The Elephantine Papyri (aka Cowley Papyri)

The Elephantine Papyri is a cache of Aramaic manuscripts discovered in Upper (southern) Egypt in 1893. These manuscripts date to as old as 663-525 BCE, i.e. Egypt’s 26th Dynasty. Among these Aramaic papyrus scrolls are official documents—dealing with marriages, sale of property, business contracts, governmental decrees, and freeing of slaves—as well as private and official letters and even some literary pieces.

These documents were of the utmost importance for a better understanding of Aramaic, the official language of the empire during the Persian period, since they formed the largest number of Aramaic documents known to have survived from the era of the Biblical Prophets. In light of the fact that several chapters of the postexilic Biblical books of Daniel and Ezra are written in Aramaic, any sizable amount of Aramaic literature originating from approximately the same period was also of significance for Biblical linguistic studies. Furthermore, these papyri provide information about the history, culture, and religion of the Jewish community, which produced this valuable archive.

The Aramaic of this cache is very close to that used in Daniel and Ezra in the Tanakh. For this reason, it is a natural “next-step” body of literature for the student of Biblical Aramaic. Delving into the Targumim, Talmuds (Bavli and Yerushalmi), and Midrashic literature is not as easy a task as interacting with the Elephantine Papyri. The former is composed in Middle Aramaic, while the latter, like the Aramaic passages we find in Scripture, is penned in Early Aramaic.

The leader of the Jewish community at Elephantine was Yedonyah bar Gemaryah (cit. Papyrus 5). Elephantine is an island in the middle of the Nile River near the present-day Assouan Dam. The correspondence preserved in the Elephantine Papyri shows the colony to be of a militaristic nature. The documents chronicle the history of this community from 400 BCE back to about 525 BCE (though the earliest dated manuscript in the cache corresponds to 494
BCE). It seems that this colony was established prior to the fall of the Jerusalem Temple in 586 BCE, possibly as early as 650 BCE, and that a replacement Temple was in place on their island by the time of Cambyses's invasion of Egypt in 525 BCE¹ (but most likely before the Cyrus Decree of 536 BCE). They vacate the island about the mid-4th Century BCE.

The scanned manuscript which follows is from this collection and provide historical-cultural background to Biblical passages which use Aramaic. The value of this exercise is that it [1] gives students hands-on experience with reading hand-written Aramaic, and [2] exposes students to extra-Biblical literature that is contemporary or near-contemporary with the latter prophets and post-exilic Scriptures and aids in exegetical analysis of certain Biblical texts.

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The Elephantine Passover Papyrus, 419 BCE.

Codification:

- Produce a transcription indicating lacunae (holes) with square brackets and missing text within the lacunae with elipses. Illegible letters in the visible text may also be represented with a dot (period or full stop). Number each line to correspond with the original manuscript.
- Translate from your transcription, again indicating lacunae, missing text, and illegible letters as above. Maintain the same line numbering as above.

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For extra credit, you may work on any portion of the following Elephantine manuscript:

Figure 1. Yedoniah's copy of his letter to Bagoas, Governor of Samaria & Judah, requesting the order to be given to rebuild the Temple of YHWH in Elephantine (408 BCE).
Resources Concerning the Elephantine Papyri


