

Open Letter to Bible Scholars: Please Re-member the Persian Era Egyptian Jews

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Reaching back in solidarity to a beleaguered community of YHWH worshippers whose temple was destroyed by international political forces during a time of war and empiric domination, I write this open letter to biblical scholars around the world. I ask that you consider this ancient community as you continue your important work.

The Jewish colony at Elephantine – a small island in the Nile at the southern border of Egypt adjacent to what is now the Sudan – was one of at least five Jewish colonies up and down Egypt that thrived in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE under sponsorship of the Persian Emperor. In 404 BCE, when a coup returned an Egyptian to Pharaoh's throne, these Jewish officials of the Persian Empire were deposed; they and their families were no longer welcome in Egypt. In the tumultuous years leading up to this time, life was difficult for the Jews at Elephantine. In 411 BCE, a raid spearheaded by an Egyptian priesthood destroyed the temple of YHWH on the island of Elephantine. In their last known written communication, dated 408 BCE, the Jews of Elephantine reached out to the religious and political leaders of Jerusalem and Samaria, reiterating a desperate plea for help. *History tells us they were never heard from again.*



The Nile River at Aswan and Elephantine Island, Egypt | photo by Sam Valadi

But is that really what history tells us? If we open our eyes to the biblical texts that we all have access to, they indicate that members of these several Jewish colonies in Egypt returned to their ancestors' homelands in Judah and Samaria where the Persian Empire who supported them still reigned.

In a fashion similar to the Babylonian Jews' "return after exile," they came back to the place that their parents, and their parents' parents, had talked and prayed and sung about for all those years.

I call on scholars from all our many sub-disciplines to consider this possibility: that the experience of Persian-era Egyptian Jews making their way to the lands of Israel, and then making their home there, is at the heart of much of our Bible.

To inspire deep consideration of this possibility, I offer these starting points in a few areas of scholarship:

To Pentateuchal scholars

The so-called "P" texts of the Torah are attributed to Aaronide priests, who were the religious leaders of the Babylonian golah in post-exilic Yehud. Reading the "JE" texts of the Torah – do any of these texts make more sense when we consider them as having been told and retold within an Egyptian golah in post-exilic Yehud and Samaria? Attention to the Joseph cycle in Genesis might yield interesting new theories.

To American scholars

In the U.S., there are communities today who hold fast to their established American identity. Only a few generations ago their ancestors immigrated to America, and yet now these Americans are tempted to demonize newer, less established American immigrant communities. Worse, they attempt to deny these other people's existence as Americans at all. Can we revisit the documents we have -- from Elephantine, from the Bible, and from elsewhere – and consider that power struggles in Persian Yehud in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE may have included similar dynamics?

I suggest that more-established Jews, whose grandparents and great-grandparents had arrived from Babylonia, demonized the Jews coming up from Egypt, and denied that they could even claim to be Jews.

Could the interwoven strands of the Abraham-Sarah-Hagar stories in the Bible be stories told by two different Jewish communities? The character Sarah comes from Ur (the region later known as Babylonia) and Hagar from Egypt. Hagar—הגר -- is not only

a name, it is the word for The Immigrant. Sarah --רִישָׁ-- is not only a name, it is the word for Elite One. Were stories about these characters told as metaphors for the communities they represented? Could the stories that feature Hagar as the protagonist have been stories told by an Egyptian community in Yehud – stories meant to bolster the morale and faith of a community that was feeling miserably oppressed by the elite class of Babylonian Jews there, to the point of wanting to flee into the desert, back towards the perils they left in Egypt?

As American scholars, have we been able to deny hearing the voices of this African Jewish community in our interpretations, even as we deny the voices of immigrant communities in our nation right now?

To scholars who have raised awareness about “The Myth of the Empty Land”

Thank you for waking us to the fact that “Exile” describes an experience of a small elite minority in the 6th and 5th century BCE. As you continue to explore those Israelites and Judahites who remained in their homeland during Babylonian rule, can you also consider yet another community from that time? Namely “all the people from the least to the greatest, [who] together with the army officers [led by Ishmael, assassin of Gedaliah] fled to Egypt for fear of the Babylonians” (2Kings 25:25-26)? And can you consider their descendants? Those who are perhaps among those envisioned in Isaiah 60:

*Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.
All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you,
the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you;
they shall be acceptable on my altar,
and I will glorify my glorious house. (Is. 60:4-7)*

To postcolonial, womanist, feminist, and LGBTQ scholars

All who know that the Bible's beauty and power are rooted in something deeper and truer than patriarchy – we have known through our own pain that the dynamics of patriarchy have crippled biblical scholarship for too long. You have the tools to uncover the presence of the Egyptian Jews in our biblical texts. Can you bring their voices to those who need to hear them? My hope is that this new perspective may affirm and support the work you are already doing. I encourage you to explore the not-so-patriarchal world of Yehoyishma (a name similar in meaning to Ishmael). She awaits your discovery in the documents of Elephantine.

To literary scholars

I leave you with this image. The story of the Garden of Eden begins with a source of life bubbling up from the earth in the center of the garden and then flowing out, splitting into four rivers. The story ends with God driving humanity out of the garden, and then keeping us out by placing there “a sword flaming and turning all around” (Gen. 3:24). The Hebrew word translated as sword – חֶרֶב – is also the word for ‘drought’ or ‘parching heat’.

Are the four rivers mentioned at the beginning of this story the White Nile, the Blue Nile, the Euphrates, and the Tigris?

Did someone who noticed the fecundity of what we know today as the fertile crescent want to explain why the center-space carving out that crescent was seemingly doomed to drought and parching heat?

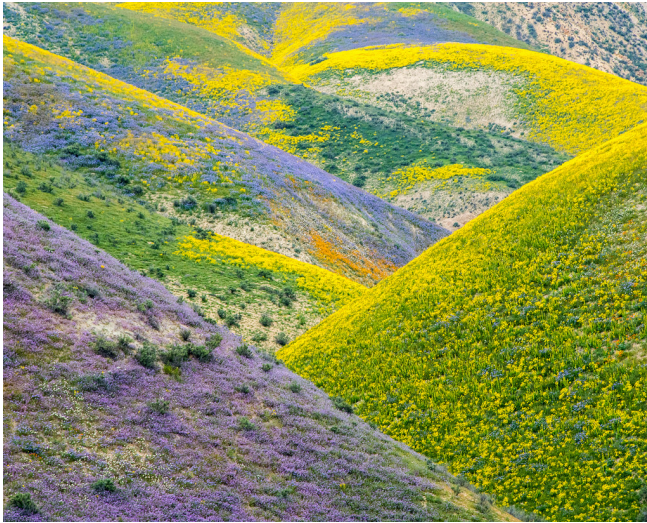
Did they imagine that buried within the Sinai Peninsula – that vast stretch of wilderness that separated African Jews from their Babylonian cousins – was the source that fed the White Nile, the Blue Nile, the Euphrates, and the Tigris?

Did they imagine that God had created not a spinning sword, but a “scorching hot dryness extending in all directions,” to keep humanity out?

Anyone with a Bible, a map, and a Hebrew-English lexicon can puzzle out this possible interpretation of the Garden of Eden story. What has kept this possibility from consciousness? As literary scholars know: the pen is mightier than the sword. But could our own need to deny the African origins of the Bible have kept us unconscious of these truths etched in Scripture?

To all scholars

Let us uncork the wellspring of our passion for the Bible that has been stopped up by the unconscious racism passed on to us over centuries. Let our own creative exploration of the Bible flow from here.



Super Bloom of 2017, California Desert

*The desert and the
parched land will exult;
the steppe will rejoice
and bloom.
They will bloom with
abundant flowers,
and rejoice with joyful song.*

Isaiah 35:1-2a

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elizabeth Berne DeGear".

Elizabeth Berne DeGear, PhD

Lizzie invites you to visit her website, www.lizziebernedegear.com, to respond to this letter.

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