

THE JEWS OF SYENE IN THE FIFTH CENTURY B.C.

By S. A. COOK, M.A.

IN the spring of 1904, Robert Mond, Esq., M.A., F.R.S.E., Hon. Secretary of the Davy Faraday Research Laboratory (Royal Institution), acquired certain Aramaic papyri which had been found near Assuan. These have just been edited by Professor Sayce and Mr. A. E. Cowley, together with other papyri acquired by Lady William Cecil and by the Bodleian Library, and form one of the most important discoveries that Aramaic epigraphy has as yet produced.¹ Through the munificence of Mr. Mond, they have been published in the completest possible manner with bibliographical information by Mr. Seymour de Ricci, and Egyptological notes by Professor Spiegelberg. Professor Sayce himself contributes a valuable introduction, whilst Mr. Cowley has undertaken the wearisome task of deciphering the papyri, and has given full philological and exegetical notes and glossaries. The papyri have been photographed and reproduced with entire success—in every respect the “critical apparatus” is all that could possibly be desired.

It is not our intention to review this notable book, but rather to call attention to the importance of the papyri for biblical research. It fortunately happens that they are dated and are found to belong to the 5th century B.C., from B.C. 471 (a few years after the battle of Salamis) down to B.C. 411. Thus they provide sure criteria for Aramaic palæography, and it is interesting to contrast the professional hand of the scribes with the often unskilful signatures of the witnesses. For Aramaic philology, the value of the papyri is of the first rank, and although technical details of a philological character would be out of place in these pages, it may be mentioned that one papyrus, of the year 465 B.C., uses two forms of the word for “land” (*arḥā* and *ar'ā*), a feature which recurs in the Aramaic verse inserted in Jeremiah x, 11, where it has been thought to be due to later alteration; it now appears that the two forms could be used freely side by side. Whilst for the study of the Aramaic portions of the Old Testament these finds will be indispensable, it is for their actual contents that they will be most welcome to the general reader.

These papyri afford the proof that some time after the disastrous

¹ *Aramaic Papyri discovered at Assuan* (Moring, Ltd.; London, 1906).

murder of Gedaliah, the governor whom Nebuchadrezzar had set over Palestine, a colony of Jews had made their way to Assuan or Syene, the southern end of Egypt, and had settled down into trading communities. The evidence seems to show that they refrained from intermarrying with Egyptians, although exceptions are certainly found, as when a widow-lady named Mibṭaḥ-yah (confidence of Yah{weh}) marries an Egyptian whose name showed him to be a devotee of the god Horus. Again, it is extremely interesting to find references to the shrine of the god Yahu, by whose name oaths are administered. It is obvious, therefore, that the Jews enjoyed religious freedom. Further, the term "Jew" (*yēhûdi*) actually occurs, and it is curious that in some cases the same individuals in other papyri are termed Aramaeans. Professor Sayce, in the course of his excellent preliminary remarks, explains the interchange as due to the fact that they spoke Aramaic, then the official language of the government in Egypt as also throughout the western half of the Persian empire. "The Jewish scribes," he observes, "accepted and employed the term just as readily as the scribes of any other nationality, evidently regarding their fellow-countrymen as merely a division of the Aramaean family." The Jewish colonists were not true citizens like the native Egyptians, and the descriptive terms applied to them—unfortunately the phrasing is of obscure interpretation—has suggested that they were in a position similar to that of the Roman "clients."

Moreover, one papyrus mentions the "tribunal (דינא) of the Hebrews (עברין)"; it was probably not confined to the Jews alone, but, as Mr. Cowley states, was used by all who were "beyond the river," that is to say, in the district beyond (*i.e.*, west of) the Euphrates.

The papyri deal with legal affairs and hence contain numerous proper names. We meet with a considerable number which are obviously Jewish: Ethan, Gedaliah, Gemariah, Haggai, Hodaviah, Isaiah, Jezaniah, Malchiah, Menahem, Meshullam, Nathan, etc., are familiar to everyone. There are other names which cannot be exactly paralleled but are unmistakably of a Hebrew type. As was found to be the case with the contract-tablets found by the expedition of the University of Pennsylvania to Nippur, there is a considerable mixture of population. Some of the names are undoubtedly of Persian origin, others are certainly Babylonian; even Arabian names may be suspected. Thus, the evidence furnished

by the business documents of Nippur finds further support from an entirely different portion of the Persian empire.

One of the witnesses styles himself "Hadad-nûrî, the Babylonian," and one of the most noteworthy phenomena in these papyri is the retention of Babylonian usage. As Prof. Sayce observes: "the conveyance of property is couched in the technical terms of Babylonian law, from which the law of Western Asia derived its origin, and the deeds which relate to it are drawn up in the form made familiar to us by the legal documents of Babylonia. The penalties for the infringement of a legal obligation went back to the early days of Babylonian history, like the testamentary power possessed by the owner of property. He could will it to whom he would and determine the succession to it after his death. In this respect the woman was on an equal footing with the man: she, too, could hold property and leave it by will as she wished. The deeds . . . are thus in exact accordance with the law of Babylonia, that is to say, of the Persian empire."

It will give some idea of the value of the papyri if we describe briefly one or two of the more interesting. One (designated B by the editors) is drawn up about the 18th of Chisleu (December) or Thoth, in the last year of Xerxes, the year of the accession of Artaxerxes. A workman named Dargman renounces certain land to Mahseiah, son of Yedoniah, the Jew of Elephantine. The property is described as lying between the house of Koniah, the son of Zadok, and that of Jezaniah, son of Uriah, both Jews. He binds himself not to lodge any complaint in the future and the penalty is fixed at "20, that is, twenty, *kebes*." This coin appears to be the tenth of a shekel; the word should properly mean a "lamb," and may be compared with the Hebrew *kestah* which, according to old tradition, has precisely the same meaning. The writer of the document is Ethan, the son of Abah, of Syene, who states that he wrote it "at the dictation" (lit., according to the mouth of) Dargman.

Another (designated G), which in all probability falls between the years 446 and 440, is a marriage contract. It gives a list of the presents which As-Ĥor, the king's builder, gave as the *môhar* or price for Mibtah-yah, the daughter of Maḥsciah. Garments and shawls of various kinds, a bronze mirror, and, it would appear, "a new ivory cosmetic-box" form part of the lady's outfit. The wife has the same power of divorce as the husband, but it must be done

publicly in the "congregation" (עדה), and the penalty was the renunciation of the gift which the other party had brought at the marriage. We learn that the woman could both hold and bequeath property, and if she was forced to leave her husband, no actual divorce taking place, half the property could be claimed by him.

It is interesting to observe that the papyri, with one exception, deal with property in Yeb (Elephantine) in which a little colony of Jews is concerned. The leading spirit is Maḥseiah (cp. Jer. xxxii, 12), the son of Yedoniah (cp. Yadon, Neh. iii, 7), who comes to an agreement with Ḳoniyah, the son of Zadok, respecting a gateway and a wall which extends from the southern end of Ḳoniyah's house to the house of Zechariah, the son of Nathan. These are the neighbours of Maḥseiah to the north, whilst to the west lies the street (with the gateway) which separates the houses of the two parties from that of an Egyptian sailor.

Some time after this, Maḥseiah was summoned by his neighbour on the south, Dargman (apparently a Persian), who had laid claim to the ground which intervened. But Maḥseiah had sworn "by Yahu the god" and had justified his right, and a contract of the year 465 B.C. is Dargman's deed of renunciation. Six years elapse and we find that Maḥseiah has given his daughter Mibṭah-yah in marriage to Jezaniah, the son of Uriah, his eastern neighbour. He endows her with "the land of one house," thirteen cubits by eleven with the measuring-rod. It is no other than the property which Dargman had claimed, and whilst one papyrus contains the deed which Maḥseiah gave his son-in-law, the other is for the daughter, and in it he hands her Dargman's deed of renunciation with the advice "Do thou keep possession of it. If to-morrow or any later day Dargman or his son shall bring an action concerning this house, produce this deed, and institute an action against him therewith."

Thirteen years later, in 446 B.C., Maḥseiah makes over to his daughter the house-property which he had bought from Meshullam, son of Zaccur, together with the deed of sale. It lay to the east of their houses and was bounded on the south by the house of Ye'ô(r), son of Penuliah, on the east by that of Gadol, son of Hoshea, and the street, to the north lay the shrine of the god Yahu, whilst to the west lived the son of Paṭu, the priest of (as it would appear) certain Egyptian gods. In a contract of the year 440 we find Mibṭah-yah coming to an agreement with Pi, son of Paḥî, the builder, apparently over materials which she had supplied for

building. It is noteworthy that the Jewess swears in court by the Egyptian goddess Sati.

Next, we come to a small group of papyri belonging to a somewhat later date. Here we find Mibṭah-yah married to As-Ḥor, the royal builder, and the marriage-contract to which reference has already been made seems to suggest that her father Maḥseiah was still alive. In 421 B.C., the pair have two grown-up sons, Yedoniah and Maḥseiah—it will be noticed that their mother has given them the names of her grandfather and father. An action is brought against them by Menahem and ‘Ananiah (cp. Neh. iii, 23) sons of Meshullam, the son of Shelomim, the son of Azariah, regarding certain goods which As-Ḥor had received on trust from Shelomim. It is interesting to observe the length of this genealogy; moreover, neither here nor elsewhere is a man’s tribal origin designated.

Four years later, the same Yedoniah and Maḥseiah succeed in maintaining their claim to the house of Jezaniah, the son of Uriah, against Yedoniah, the son of Hoshaiah (or Hoshea), the son of Uriah. The property in question is bounded on the west by their mother’s house which she had received in 459, to the east is the shrine of the god Yahu with the king’s road running between, to the south lies the house of Hoshea, the son of Uriah, whilst to the north is that of the son of Zechariah. We evidently come upon a little family quarrel here such as could easily happen under the circumstances, where so many families lived in close contiguity. Mibṭah-yah had received the house of her first husband Jezaniah and had bequeathed it to her sons by her second marriage, and her nephew Jedoniah brings an action against these cousins of his in the vain hope of recovering some of his grandfather’s property. It is very remarkable that the lady’s husband is here regularly called Nathan, and, since his father was Egyptian, this may suggest that he was converted and took a Jewish name.¹

Finally in 411, Maḥseiah and Yedoniah, the sons of Nathan, agree to divide between them their mother’s slaves; the latter takes Petosiros, the former Belo, whilst Tebo, the mother of the lads, and Lîlû, a third son, remain their joint property for the time being. Here it is extremely interesting to read that the two slaves

¹ It is perhaps possible that the element *As* (Egypt. *u-s* “belonging to”) was popularly connected with the Arabic *aus* “gift” which enters frequently into proper names (Sinaitic inscr., etc.). If so, the choice of Nathan (“—gave”) is intelligible.

appear to be tattooed with the mark or letter *yôd* in Aramaic upon the right hand—a practice which was very familiar throughout the east, although these details are novel.¹

There are numerous points upon which one is tempted to enlarge, but perhaps enough has been said to demonstrate the very great importance of the papyri not merely for the philologist, but for the biblical student. It is a very real gain to be able to obtain some idea of the conditions under which the Jews lived in the fifth century, and these most welcome finds throw much light upon the life and custom of fifth century Judaism. For we may not unreasonably expect that the evidence which is gradually being collected, whether in Egypt or in Babylonia, will enable us to understand the internal conditions in Palestine itself, and the mere fact that these *business* documents have come to light inspires the hope that other papyri, perhaps of more vital importance, may yet be discovered in the near future. And, obviously, if Egypt can furnish such evidence as this, where the Jews formed only a portion of the population, what may we not expect when more excavation has been undertaken in Palestine itself, when this country, which has allowed itself to lag behind, wakes up and shows a more practical interest in the efforts to recover the secrets hidden in the soil of the Holy Land?

GOLGOTHA ON MOUNT ZION.

By the REV. W. F. BIRCH, M.A.

LOVE for truth compels me to show that "The place of a skull" was on the ridge of Mount Zion (the eastern ridge), east of the Damascus Gate. Biblical evidence is decisive on this point. The traditional site seems to have been evolved from a radical error of mischievous Josephus, who shuns the term *Zion*, and, using the term *City of David* only *once*, frequently for it substitutes *Jerusalem*.

That deep interest is still taken in the position of Golgotha is clear from the 250 pages that here have treated of the subject, and from Sir Charles Wilson's recent work on Golgotha, a very armoury for controversialists.

¹ For the use of words or letters as "wasms," reference may be made to the *Q.S.*, 1902, p. 308.