the god was venerated by the Aramaeans who probably were in contact with the Jewish community at Elephantine. Bethel was also worshipped by the Elephantine Jews as Ešem-Bethel³⁵ and Anat-Bethel. The presence of these deities in Egypt would imply that they were brought there by North Syrian Aramaeans (van der Toorn 1992:85-87). The Aramaean deportees who came to live in seventh century B.C.E. northern Israel probably maintained their religious traditions, but also adopted Yahweh, the deity of their new country, into their pantheon. Although they feared Yahweh, they also served their own gods.³⁶ It is therefore possible that Bethel was introduced into Israel at this time of “religious cross-fertilisation”, with the result that Yahweh was subsequently identified with other major deities, such as Bethel. Anat-Yahu could thus have been created on the model of Anat-Bethel by the Aramaean deportees who had adopted Yahweh/Yahu into their cult. Many elements of the diversified population of the seventh century B.C.E. northern Israel and its religious pluralism recurred at Elephantine in the fifth century B.C.E. Both Elephantine and Syene were colonised by Jews and Aramaeans worshipping those gods who were venerated in northern Israel two centuries earlier. Therefore, despite references to Elephantine as a Jewish colony, the religion of the inhabitants was Israelite (van der Toorn 1992:88, 93-95, 97-98). Van der Toorn (1992:97) furthermore contends that “the concept of Anat-Yahu is an illustration of the cultural symbiosis which has marked the Israelites and Aramaeans living in Egypt”. A parcel of family letters (late sixth and early fifth century B.C.E.) was discovered at Hermopolis. Four of the letters sent to Syene all bear greetings to temples there. Two of these are the Temple of Bethel and the Temple of the Queen of Heaven (Porten & Yardeni 1986:9-10).

³⁴ An example is: *É.DINGIR^{mes}-da-la-*, “Bethel saved me”; compare *by’ldlny* (Röllig 1999:174).

³⁵ The god Ešem or Ashim appears as a theophorous element in Aramaic anthroponyms from Egypt. Ashim could be identical with the deity Ashima from Hamath (van der Toorn 1992:86).

³⁶ 2 Kings 17:33.

CONCLUSION

Archaeological discoveries often stimulate prolonged scholarly debates, with the result that a proliferation of publications on a particular subject become available. This article addressed the views of some scholars concerning the matter of a consort for Yahweh, particularly with reference to the Elephantine oath-text “in/by the place of prostration and by Anath-YHW”. The aim of this article was thus to illustrate that the Elephantine Jews probably venerated a deity Anat-Yahu or Anat of Yahu. As indicated in the article, scholars, such as Karel van der Toorn (1992:80-81), argue that Anat-Yahu was modelled after Anat-Bethel, and was thus “an Aramaean creation, elicited by the identification of Yahu with Bethel”. The result was that Anat, consort of Bethel (Röllig 1999:174), was also accepted as the appropriate consort of Yahu/Yahweh. Aramaean deportees probably introduced Anat-Bethel into the former northern Israel from where, in all likelihood, the Elephantine Jews originated. Religious pluralism in the former northern Israel, obviously could thus have been carried over to Egypt.

The recorded oath, in the Elephantine papyrus text, in the name of Anat-Yahu, has influenced scholars’ interpretation of the Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and Khirbet ‘el Qom inscriptions. These epigraphic discoveries, which refer to “Yahweh and his Asherah”, have shaped current views on the history of the Israelite religion significantly. It is, however, within the scope of this article not possible to deliberate on these particular inscriptions, but merely to illustrate that, similarly, the Elephantine Jews could have accepted Anat as consort of Yahweh.

In ancient Israel Yahweh was equated with El and with Ba’al. Asherah was originally the consort of El, and Anat that of Ba’al. Day (1986:392-393) denotes that, therefore, both Asherah and Anat would have been acceptable as a consort for Yahweh, and that it is thus conceivable that in certain religious circles the idea of a consort for Yahweh, such as Asherah or Anat, was credible. Van der Toorn (1992:81, 97) is of the opinion that “the concept of Anat-Yahu is an illustration of the cultural symbiosis which has marked the Israelites and the Aramaeans living in Egypt” and he accepts that “the evidence is unequivocal: the Jews of Elephantine knew a goddess [Anat] consort of Yahu”. Maier (1992:226), however, proposes that Anat should rather be regarded an hypostasised aspect or quality of Yahweh, thus representing his essential nature.

Taylor (1994:53) believes “that a substantial number of Israelites” accepted that the Israelite God, Yahweh, had a consort. He is also of the opinion that the Israelites considered the sun to be a symbol or icon of Yahweh. Furthermore, the question of Yahweh having a consort and being symbolised by the sun “points to an understanding of Yahweh as an abstract, non-anthropomorphic deity” (Taylor 1994:53). This idea supports Maier’s (1992:226) suggestion that Anat should be regarded as an hypostasised aspect or quality of Yahweh. Regarding the excavated Taanach stand, scholars, such as Taylor (1988:560-565), Ackerman (1992:190-191), and Hestrin (1987:65, 68, 74) interpret certain scenes on this stand as a representation of Asherah, and the vacant space on the stand as symbolising the “invisible” Deity, Yahweh.

It is my opinion that the different scholarly arguments in favour of the theory that a substantial number of Israelites believed that Yahweh had a partner or spouse, support the idea that the Jews at Elephantine venerated a deity Anat-Yahu – either as the deity itself, or as an hypostasised aspect of Yahweh – and that Anat was accepted as consort of Yahu/Yahweh.

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