

SPECIAL  
ARTICLES

## Our Contributors

BOOK  
REVIEWSNEWLY DISCOVERED JEWISH  
DOCUMENTS IN EGYPT.

By Professor A. H. Sayce, D.D., LL.D.,

Egypt is continually furnishing fresh surprises to the archeologist and historian, as well as to the student of the Old Testament. The latest discovery has been that of a series of Jewish documents written by the contemporaries of Ezra and Nehemiah, and throwing unexpected light on the later historical books of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The town of Assuan, the Seventh of Ezekiel 29:10, is built at the southern frontier of Egypt, and immediately opposite to it lies the little island of Elephantine. An important city once stood at the southern end of Elephantine, from which came the Pharaohs of the fifth and sixth dynasties, and which lasted down the age of the Arab conquest of Egypt. Its site is now marked by mounds which for many years past have yielded a rich harvest to the "sebakhin"—that is to say, the searchers for the nitrogenous dust which is used as manure in Egypt. Hundreds of potsherds have been found in them, covered with Greek writing, and containing receipts for the payment of taxes in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. One or two "ostraca," as these inscribed potsherds are called, have also been found with Aramaic inscriptions upon them instead of Greek. The alphabet of the inscriptions preceding the Christian era, while the language of them resembled the so-called biblical Chaldee. But they were very difficult to decipher, owing to their broken and obliterated condition and the very small number that were known.

Seven years ago I rescued from the hands of the "sebakhin," who were about to destroy them, two of these ostraca, larger and more legible than usual, with a papyrus that had been discovered along with them. The papyrus proved to be a document written in the Aramaic (or "Chaldee") dialect and alphabet, by Jews who were settled at Assuan and Elephantine, where they carried on the business of banking and money lending under the Persian kings. The persons mentioned on the ostraca were the same as those whose names occurred in the papyrus.

## Persia's Friendliness to Judaism Strikingly Proved.

Three years later the "sebakhin" made a still more important discovery. A wooden box was found containing a number of large papyrus rolls all tied round with string which was fastened with clay seals. The rolls were bought by Lady William Cecil and Mr. Mond, who gave them to the Cairo Museum, and Mr. Mond generously bore all the expenses of their publication, which was undertaken by Mr. Cowley and myself. The documents were all dated, the earliest in the reign of Xerxes I (471 B.C.), the latest in that of Darius II (411 B.C.), and they all belonged to the Jewish colony at Assuan. This colony was large and wealthy, and owned a good deal of house property in Elephantine. The papyrus throw considerable light on the laws under which they lived, more especially upon those relating to marriage and inheritance, and they also explain the origin of biblical "Chaldee," which was the official Aramaic language of the western provinces of the Persian empire, as spoken and written by Jews. But the most curious fact disclosed by the papyrus is that there was a temple of Yahu—the Jehovah of the Authorized Version—by the side of the public street in Elephantine, where the stated ritual

and sacrifices of the Mosaic law were performed. The temple was not a synagogue, but a temple like that of Jerusalem, or the temple afterward built by Onias at Tel-el Yehudiya in northern Egypt, for which therefore as we now know, there has already been a precedent.

The discovery of the "Assuan Papyrus" at once excited the attention of the learned world, and in 1904 I superintended some excavations for the Egyptian Service of Antiquities on the spot where they were said to have been found. But unfortunately, I was obliged to close the work after a few days, as the season was getting late, the Nile was low, and I had to return to El-Kab in order to finish the excavations I had been carrying on there for some years with Mr. Somers Clarke. A year or two later, however, the German and French governments obtained concessions by which the mounds of Elephantine were divided between them, and in the spring of 1907, a German expedition under Dr. Rubensohn was exploring the northwestern portion of them, while the eminent French scholar, Professor Clermont-Ganneau, was at work at the south-eastern end. The place where the papyrus had been found fell within the German lines, and here, accordingly, further discoveries of even greater interest awaited the explorers.

In the ruins of two adjoining houses two collections of papyrus rolls were again found, all belonging to the Jewish colony, and written in Aramaic. Among them are narratives and poems or psalms which have not yet been thoroughly examined. But three of them have turned out to be of such surpassing historical interest that their editor, Professor Sachau, determined to publish them at once.

Two of the papyri are copies of the same document, a memorial sent by the Jews of Elephantine to Bagoas, the governor of Judea, complaining that their temple there had been plundered and destroyed, while the third contains the order for its restoration. The memorial is dated November, 408 B.C., only twenty-four years after Nehemiah's second visit to Jerusalem (Neh. 13: 6), and is written in the name of "Zedoniah and his companions, the priests in Elephantine." It begins by praying that "our Lord, the God of Heaven," may grant peace to Bagoas, and "mercy in the sight of King Darius," and goes on to say that the priests of the Egyptian god Khnum, or Khnum, had taken advantage of the temporary absence of the Persian governor of Assuan to bribe his deputy, Vidrang, who accordingly had given permission for the Jewish temple in Elephantine to be destroyed. Thereupon Vidrang's son, who was in command of the garrison, "led out the Egyptians with other forces," "they entered this temple and razed it to the ground, breaking in pieces the pillars of stone." They also destroyed its "seven great gates of hewn stone," as well as "the bronze hinges of the doors," and "they burnt with fire" the roof of cedar-wood and the stucco of the walls. "And the bowls of gold and silver, and whatever else was in the temple, they took and appropriated to themselves." Then comes the important statement that the temple had been built "in the days of the kings of Egypt," before the Persian conquest, so that its builders must have been either the Jews who came into Egypt with Jeremiah, or their sons. "When Cambyes came up into Egypt," the memorial goes on to say, "he found this temple built: and, though the temples of the gods of

Egypt were overthrown, no one injured anything in this temple." In these words we have a complete verification of the favorable attitude toward Jewish worship and religion ascribed by the Old Testament writers to the Persian kings.

## Ezra and Nehemiah Confirmed.

After the destruction of their temple the Jews at Assuan and Elephantine, with their wives and children, "put on sackcloth, and fasted, and prayed to Yahu, the God of Heaven," who heard their prayer, and punished the evil-doers, Vidrang losing all his possessions, and "all the men who wished evil against this temple" being slain. Meanwhile, the Jews had written "to Jehohanan, the high priest, and his companions, the priests in Jerusalem, and to Ostanes, his brother, whose (Jewish) name is Anani, and to the nobles of the Jews; but they sent no letter" in reply. Jehohanan is called Johanan in Nehemiah 12: 22, and a few years later was heavily fined by Bagoas for the murder of his brother in the temple at Jerusalem. As he returned no answer to the communication from Egypt, the Elephantine Jews determined to apply directly to Bagoas, telling him that if he would give permission for the restoration of their sanctuary "we will offer meal-offerings and frankincense and burnt-offerings upon the altar of Yahu the God in thy name. And we will pray for thee at all times, we and our wives and our children, and all the Jews who are here, if thou doest thus, until this temple is rebuilt. And thou shalt have a portion before Yahu, the God of Heaven, from every one who offers to Him burnt-offering and sacrifices, of the value of one thousand silver talents." The memorialists conclude by saying that they have already written on the matter to Delaiah and Shelemiah, "the sons of Sanaballat, the governor of Samaria," whose date, which has been disputed, is thus finally fixed.

There is no space here for discussing the many questions which this remarkable document raises. At all events, it proves that the prohibition to erect a temple and carry on the regular temple service elsewhere than in the central sanctuary at Jerusalem was not considered to be binding outside Palestine itself. But we can easily understand that the high priest and his companions at Jerusalem would not be anxious to see the Elephantine temple restored. That it was re-built, however, we learn from the third papyrus, which contains the answer of Bagoas, and reads as follows: "Thou shalt say in Egypt before Arsames (the governor) concerning the altar-house of the God of Heaven, which was built before our time, before Cambyes, in Elephantine, which Vidrang destroyed in the fourteenth year of King Darius, that it is to be rebuilt in its place as it was before, and that meal-offerings and frankincense shall be offered upon this altar, as was done formerly."

The answer of the Persian government shows how true to historical fact are the statements of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah in regard to the relations between the Persian kings and their Jewish subjects. The Jews and their religion, it is clear, were looked upon with special favor at the Persian court. As orders were issued for the restoration of the temple at Jerusalem, so a similar order was issued for the restoration of that at Elephantine as soon as the story of its destruction became known to the higher authorities. So, too, when the temples of Egypt had been plundered