PART ONE

papyrus, potsherd, parchment

I

IN EGYPT

In the beginning – not the imagined beginning of patriarchs and prophets, and certainly not the beginning of the whole universe, just the documented beginning of ordinary Jews – in *that* beginning, a father and mother were worrying about their son.

This son, a soldier boy, was called Shelomam, an Aramaic version of my Hebrew name, Shelomo. His father's name was Osea, which was the middle name of my own *aba*.[1] The time was two and a half millennia ago, in 475 BCE, the tenth year of the reign of Xerxes, the Achaemenid king of Persia who, though much bloodied in Greece, was still ruler in Egypt, where Shelomam and Osea lived. Xerxes had another decade on the throne before being murdered by his most trusted officer, Artabanus the Hyrcanian, who did the deed in cahoots with a helpful eunuch. Jesus of Nazareth would not be born for half a millennium. If the several writers of the Hebrew Bible are to be believed, it had been around eight hundred years since Moses had led the enslaved Israelites from Egypt into the desert mountains where, in possession of the laws given directly by Yahweh – indeed written with His very finger – they turned, despite recurring flings with idolatry and a yen for many other gods, into something resembling Jews.

The exodus from the flood valley of the Nile, the end of foreign enslavement, was presented by the Bible writers as the condition of becoming fully Israelite. They imagined the journey as an ascent, both topographical and moral. It was on the stony high places, way stations to heaven, that YHWH – as Yahweh is written – had revealed Himself (or at least His back), making Moses' face hot and shiny with reflected radiance. From the beginning (whether in the biblical or archaeological version), Jews were made in hill country. In Hebrew, emigrating

to Israel is still *aliyah*, a going up. Jerusalem was unimaginable on the low fluvial plain. Rivers were murky with temptation; the sea was even worse, brimming with scaly monsters. Those who dwelled by its shores or shipped around upon its waves (like the Phoenicians or the Greeks) were to be detested as shifty, idolatrous and unclean. To go back to *Egypt* then, in the eyes of those for whom the exodus was the proper start of everything Jewish, was a fall, a descent to brazen idolatry. The prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah – the latter even when he had gone to Egypt himself – had warned against this relapse, this un-Jewing. Those who fully succumbed, Jeremiah warned, would become 'an execration and an astonishment, a curse and a reproach'.

Heedless, the Israelites not for the first or last time disobeyed, trotting back to Egypt in droves. Why not, when the northern kingdom of Israel had been smashed by the Assyrians in 721 BCE, and a century later the kingdom of Judah was likewise pulverised by the Babylonians? All these misfortunes could, and were, interpreted by the writers of the Bible narratives as YHWH's chastisement of backsliding. But those on the receiving end could be forgiven for thinking: much good He has done us. Some 30,000 rams and ewes sacrificed for Passover in the Temple by King Josiah; a mass rending of raiment in contrite penitence for flirting with false gods; no help at all in fending off whichever hellish conquerors came out of Mesopotamia with their ringlets and their panthers and their numberless ranks of archers and javelin-men.

So the Israelites went down from their lion-coloured Judaean hills to the flood country of Egypt, to Tahpanhes on the delta, and Memphis halfway south, and especially to Pathros, the south country. When the Persians arrived in 525 BCE, they treated the Israelites not as slaves but often as slave owners, and above all as tough professional soldiers who could be depended on, as much as Arameans, Caspians or Carian Greeks from the western Anatolian littoral, to suppress Egyptian uprisings against Persia. They would also police the turbulent southern frontier where Nubian Africa began.

Shelomam, Osea's boy, was one of these young men, a mercenary – it was a living – who had been posted south all the way to the garrison of the Hayla hayahudaya, the Judaean Troop, on the island of Elephantine, just downstream from the first cataract of the Nile. Perhaps he had been assigned to caravan convoy, guarding the tribute

of elephant tusks, ebony and Ethiopian boys that had been the pharaoh's due from Nubia and was now sent to the Persian governor in his place.

The father, Osea, was writing from Migdol, probably located on the eastern branch of the Nile delta, where Shelomam had previously been stationed. His letter, sent five hundred river miles south to await the soldier boy's arrival on Elephantine, was written in Aramaic, the daily tongue of the region and the entire empire, on the pressed-reed writing surface of papyrus. Patched together though this particular piece was, papyrus degrades very slowly. If kept from light, the ink remains dark and sharp. The square-form script, the same elegant style in which Hebrew would be written from the time of the Second Temple to our own, is still crisply legible. In Jewish memory it is as though Osea had written just yesterday. A worried father is a worried father. He can't help letting the boy know how he feels, right away, at the top of the letter: 'Well-being and strength I send you but from the day you went on your way, my heart, it's not so good.' And then, the inevitable clincher, the three words Shelomam must have known were coming, even without Osea having to write them, the phrase all Jewish boys hear at some point; the phrase from which history unfolds: 'Likewise your mother.'

A classic pre-emptive strike. My own father, Arthur Osea, was known to resort to it shamelessly when, as in the case of Egyptian Osea, he was on the back foot, worrying that the news which followed might not make his son altogether happy. 'Don't worry . . . your mother's a bit upset about this but . . .' Now what might get his pride and joy, his Shelomam, all bent out of shape? Trouble with pay and kit? Oh, don't get in a snit. 'That tunic and the garment you wrote about, they're made, all right? Don't get angry with me because I couldn't bring them to Memphis in time (for your journey south). I'll bring them so you have them on your way back.' The pay? Yes, well, bit of a problem there, my boy. 'When you left Migdol, they wouldn't send us your money.' Worse, when Osea made enquiries about the back pay owing, he got the brush-off default mode for the minions of empires. Tremendously sorry, actually not my department, you see, but please *do* by all means forward your complaint to the appropriate officials. 'When you come back to Egypt, give them what for and they'll give you your pay.' So listen, my son, Osea goes on, brushing

off any notion that he'd failed his boy in the crucial matter of the kit: 'don't cry. Be a man . . . Your mother, the children, everyone's well.'

It would be good to know in more detail how Shelomam lived in the frontier world of Jewish soldiers on Elephantine, but the letter stayed there, so perhaps he never made it to Elephantine, never got his tunic or his pay. Or perhaps he did, and left the note behind. At any rate, there it remained for two and a half millennia until an American amateur Egyptologist and ex-journalist for the *New York Herald Tribune*, Charles Edwin Wilbour, bought clay pots full of papyri from women digging for *sebagh* fertiliser on the island mounds in 1893. 'All these pap. from Kom shown me by three separate women at different times,' Wilbour wrote in his diary. But once he saw the papyri were Aramaic, and twenty-seventh dynasty, he lost interest. Grander, older, pharaonic antiquities were his game.

Twenty years before, he had left Manhattan in a hurry when his crony, the king of city graft Boss Tweed, who had put some nice contracts Wilbour's way for his paper business, had been booted out of town. In Paris, ancient Egypt gave Wilbour a new life, its stupendous history learned from the eminent scholar Gaston Maspero. He rigged out a *dahabiyeh* so that he and his wife, Charlotte Beebee, an ardent suffragist, could sail the Nile with all conveniences, stopping by to help with digs in Karnak, Luxor, Thebes. High-domed Germans, French and British Egyptologists found his Yankee enthusiasm entertaining, sometimes even useful. Occasionally Wilbour would go and see Flinders Petrie in his rude tent and thought the British archaeologist ostentatiously spartan for camping like an Arab.

Sporting a prophetic beard, Wilbour made the Nile his living room for nearly two decades. When, near the end of that time, he stood on the mounds of Elephantine amid the grubbing women, he knew that the *sebagh* they were after for their crops was the pulverised debris of ancient mud bricks, with enough hay and stubble mixed in to give it nitrous potency. But he was certainly unaware that somewhere beneath his feet was a decomposed Jewish city, the first we can reconstruct in the thrumming drone of its daily business: its property-line disputes over rooms and houses, exits and access; its marriages and divorces; its wills and prenups; its food and its dress; its oaths and its blessings. Oblivious to all this, Wilbour took the

papyri, neatly folded and bound, addressees on the outside as they had been in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, to the Paris lodging where he expired in 1896.

Ten years later more extensive troves were found by German expeditions who picked at their content, took them to Berlin and Paris, and published a little more. Needless to say the British, whose pith-helmeted dominion Egypt had become, were not far behind. Papyri and inscribed clay potsherds – ostraca – duly ended up in the usual destinations – Oxford and the British Museum – and when the archaeological proconsuls chose to be grandly magnanimous, in Cairo. Some papyri were published in the early twentieth century but it was when the papyrus hoard passed to the Brooklyn Museum that the curtain truly rose on the marvel of Jewish Elephantine.

Fragmentary letters and inscriptions written on pottery shards in classical, linear Hebrew (from three and two centuries earlier than the Elephantine papyri) survive – Judaean shouts and cries half lost in the gusting wind of time: a farm worker whose garment has been nabbed by an unscrupulous creditor; a beleaguered quartermaster facing the oncoming horde of the Babylonians, urgently needing oil and grain; a junior officer in another citadel, peering in vain for the beacon warning flares of neighbouring hill forts.

And the Hebrew Bible? Unless we suppose (along with the ultra-Orthodox Jews and Christians) that it is the directly dictated word of God to Moses and the prophets, much of the stupendous poetic narrative of the scripture is no more than what another archaeologist has characterised as an 'echo' of the historical truth. And sometimes, as with the entirely undocumented exodus story, written nearly half a millennium after it was supposed to have happened, it is probably not even that. There is a point in the epic where the storyline and the reality of Jewish history do indeed converge, but the Hebrew Bible is the imprint of the Jewish mind, the picture of its imagined origins and ancestry; it is the epic of the YHWH treaty-covenant with Israel, the single formless God moving through history, as well as the original treasure of its spiritual imagination.

The tawny papyri of Elephantine, with their neat, black scribal hand, give us something entirely different, something more earthily human and mundane: the quotidian record of the lives of the expat Judaeans and Israelites with whom we can keep company as naturally

and materially as if we were living in their neighbourhood: tough guys, anxious mothers, slave-girl wives, kibitzers and quibblers, hagglers over property lines, drafters of prenups, scribes, temple officials, jailbait indignant that they were set up for a fall, big shots and small fry. We know their names, such unapologetically Jewish names ending in the theophoric 'yah' that embedded YHWH in their identity even as it claimed His protection for their lives: Berechiah, Ananiah, Delaiah, Mahseiah, Shemaiah, Gedaliah, Jedaniah, Mibtahiah, Pelaliah, Malchiah, Uriah, Jezaniah, Gemariah, Azariah, Zechariah.

There they all were, the people of YHWH, jostled together on the club-shaped little island in the Nile. Not a home for lotus-eaters, perhaps, but all things considered, not such a bad place: shady in the slamming heat; famous for the fig trees that never dropped their foliage; the peculiar dom-nut palms with their topknot of sprouting leaves, found only in the south country of the Nile; rushes fringing the shoreline; acacia, cassia and mulberry inland a little – a tight clump of green at the point where the cultivable floodplain on the west bank of the river had receded to a thin ribbon below the golden dunes. On the east bank, still more arid, rose the quarries of Syene, beneath which a camp of Arameans, both soldiers and stone labourers, were housed. Slabs of local grey granite, freckled with rose pink or blood red, were laboriously loaded onto boats and barges and sent downstream for the master builders to make temples and mausoleums, as if the Egyptian lords were still pharaonic masters and not, since the conquest by Cambyses in the late sixth century BCE, the subjugated creatures of Persian whim. One such slab was so enormous that an entire royal shrine could be made from it – or so Herodotus (who could be guilty of exaggeration) tells us. The same slab, he insists, was so imposing that it took three years and the haulage of two thousand men to reach its downstream destination at Sais in the western delta.

Elephantine – 'Yeb' to the locals, from the Egyptian *Iebw* meaning 'place of elephants' (though no one, not even Herodotus, knew quite why, although the bald, rounded pale grey rocks in the river certainly suggest the domes of wallowing pachyderms) – was famous as the last place of true Egypt, the edge of its civilisation before it evaporated into Nubian sand and rock. It was where the lethargically oozy river, carrying its cargo of fertilising sludge, suddenly underwent a

radical change of personality, running mad over the granite outcrops that sped boats towards the cataract. Only the 'Boatmen of the Rough Waters', neighbours of the Jews whose manners were notoriously as rude as the churning river, were capable of riding its furies, navigating the upstream whitewater with the help of ropes hooked to the sides of the overhanging rocks. The geographer Strabo – every Greek traveller worth his salt came to Elephantine – has them doing water stunts to impress the tourists. The spumy torrent held mysteries: the quick of Egyptian life. For between the twin hills of Crophi and Mophi that rose from the banks, or so Herodotus claimed an Egyptian priest had told him, was the wellspring of the Nile so unfathomable none could sound its bed. Pharaoh Psamtik I had tried not that much before to plumb the depth with a twisted cable a thousand fathoms long, and still touched nothing but its swirling waters. That pull beneath the surface was the fluvial valve that divided the torrent, sending half south to burning Nubia, and half north to feed the flood valley. The ram-headed god Khnum was worshipped in Elephantine, since it was he who assured the annual inundation without which local cultivators were condemned to famine. The sacred rams of Khnum have their own special mausoleum on the island, their mummies reposing where the sculptors enjoyed themselves fashioning fat and fleecy animals from the limestone. A Nilometer positioned at steps leading to the bank measured the constancy of Khnum's benevolence.

As well as myths and rites, men, money and arms flowed with the river to the island fortress. Together with Syene, it had been the sentinel of the south country, the pressure valve of classical Egypt. It needed maintaining, watching, policing – but what kind of job was that for Judaeans? What were they doing there? Had they been deaf to the warnings of Jeremiah? But few of the books of the prophets had yet been written, and fewer still disseminated, by the time that Israelites and Judaeans, from north and south of Palestine, journeyed down once more to the Nile Valley probably sometime in the late seventh century BCE.

Jewish identity would eventually be formed somewhere between the two cultural poles of the Nile and the Euphrates, but the magnetic needle of attraction and repulsion swung unevenly. Bible writing

happened in Judaea and in Babylon, not in Egypt. In the mind and the writings of the Hebrew sages, scribes and the prophets – all those who, between the seventh and the fifth centuries BCE, were anthologising and redacting the memories, oral traditions, folklore and writings that would eventually be turned into the canonical Bible – there was a good migration (Mesopotamia) and a bad (Egypt). Both were captivities by the despotisms of the waterlands: both supporting teeming urban populations from the plains irrigated with flooding rivers; both generating grain and fruit from the alluvium. Both city states were enriched and ordered by hieroglyphs and lettered-writing, laws and epics, pyramids and ziggurats. Although both were brutal annihilators, both in the grip of sacrificial cults (Marduk and Ra) and both equally in thrall to voracious idolatry, the land between the Tigris and the Euphrates never figured quite as demonically in the proto-Jewish mind as the Nile Valley. If there was one thing that Egyptian memorialists and the Hebrew Bible writers agreed on, it was the difficulty of living Jewish in Egypt.

To live in Egypt was to live uncleanly, or to be in bondage – so the writers of Genesis and Exodus pictured it. In Deuteronomy, the book that more than any other defined the obligations of Jewish memory, God is defined as He had been in Exodus as He 'who brought you forth *out* of the Land of Egypt'. This was most likely written sometime around the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, precisely at the moment when Jews went back there. To the 'Deuteronomists', who also reworked oral history into the narrative of Judges and Kings, any such return would be a disgraceful violation of the covenant.

Exile in Babylon after the sack of Jerusalem in the sixth century BCE, on the other hand, was in some mysterious, punitive way, known to the God who had ordained it, as a *return* to the well-head: the source of the covenant-urge. The writers of Genesis, chronicling Abraham's journey towards a visionary communion with YHWH, and the origination of the idea of a separate people under His special guidance and protection, set the place of Abraham's birth as Chaldea, Mesopotamia. So the *ur*-cradle of monotheism was Ur, the city state. This is what gave special meaning to the destruction of the polluted Jerusalem Temple by Babylonians led by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BCE. The people from whom the Israelites had first departed to make their way in history were now made the instrument of YHWH's

manner of reconnecting them with that original covenant. Babylon obliterated the Temple. From Babylon – or its Persian successor empire – would come its purified restoration, when, after half a century of exile, the Persian king Cyrus decreed they be allowed to return to Jerusalem.

In the Bible-writing mind, Babylonia–Persia had been co-opted as the instrument of divine will. Egypt was always the obstinate enemy of YHWH's plans for history. This feeling of perennial irreconcilability may have been mutual. The very first time that 'Israel' appears on any historical artefact is on the famous late-thirteenth-century BCE triumphal inscription of Pharaoh Merneptah, son of Rameses II, the latter traditionally identified with the 'stiff-necked' pharaoh of the exodus. 'Israel is laid waste,' it says, 'its seed is no more,' the hieroglyph leaving no doubt that by Israel is meant a people rather than a place. The history of Egypt by the priest-grammarian Manetho (written in the third or second century BCE and known to us through the work of the Romano-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus in the first century CE) chronicles a departure of the Israelites from Egypt – but as an expulsion of an unclean pariah population of slaves and perhaps banditti, not the victorious exodus of the YHWH-protected Children of God.

In this sense, the liberation epic of the Torah (the five books of Moses that begin the Bible) was a reversal of that indignity – the identity of Israel established not just as a separation from Egyptian bondage, but as a reversal of Egypt's triumphant master-narrative. Babylon might destroy Jerusalem and the Temple, but it would not wipe out the faith; the divine plan for exile might even sustain it. Egypt was another matter entirely – to go back, as Jeremiah warned when he was taken there, was to court perdition, spiritual as well as physical. Never return to the Nile.

But Jews did just that, over and over again, so often and so incorrigibly that it is difficult to think of Jewish history as in any way separable from Egypt. Egypt was the ultimate Them; but Egypt has also been, generation after generation, unmistakably Us. The most Jewish of all names, that of Moses the deliverer, in whose epic a nation was first defined, was probably Egyptian. Never mind that one of King Solomon's wives was the daughter of a pharaoh. 'Go not into Egypt for horses,' Isaiah warned King Hezekiah of Judah, because he knew

that for centuries the Israelites and Judahites had been doing exactly that, buying stud for the great stables in north Palestine.

Whatever the risks, when the Assyrians had embarked on devastating conquests out of Mesopotamia in the late eighth century BCE, the Egyptian connection became critical for survival for the kings and peoples of both Israel and Judah. The last kings of Israel at that time, their capital in Samaria, made a tactical Egyptian alliance (although it was in the end no impediment to their destruction; probably the reverse). Trapped in Jerusalem by Sennacherib's besieging Assyrian army in the closing years of the eighth century BCE, King Hezekiah built the subterranean water tunnels that might make the difference between capitulation and survival, but still needed help from Egypt.

What happened when Sennacherib's huge army surrounded Jerusalem in 715 BCE is one of the great mysteries. The Bible and Herodotus tell us that the Assyrian army fell to some unidentifiable plague (Herodotus picturesquely claims an army of mice nibbled through the bowstrings of their archers). Sennacherib's own triumphal inscription brags of all the Judaean towns destroyed and looted by his army, and of locking up Hezekiah within his royal citadel 'like a bird in a cage', but concedes he failed to vanquish him. Most startling of all – but historically plausible – is the claim in Egyptian sources that it was an army under the Nubian pharaoh of the twenty-fifth dynasty that broke the Assyrian siege and preserved both the Kingdom of Judah and its capital, Jerusalem. Egypt had become the rescuer of Judah.

During the two centuries that followed – the epoch when the Bible began to be written – Judah played off Mesopotamians and Egyptians against each other. The turning point for the re-establishment of Jews in Egypt came after Nebuchadnezzar's first siege of Jerusalem in 597 BCE, when many of the elite of Judah – priests, nobles, scribes – were deported to the Euphrates, leaving common folk – farmers, shepherds, artisans – to fend for themselves. Ten years later, the Babylonians delivered the *coup de grâce*, destroying Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple and inflicting terrible devastation on the Judaean countryside. Many of those who chose not to stay amid the ashes and the rubble migrated south to what were already well-established colonies of Jews at Tahpanhes, Memphis, and what Jeremiah called Pathros, the south province, whose capital was at Elephantine.

Aware that Jews had gone back to escape the hardship, famine and terror visited on Judaea, Jeremiah went to Egypt to warn against false hopes of sanctuary: 'it shall come to pass that the sword which you feared shall overtake you there in the land of Egypt and the famine thereof ye were afraid shall follow close after you there in Egypt and there you shall die'. The deliriously fulminating prophet Ezekiel, writing from a Babylonian work camp by the Chebar canal, was if anything even more ferocious in his warnings. Channelling the voice of YHWH, he addressed Pharaoh directly:

> I am against thee, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon that lieth in the midst of his rivers, which hath said, My river is mine own, and I have made it for myself. But I will put hooks in thy jaws, and I will cause the fish of thy rivers to stick unto thy scales and I will bring thee up out of the midst of thy rivers . . . And I will leave thee thrown into the wilderness . . . I have given thee for meat for the beasts of the fields . . . and I will make the land of Egypt utterly waste and desolate, from Migdol to Syene even unto the border of Nubia. No foot of man shall pass through it, nor foot of beast shall pass through it, neither shall it be inhabited forty years.

Even more than Jeremiah, Ezekiel, notwithstanding his Babylonian address, seemed to know exactly where the Jews had settled after the destruction of Jerusalem, specifically in 'the land of Pathros' which would be, the prophet warned again in the voice of YHWH, 'the basest of kingdoms'. But the Jews of the south country did not waste away in a land doomed to forty years of desolation; on the contrary, they prospered. So that by the time of the Persian conquest in 515 BCE, led by Cyrus' son Cambyses, the military Jews of Elephantine were in a position to do something extraordinary: they built a temple, a House of YHWH, or in Aramaic, 'Yahu', the deity they called the God of Heaven. This they did in spite of the explicit and strict prohibition (recorded in Kings and Chronicles, and laid down not once but twice, first in the reign of Hezekiah and then again in the reforming reign of Josiah at the end of the seventh century BCE) that there must be no temples outside Jerusalem.

What was more, the Elephantine Temple for the Jewish soldiers and their families, and the whole buzzing community around them,

was no hole-in-the-corner provincial affair. Modelled either on what had been known of the First Temple from the Bible of the original Sanctuary, its five stone gates opened onto a spacious courtyard with a holy dwelling place at the centre for Ark and Torah. The door of the inner sanctum had bronze hinges, there was a cedar roof and gold and silver vessels within.[2] Worse still, in flagrant violation of the biblical prohibitions, it regularly made animal sacrifices along with offerings of grain and incense, for this was, after all, the dwelling place of YHWH and (almost as if he were another local deity) his needs had to be provided for.[3] So there was much sprinkling of blood and curling of smoke for the 'burnt offerings', usually of sheep and lambs – which, given the prominence of the cult of the ram-god Khnum in the Egyptian Temple just the other side of the 'Street of the King', was dangerously tactless. It ought to have been an outrage to the restored authorities in Jerusalem: the priests and the scribes and the writers of the prophetic books. But the Elephantine Jews took unrepentant pride in *their* temple, which they describe as having been so important that when Cambyses destroyed those of the Egyptians, he made sure to preserve the House of YHWH.

The existence of a temple of YHWH in Upper Egypt means one of two things for our understanding of what Jews were like at this embryonic moment in their collective existence. Either they were pre-biblical, aware only of some of the legal codes of the Torah and some of the elements of the founding epic, but had not yet taken in Deuteronomy, the book written two centuries earlier, ostensibly the 120-year-old dying Moses' spoken legacy to the Israelites, which codified more rigorously the much looser and often contradictory injunctions of Leviticus. Or the Elephantine Jews *did* have the Mosaic strictures of Deuteronomy, and perhaps even knew all about the reforms of kings Hezekiah and his great-grandson Josiah making the Jerusalem Temple the sole place of sacrificial ritual and pilgrimage, but had no intention of surrendering to its monopoly. The Elephantine Yahudim were Yahwists who were not going to be held to the letter of observance laid down by Jerusalemites any more than, say, the vast majority of Jews now who believe themselves to be, in their way, observant, will accept instruction on what it means to be Jewish (or worse, who is and who isn't a Jew) from the ultra-Orthodox.

It is even possible that the priests, elders and officials who looked after the Elephantine Temple, and were the elite on the island, may have believed their sanctuary to be *more* faithful to the Solomonic original than the modestly rebuilt structure in Jerusalem (only completed in 515 BCE). Some of them may have come to Egypt in the seventh century BCE in hostile reaction to King Manasseh's reversion to polytheism and built a structure modelled on the style and proportions of the tabernacle sanctuary described in the Bible.[4] As in Palestine, synagogues, places of prayer assembly, were as yet unknown. A temple would be the sole monumental focus of the community, the built expression of their particular religion. It seems likely that at the centre of it was a free-standing cultic pillar, a *massebah* very much like the one that stood in another fortress sanctuary, that of Arad at the northern end of the Negev Desert. There might well have been a horned stone sacrificial table, also standard to the temple shrines outside Jerusalem.

Even so, as a Jewish mother understandably asked of her son, the curator of the Brooklyn Museum's show about the Wilbour papyri some years ago, were these Egyptian, pre-biblical, much-travelled Jews '*really* Jewish?' Their names – the Zechariahs, Gemariahs, Jedaniahs, Haggais, Mahseiahs and Mibtahiahs – unmistakably proclaimed them Yahudim, and naming was no light matter in the ancient world. They had the lunar calendar of their fathers, with all its beautiful names (Marcheshvan, Kislev, Tishri, Nissan), the year divided in time for them as it still is for Jews two and a half millennia on. They seem to have circumcised their sons, but then everyone in Egypt did, though not all in infancy, let alone on the eighth day after birth.[5] They blessed and sometimes cursed and took solemn oaths, signed legal contracts and began and ended letters by invoking the 'God of Heaven and Earth': 'I bless you by YHWH', 'May YHWH bless you', 'May YHWH cause you to hear good news every day', 'May YHWH make this day a good one for you'. Although they were occasionally known to invoke Aramean, Phoenician and even Egyptian gods, where perhaps it was expected as a matter of form, it had long been unproblematic in Judaea itself to profess devotion to YHWH as well as the consort commonly believed to be paired with him, Asherah. The strictures of the most exclusivist prophets, like the so-called 'second Isaiah' who added twenty-odd chapters to the book perhaps two centuries after the

original, and who demanded a devotion to 'Yahweh alone', may well not have registered with the Elephantine Jews, whose immigrant-ancestors had come to Egypt still steeped in the traditions and magic of popular Israelite religion.

Although the Sabbath is not mentioned in Deuteronomy (nor for that matter is the Day of Atonement), we know that the Elephantine Jews kept it (or, like the majority of Jews today, knew they were supposed to keep it). There were plenty of Shabbetais in the colony – though some of them may have been Aramean and about the day of rest they may have had the same mixed feelings when it came to business and the conveniences of life that Jerusalemites exhibited when they allowed non-Jewish Tyrian merchants to sell goods on the Sabbath day within and without the city walls. If today Tel Aviv and Jerusalem have strikingly different attitudes to what may and may not be permitted on the Sabbath, Elephantine was bound to have been more like Tel Aviv. But a letter, written on a pottery shard, to one Islah in the town, certainly reveals how steamed up they could get about doing what had to be done before the Sabbath break from work: 'Look, I am sending you vegetables tomorrow. Get there tomorrow [at the dock] before the boat comes in on account of the Sabbath [*bsbh* in Aramaic] so they don't spoil. If you don't I swear on the life of YHWH I will kill you! Don't rely on Meshullemeth or Shemaiah [two Jewish theophoric names again] to take care of it. In return sell the barley for me.' And in case Islah hadn't got the point, a repetition of the threat 'now by the life of YHWH if you don't do this, you will foot the bill'.

Even more clearly than Sabbath observance, it was (and is) the coming together for Passover that made Jews Jews. Elephantine Passovers must have been a little peculiar since their YHWH was defined as the deliverer from Egypt and the exodus as the true moment of separation, of religious and national birth – the necessary condition of receiving the Law that had set Jews apart. But obviously the Jews of Elephantine were not entirely apart, and for sure, they weren't going anywhere, not of their own accord anyway. The earliest Haggadah, the narrative ordering of the Seder ritual at the beginning of Passover, dates from the ninth century CE, so we have no idea what was or was not recited on the Passover eve by Egyptian Jews – at Tahpanhes and Memphis, as well as Elephantine. (The formal Seder 'order' itself was, like so much

else assumed to be immemorial, an institution of the rabbis no earlier than the third century CE, probably in response to the Christian Easter Eucharist, not the model for it.)

The Jerusalem elders of the fifth century BCE, much agitated by 'foreign' contaminations, wanted to put the stamp of their authority on the wayward practices of Jews abroad. Ezra, the 'Scribe of the God of Heaven', was sent west by King Artaxerxes to correct the loose practices of those who had stayed behind in Palestine after the sack of the Temple and who were suspected by Babylonian exiles of impure ways, of relapsing to pagan habits and marrying 'foreigners'. In 419 BCE, one Hananiah, quite possibly a brother or kinsman of the returned governor of Judaea, Nehemiah, wrote a letter to the head of the Jewish community in Elephantine, Jedaniah bar Gemariah, laying down the law for standard Passover observance.[6] He may even have brought the letter to Egypt in person. At some point Hananiah showed up in Elephantine, and with him came trouble.

Not infrequently at such moments of Jewish history, one Jew is to be found telling another Jew how things are supposed to be done. Hananiah makes sure not to repeat the threatening tone of Ezekiel and Jeremiah demanding an exit from the accursed country – what would be the point of that? – but the details of Hananiah's corrections suggest a dim view of the looseness with which the Elephantines celebrated the feast of departure. An earlier pottery shard on which one correspondent asks another 'let me know when you will be celebrating Passover' implies a conveniently movable feast. So Jedaniah is instructed by Hananiah on exactly which day in the month of Nissan the feast begins (the fifteenth), how long it continues, and that the essential thing was to eat exclusively unleavened bread, the matzo. Since the Egyptians of this period were great bread eaters, this would certainly have marked a decisive break from their domestic routine. As for the other staple of their diet, beer, during Passover they were to abstain from 'fermented drink'. Modern observance has made up for that alcohol ban by requiring four cups of wine at the Seder. 'Do not do work on the fifteenth or twenty-first day of Nissan', and 'be pure'. There was nothing impure about sex in the Jewish tradition (unless taking place during menstruation), so this last instruction was either a command to make animal sacrifice in keeping with the purification rituals of the Jerusalem Temple, or else to avoid

absolutely any contact with the dead, which in heavily embalmed Egypt was no small matter. What to do about the *chametz*: those stray crusts, loaves and crumbs, or anything that had made contact with them, so exhaustively eradicated from Orthodox Jewish houses today as Passover approaches? Shockingly to modern guardians of the law, Hananiah ordered that *chametz* be brought *into* Jewish houses, stored in pots and vessels, and sealed up for the duration of the feast! The custom would dismay Talmudically observant modern Jews for whom invisibility is not the point, though the Mishnah (the first written version of the Oral Torah) and Talmud (the immense anthology of commentaries including the Mishnah) allow for the temporary 'sale' of leaven foods and objects to non-Jewish neighbours.

Whether Jedaniah bar Gemariah did as he was told and led the Elephantine Jews to a purer observance of Passover we can't be sure, but Hananiah's mission to impose conformity suggests a high level of anxiety among the Jerusalemites about the wayward customs of the Egyptian Jews. They were not altogether wrong to be suspicious. For in one other crucial respect, the issue that went to the heart of the matter of what it meant to be a Jew – the conditions on which Jews could marry Gentiles – the troop and its hangers-on took a decidedly relaxed view. But then they were encouraged by their Persian masters to make households. Do not imagine a dusty barracks of bachelor grunts, sweating out their time at the end of the world, lost in dirt, drink and boredom. Elephantine was, in its way (like the cosmopolitan garrisons on Hadrian's Wall), a family town, and its Judaean soldiers were supposed to produce boys who in their turn would grow up to serve the *brigade*, the frontier regiment. Beyond the garrison the Jews – temple officials, scribes, merchants, artisans – lived in grey, mud-brick houses, often two storeys, with cooking hearths and stables on the ground floor and surprisingly spacious living quarters above. Their doorways gave on to streets narrower than grandiose names like 'Street of the King' would suggest, but still, excavations since the 1990s have uncovered a real town: flagstone steps lead from one level to the other, high walls, long straight alleys and winding lanes. It takes no imagination at all to wander the streets of Elephantine, hear the gossip and smell the cooking pots. This was not a closed Jewish quarter. Their neighbours were Persians, Caspians and of course Egyptians. And sometimes, as the papyrus

contracts tell us, they married them. It helped if the outsider was brought into the community of YHWH, but even so the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy took a dim view of the practice ('Neither shalt thou make marriages with them,' Deuteronomy 7:3), as did later books of the Bible and of the Talmud.

But while Judaea was being assaulted by invasions and obliterations, when much of its population was in Babylonia or Egypt, and Palestine itself was a parade ground for marching mercenaries, those who felt themselves charged with the preservation and restoration of the religion of the one God 'of Heaven and Earth' were understandably defensive. The scribes and prophets thought the Judahites and Israelites left behind in the hills and valleys of Palestine especially vulnerable to pagan backsliding. Should they marry 'Edomites' or other doubtful pagans, their resolution to obey the injunctions of the Law might be weakened by their husbands' and wives' notorious attachment to 'abominations'. They might eat the flesh of swine; Egyptian or Phoenician influence might turn YHWH into the crescent moon god; tree pillars might start to appear in their houses and burial caves. They would be no better than the pagan nations. Much of the Book of Ezra, written around the time of Elephantine's flourishing in the mid-fifth century BCE, and more or less contemporary with the events it describes, is devoted to ordering Jerusalemites and Judaeans who had stayed on after the destruction of the Temple and intermarried with locals that they must 'put aside' their foreign wives.

Not so the Elephantines who had an entirely different way, as they saw it, of being good devotees of YHWH. One of their officials, a *lechen* of the Temple of Yahu, Ananiah bar Azariah, thought – or more likely knew – so little of the strict prohibitions laid on the Jerusalemites that he married a teenage Egyptian slave handmaiden, Tapemet, known as Tamet.[7] Tamet, however, was not her husband's own slave. Her left forearm was tattooed with the mark of her owner, Meshullam, another prominent figure in the crowded world of Elephantine. It seems likely that Meshullam had originally acquired Tamet as collateral for a loan of silver pieces he'd made to a Jewish woman, Jehohen. Such human pledges were common and on this one Meshullam, who had been charging 5 per cent on the loan, and who had specified in the loan contract that if arrears went into a second

year he could seize whatever he chose from the woman's possessions, collected.

How Ananiah bar Azariah met his future wife is anyone's guess, so I'll hazard one. Perhaps it was at Meshullam's house when he was visiting, for the two men knew each other well. As far as the slave owner was concerned it would have been Ananiah's business whether he wanted the Egyptian girl as his concubine and even, as happened, when she bore him the boy child Pilti. For his part Ananiah could have left it at that: an occasionally visiting father. But he didn't; instead, in 449 BCE he married Tamet the Egyptian. 'She is my wife and I am her husband from this day and forever' the legal 'document of wife-hood' reads. Whatever the affection that moved the freeman Ananiah to wed the slave girl they were certainly uncomplicated by anything mercenary. All that Tamet brought to the marriage as her dowry was 'one garment of wool', a cheap mirror (this was Egypt after all), a single pair of sandals, and a few handfuls of balsam oil (precious) and castor oil (less so but not to be sneezed at), the whole lot valued at a paltry seven shekels. It was all the girl-mother could have had, all she could bring to what was clearly a love match. Meshullam, the owner of the bride, was evidently unmoved. Legally Tamet's status as a new wife did nothing to liberate her from her master, even if she went to live with her husband. But Meshullam drove a harder bargain, demanding (for he was a practical man) that, should they divorce, he would retain his ownership rights to the boy Pilti. Should either of the couple die, he would get half of whatever property they might share. The newly-weds weren't having this, went to law and got a rewrite of the agreement. If Meshullam reclaimed Pilti he would get a steep fine, and he was cut out of the half-share of property if one of the couple died – a satisfying result for Tamet and Ananiah.

Where they went to live – or indeed whether they lived together from the start – is unknown. These are legal documents rather than a journal of a marriage. But twelve years after he married Tamet, Ananiah bought a broken-down house belonging to the Caspians, Bagazushta and Whyl, and he got it for the rock-bottom price of fourteen shekels. But then it wasn't much to look at; just a dilapidated place not far from the Temple. There was a muddy yard, window frames, but no roof beams, yet somehow it was – rather belatedly – the couple's fixer-upper. Three years later when Ananiah had made it

fit for living, he formally gave an 'apartment' – in effect a single room – to Tamet in her own right. This didn't happen to slave girls – even koshered-up ones. Almost certainly, the occasion was the birth of another child, the girl Jehoishima.

Somehow, in the fortress world of the high-walled lanes, the slave owner, the one-time slave girl, the Temple official and their children all became an extended family. In 427, when Jehoishima was just seven, her legal owner, the hard-bargaining Meshullam, perhaps with some prodding, gave the little girl and her mother Tamet their manumission, a not-quite unconditional portion of freedom – 'released', in the lovely Egyptian formula, 'from the shade to the sun'. There was, of course, a catch. The girl would become part of Meshullam's family, and if they so wished, his children could still demand her service. All the signs, though, were that at least one of her adopted siblings, Meshullam's son Zaccur, became a true brother to his little adoptive sister. Seven years later, when she was fourteen and marrying a man with the same first name as her father Ananiah, it was Zaccur who made sure she wedded in grander style than her mother. For a start, there was what every teen bride needed: a proper wardrobe – a brand-new striped wool dress, a long shawl, linen robe, a 'fringed garment', a 'palm-leaf chest' to store all these clothes in as well as another chest of papyrus reeds, a third for her jewels, bronze cups and utensils, fancy Persian sandals, and along with the usual oils, one described as scented. Thanks to her big brother the teen bride was well endowed. And she had a place to live, since before the wedding, her father had given her the legal right to reside in the half of the house not occupied by her older brother Pilti.

Sixteen years later, in 404, forty-five years after the slave girl and the *lechen* had married, Ananiah deeded the property, now very much a family home, to his daughter, on his death, partly at least in consideration of 'the support' she had shown her father in his old age. A good girl, Jehoishima. At the end of the carefully delineated property description, the dry document says, 'This is the measurement of the house I gave Jehoishima my daughter in love.' But she didn't have to wait around for the funeral. A year and half later Ananiah changed the title to take effect forthwith. 'You, Jehoishima, my daughter, have a right to it from this day forever and your children have the right after you.'[8] Perhaps by this time old Meshullam had gone to the island

cemetery and the slave woman and her daughter were at last truly 'released from the shade to the sun'.

Elephantine may have been a soldier town, but its women were far more powerful presences, both legally and socially, than their counterparts back in Jerusalem and Judaea. 'Lady' Mibtahiah, daughter of Mahseiah bar Jezaniah, hailed from the opposite end of the social scale from Tamet.[9] Mibtahiah's family was among the leaders of the community, the notables of the Temple. This did not, however, preclude her from taking two of her three husbands from the local Egyptian population, both of them master builders. One, Eshor (renamed Nathan), was described as 'builder to the king'. Over the course of her long life Mibtahiah – as confident and glamorous as Tamet had been modest and unassuming – would end up with three houses as well as three spouses, beginning by joining herself to a neighbour, Jezaniah. Her bridal gifts were lavish – as well as jewellery and chests, a papyrus reed bed. But she also came to the marriage as a householder, the gift of her well-to-do father, who gave her the property in her own right. 'To whomever you love, you may give it, and so may your children after you,' as the deed of transfer put it. Her husband, on the other hand, in case he didn't know his place, just had the *use* of the house for as long as their marriage lasted. Which turned out to be not that long, due to Jedaniah's early death.

Husband number two, an Egyptian called Peu, wouldn't do, and the documents dealing with the divorce settlement make it clear that in Jewish Egypt, unlike anything sanctioned by the Torah (then and now), women were entitled to initiate the separation. Deuteronomy 24:1–4 gave husbands a unilateral right of divorce by mere delivery of a statement that they had 'found some uncleanness'. Should a man decide he 'hated' his wife, the same bill of divorce would end the marriage and 'send her out of the house'. But that was not how it was done at Elephantine, certainly not for Lady Mibtahiah anyway, whose substantial dowry had to be returned. She and Peu went to court over division of goods, but it was Mibtahiah who won the case – after taking an oath on the name of the local Egyptian goddess Sati, something that would have appalled the guardians of the Torah in Jerusalem but was a matter of form for the Jews of the Nile.

So, in this first Jewish society we know anything much about, the families of the troop could be Jews after their own style – open to

the practices of Egyptians without surrendering their own beliefs, much less their names or identity. Hananiah's mission to impose conformity – since he couldn't or wouldn't exhort them to depart Egypt altogether as the prophets wanted – ran up against generations of practices documented by the Elephantine papyri that resisted such instruction. After all, theirs was a community that had been shaped before Torah law had hardened; and there was sufficient distance to allow for its own customs and laws to become a shared inheritance.

In other words, notwithstanding the fact that a garrison town on the Nile frontier of Upper Egypt doesn't sound like an exemplary case for the subsequent unfolding of Jewish history, it actually was. Like so many other Jewish societies, planted among the Gentiles, the Jewishness of Elephantine was worldly, cosmopolitan, vernacular (Aramaic) not Hebrew, obsessed with law and property, money-minded, fashion-conscious, much concerned with the making and breaking of marriages, providing for the children, the niceties of the social pecking order and both the delights and the burdens of the Jewish ritual calendar. And it doesn't seem to have been especially bookish. The only literature found in the archive was the 'Book of Wisdom', the Words of Ahiqar. And at the core of their community, rising monumentally above the crowded streets they shared with Aramean, Caspian and Egyptian neighbours, was their temple, a little ostentatiously done up, but very much their own.

It is the suburban ordinariness of all this that seems, for a moment, absolutely wonderful, a somewhat Jewish history with no martyrs, no sages, no philosophical torment, the grumpy Almighty not much in evidence; a place of happy banality; much stuck into property disputes, dressing up, weddings and festivals; tough army boys living next door to the even tougher *goyishe* boatmen of the rough waters; a place of unguents and alleys, throwing stones in the river and lingering under the palms; a time and a world altogether innocent of the romance of suffering. But, wouldn't you know it, trouble came, all the same.

Like so many similar Jewish communities that would take root outside Palestine in the centuries and millennia that followed, the Elephantines were perhaps a little complacent in their easy-going assumption that relations between themselves and their neighbours were as good as if not better than could be expected and would stay undisturbed, as long as the benign Persian power was there to

safeguard against ugly local jealousies. But that was precisely the problem. When imperial powers fray at the edges, ethnic groups perceived to be the beneficiaries of their trust suddenly start to look like aliens not natives, however long they may have been settled. This was exactly what happened at the end of the fifth century BCE, when Egypt, which had gone into outright rebellion in 486 and 464–454 BCE, and towards the end of the century, began once more to be aggressively restive against their overstretched Persian overlords. Suddenly (as would happen again 2,500 years later in twentieth-century Egypt) the Elephantine Jews were stigmatised as colonists, tools of the Persian occupiers, their social practices an anomaly, their religion a desecrating intrusion. If Persian toleration had allowed them to flourish as their imperial stooges, the mark of native Egyptian rebellion would be to stigmatise them as occupiers, marginalise and intimidate them, to unpick and tear them out of the body of local culture.

The papyri report riots and looting – ancient forms of proto-pogrom. Six women who had been waiting for their husbands at the gate of Thebes – all of them married to Jews but some of them, as was often the case in Elephantine, with Egyptian names like Isireshwet – were arrested without explanation. Mauziah wrote to Jedaniah that he had been framed for fencing a stolen jewel that had been found in the hands of merchants and thrown into prison, until a commotion at the injustice became so serious he was finally released. But his tone is edgy and nervous. Frantic with gratitude for the help he has had in getting out of jail, he tells Jedaniah to look after his saviours – 'Give them whatever they desire!'

In the last decade of the fifth century BCE, things that had seemed secure suddenly turned shaky. The Yahudim of Egypt pointed fingers at interfering outsiders from Judaea who didn't understand their way of life. Mauziah blamed the presence of Hananiah, the Passover envoy from Jerusalem, for provoking the priests of Khnum to become aggressive, even against the Jewish garrison itself. The well used to supply drinking water when the troop was mobilised and called to the fort was stopped up. A wall dividing the garrison compound abruptly and mysteriously appeared. But these were merely provocations. True calamity followed.

Three years after the disaster, Jedaniah, the communal leader, together with 'the priests who are in Elephantine' reported to the

Persian governor of Judaea, Bagavahya, the sad history of the destruction of the Temple of YHWH in the year 410 BCE. The tone is exactly that of scripture: a chronicle steeped in anger and lament. The community was still in shock, still wearing sackcloth in mourning. 'We fast, our wives are made as widows. [That is, they have forsworn conjugal sex.] We neither anoint ourselves with oil nor do we drink wine.'

The trouble which brought down the Temple of Yahu was perhaps unavoidable. It specialised, after all, in sacrificing animals, most of which were undoubtedly sheep, exactly the creatures venerated by their next-door neighbours at the Temple of Khnum; handsome rams' head profiles carved on its gates. It was not as if the Jewish rites were easily ignored. There would have been constant activity from within the walls of its compound: smoke, blood, chants. And as if angrily elbowing their irreverent neighbours, the priests of Khnum were expanding their own premises, pressing against the narrow boundary separating the two ritual houses. Indeed in places they seem to have shared abutting walls. At some point, the priests of Khnum mobilised resentment against the Jewish troop as the hirelings of the Persians to be rid of their temple if not of their soldiers and families. They persuaded the commandant of the island, 'the wicked Vidranga' (as the Jewish petition of complaint and lament called him) to act. A letter had been sent to Vidranga's son Naphaina, the commanding officer of the Egyptian-Aramean garrison at Syene, encouraging the soldiers there to attack and demolish the Temple of YHWH.

'They forced their way into the temple, razed it to the ground, smashing the stone pillars . . . the five gateways of hewn stone were wrecked; everything else burned: the doors and their bronze hinges, the cedar roof. The gold and silver basins and anything else they could find they looted for themselves.'

With an eye to Persian susceptibilities, Jedaniah spoke feelingly of the antiquity of the Temple, built in the days of the Egyptian kings and respected by King Cambyses when he conquered the country. He reminded the Persian governor that he had already sent one letter to Jerusalem, addressed to the Lord Bagavahya, to the high priest Jehohanan and to 'the nobles of Judah' in the city, but they had not deigned to reply! (Could it be that the Jerusalemites, increasingly insistent on their monopoly of temple worship, were not altogether unhappy about the destruction of the unauthorised unorthodox

Elephantine building?) Neither had the elders at Elephantine received any satisfaction from a letter sent to the sons of the governor of Samaria, Sanballat.

The prayers had not gone entirely unanswered. The guilty, from 'Vidranga the dog' down, had indeed been punished, Vidranga's loot taken from him, 'and all those who did evil to the Temple killed and we gazed upon them'. But now the only true satisfaction was not revenge but the restoration of the Temple of YHWH the God. Should it be granted then 'the meal offering, the incense and the burnt sacrifice will be offered on the altar of YHWH the God in your name and we shall pray for you at all times; us, our wives and our children'.

Eventually there came a reply. Permission granted, more or less. The authorisation was for the Temple to be rebuilt 'as it was formerly and on its site'. Pointedly, the permission was on the strict condition that henceforth offerings were to be only of grain and incense, not animal sacrifices. Someone in Jerusalem had got to the governor; or perhaps the Elephantine Jews wanted to reconcile the Jerusalemites to their cause. At any rate, they accepted the principle that burnt offerings were to be made only within the sacred precincts of the Jerusalem Temple. Accepting their secondary status, perhaps relieved that they were allowed to build a temple at all, which was still in violation of the monopoly of worship, a final letter from 'The Board' – Mauzi, Shemaiah, two Hoseas and Jedaniah himself – solemnly promised that sacrifices of 'sheep and ox and goat' would no longer be made. Just to make sure, they offered a sweetener of silver and shipments of barley.

The Second Temple of Elephantine was indeed rebuilt, but it lasted only as long as Persian power over Egypt. It was shaken to the core by another all-out Egyptian revolt in 400 BCE, and had collapsed completely by the middle of the fourth century BCE before the oncoming power of Alexander the Great and his generals. With the demolition of Persian Egypt went the Jewish troop and its world of soldiers, slave girls, oils and incense, property disputes and marriage alliances; vendors, Temple notables and bargemen all disappeared back into documentary darkness, beneath the stones of the island in the Nile.

Outside of a circle of scholars, this first, rich, Jewish story has had virtually no purchase on the common memory of Jewish tradition.

Perhaps this is not surprising. For if that story is set up from the very beginning as one of clear-cut separation, then the mishmash Jewish–Egyptian–Persian–Aramean world of Elephantine is bound to seem an anomaly, a marginal curiosity, nothing to do with the creation of a pure and distinctive Jewish culture. Around the time of Elephantine's flourishing, it is thought, two formative books of the Hebrew scripture – Ezra and Nehemiah – were being written in Jerusalem with the express aim of purging Jewish society of 'foreign' elements: a winnowing out of foreign women, foreign cults, foreign habits – even when they had long been mixed into the daily life of Judaean society. The writers of those books and their successors may have looked back at the Egyptian episode – its heretically unauthorised temple; the audacity with which it presumed to offer sacrifices; perhaps to call itself a society of Yahudim at all – with horror, and told themselves that the fate which eventually overtook it was YHWH's will, another punishment for those who strayed from the narrow path.

But suppose there is another Jewish story altogether, one in which the line between the alien and the pure is much less hard and fast; in which being Jewish did not carry with it the requirement of shutting out neighbouring cultures but, to some degree at least, living in their company; where it was possible to be Jewish and Egyptian, just as later it would be possible to be Jewish and Dutch or Jewish and American, *possible* (not necessarily easy or simple) to live the one life in balance with the other, to be none the less Jewish for being the more Egyptian, Dutch, British, American.

This second kind of story is not meant to displace the first. The two ways – exclusive and inclusive, Jerusalem and Elephantine – have coexisted as long as there have been Jews at all. If both are legitimate ways of thinking about Jewish history, of telling its story, Elephantine could be seen not as an anomaly but as a forerunner. And, of course, it was not the end of a truly Jewish history in Egypt, but just another beginning.

2

THE WORDS

Nehemiah, so his book says, rides by moonlight.[1] He can't sleep. The broken walls of Jerusalem, to which he has returned, make a desolation in his heart.

It is 445 BCE, nearly a century and a half since the Nebuchadnezzar catastrophe and the captivity of the Israelites in Babylonia. Although the Babylonians have long gone from Jerusalem, their soot is rubbed into the city's honey-coloured limestone. Beyond the walls, the Persian province of Yahud is still barely peopled; village after village has been abandoned or reduced to primitive subsistence.[2] The city is filthy, poor, twenty times less populous than in the last years of the Judaean kings, its remaining inhabitants withdrawn into huddled dwellings beside the half-demolished walls.

Decades have passed since the Persian king Cyrus, in keeping with the Persian policy of returning deportees and restoring local cults (hoping to bind their allegiance with that favour), authorised the Israelite return to Yahud in a decree 'in the first year of his reign', according to the Book of Ezra.[3] The princeling Zerubbabel, with a claim to kinship with the ancient Davidian line of royalty, had been appointed to lead a few thousand back to Jerusalem, together with Yeshua the high priest. A start had been made on a second temple at the razed site of Solomon's House of YHWH. 'When the builders set the foundation . . . they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets and the Levites . . . with cymbals and they sang together . . . and all the people shouted with a great shout.'[4] After it had been completed in 515 BCE, it was seen to be a modest rebuild, but enough for there to be the sprinkling of blood and the roasted sacrifices that the Holiness Code of Leviticus required, enough to command the reverence of pilgrims on days of harvest festivals.

The Cyrus decree remained a precious authorisation, so much so that the Book of Ezra goes to the length of dramatising an archival search for the text, as a response to malicious objectors, generations later in the reign of Darius.[5] Sure enough a copy is found in Babylon specifying the size and height of the rebuilt Temple, that its costs were to be paid for from the royal treasury, and the gold and silver vessels plundered by Nebuchadnezzar returned. Even more gratifyingly, the decree threatens anyone attempting to alter it by so much as a word with having the timber pulled down from their house, with hanging from a gallows erected on the debris, and that house 'be made a dunghill'. As fragments of the Cyrus Cylinder text have been identified on a different cuneiform tablet (found on a dig in 1881), it is entirely possible that Ezra and his contemporaries were in possession of a copy that gave them the details of the authorising decree.[6]

The children and grandchildren of those who had come back would have needed to hang on to the promise and reassurance of the Cyrus decree, since they still lived every day amid the weedy rubble of destruction. And there were so pitifully few of them, probably no more than two thousand souls. Nehemiah wells with sorrow as he rides beside the low ruins. Behind him, at a shadowy, baffled distance, trot the few chosen men he had roused from their beds. The rest of Jerusalem, such as it is – the priests, the scribes, the local notables, Edomites and the like, who lord it over the tattered Jews, puffed up with the aggravated authority they imagine they hold from the Persian court – snores on oblivious. Nehemiah is cup-bearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes in the palace at Susa, his trusted man and deputed governor. The descendants of the Judaean king Jehoiachin, who was deposed and carried away by the Babylonians, still like to give themselves the airs of the House of David, but the truth is that there is no king in Judaea, and this exiled puppet court depends on Babylonian bureaucrats for its rations of oil.[7] So Nehemiah is the next best thing – the man who holds decrees with the names of Persian emperors inked on them.

He sits upright in his saddle as the horse picks a careful way through the shattered stones. Through the Dung Gate goes Nehemiah, the stars over his head, the Judaean summer night pleasingly cool; past the deep well where the people say a dragon lies, allowing its waters to flow only when he sleeps with his wings furled, the claws retracted beneath his scaly body; on past the Water Gate, on to Siloam and the brook

of Kidron, skirting the heaps of trash and the meandering line of ruin, on until his horse has no more room amid the rubble to trot or even to walk. Nehemiah guides the animal through the waste, and back into the alleys of the city. He can rest now. He knows what must happen.

In Elephantine at this time the Judaeans live as well as could be expected amid the Egyptians. Their neighbours are still Arameans, Carians, Caspians and Greeks. They have their own temple, their own way. Nehemiah understands this very well, but it is not his way and, so he tells us in his 'memoir' (one of the most powerful of the Bible), neither does he believe it is YHWH's way.

The next day Nehemiah calls a meeting of the priests, chief men and scribes. 'You see the distress we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, its gates burnt with fire; come, let us build up the wall that we be no more a reproach.' Heartened, they follow the lead of the man who seemed to speak with the authority of the king. 'Let us rise up and build.' When local officials – Sanballat the Horonite and Geshem the Arabian – jeer at the temerity, Nehemiah stiffens. 'The God of heaven will prosper us; but you have no portion or right nor memorial in Jerusalem.'

The Book of Nehemiah, short but exceptionally vivid, is called a 'memoir' even by the most sober scholars. Unlike other books of the Hebrew Bible (although like the Book of Ezra, with which it is always paired even to the point of reading them as a single narrative), it was almost certainly written close to the time of the events it describes.[8] The long quotations from Persian royal decrees and charters invoked in Ezra correspond persuasively to Persian court-legal style of exactly the mid-fifth century BCE. They are, in effect, direct quotations. The overwhelming impression is of documentary immediacy, a book that in its material load of iron, stone and timber, seems physically of its moment.

That mid-fifth century BCE moment is weighty with formative significance. Something is being built, and it is not just masonry – although it is in Nehemiah that actual building happens: timber beams are aligned; stone slabs cleaned; rubbish carted away; studded gates are set again on massive, dependable hinges; the locksmiths busied. Nehemiah studiously lists the work gangs and their bosses and the local big shots of each quarter of the broken city: 'the dung gate repaired Malchiah the son of Rechab, the ruler of part of Beth-haccerem, he built it, and

set up the doors thereof, the locks thereof and the bars thereof. But the gate of the fountain repaired Shallun the son of Col-hozeh, the ruler of part of Mizpah; he built it, and covered it . . . After them the Tekoites repaired another piece, over against the great tower that lieth out, even unto the wall of Ophel.' It is as if we are riding with Nehemiah on a tour of inspection: the non-stop hammering, the governor making sure his scribe takes careful notes so that no one responsible for construction or beautification would be forgotten, like modern donors who expect to have their names inscribed on grateful walls.

The work proceeds apace over local opposition, which becomes so incensed that the gangs have to work with weapons by their side in case of attack. Nehemiah must arm the labourers who work with a trowel in one hand, a sword in the other or propped against the stone. He has to see that farmers and traders do not exploit the sudden need for provisions by charging outrageously for food; or worse, that the local Jewish elite doesn't extort money from those who had mortgaged olive groves and pasture to join the effort. The repair of the walls is done in fifty-two days.

Walls separate; they may enclose and exclude. Even though Nehemiah's message to Sanballat the Horonite and Geshem the Arabian was hostile – that they had no 'portion' or 'memorial' in Jerusalem – we must not make him a security-fencer of the fifth century BCE, although his walls were certainly meant to give the smashed and exposed city ruin some shape and definition (as they still do), and a sense of shared community to the people inside them, as well as those camped beyond and in the Judaean hills, groves and valleys of the country. That sense, however, could not be conveyed merely by stone, timber, brick, iron and mortar. Ultimately the house of common fate was – as it would be for millennia – built from words. So a month after the completion of the repairs to the walls, a second ceremonious action was called for.

According to Nehemiah's fantastic enumeration, on the first day of Tishri exactly 42,360 of the Jews of Jerusalem, their manservants and maidservants (another 7,337), and certainly the 245 singing men and women (for there was and is no Israelite religion without music) were summoned to the open street before the restored Water Gate. Although the numbers are an absurd exaggeration (probably fewer than 40,000 Jews were then living in the entirety of Judaea and Samaria), there was some sort of crowd.

At the centre of what was orchestrated as a second moment of self-definition is Ezra, who, unusually, is both priest and scribe. This double vocation mattered, for it was scribal writing that was about to be sanctified. Ezra brings with him 'the book of the Law of Moses which the Lord had commanded to Israel'. The congregation (which Nehemiah makes a point of saying consisted of women as well as men, and, like all the earliest sources, with no hint of separation) knew that a solemn moment was at hand. Ezra stood on an elevated wooden platform, designed for the occasion perhaps, on the rebuilt ramparts. To his right and left were a throng of priests and Levite scribes surveying the crowd which waited in silent expectation. When Ezra opened the scroll, everyone stood. Before proceeding to the reading, 'Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God and all the people answered Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands and bowing their heads.' Then the scribe began. For those out of hearing range there were Levite repeaters at hand, their names carefully listed by Nehemiah as if they were themselves involved in the production of the words, which in fact they were. Since the first language of many of their listeners would have been Aramaic not Hebrew, the Levites were needed to 'cause the people to understand' – a matter of both translation and explanation.

If the reading was not exactly call and response, it was nonetheless intensely participatory. The audience was not a passive receiving station for the words of God. Nehemiah (admittedly the official impresario) says it was the people *themselves*, 'gathered as one man', who took the initiative, asking Ezra to bring the scroll of Moses. This active connection between listener and reader was something new in the world of the ancient Near East, where people were more usually summoned to be stupefied by the power and sacred grandeur of the words of the king, required to attend to his acts of judgement, and venerate his cult image carried in procession. But the processions of Judaism have at their devotional centre a scroll of words (treated with all the bowing and worshipful kissing through the fringes of a prayer shawl that would have been given to a cultic statue). Moreover, this was a kingless moment, and the urgency of the listeners and the high pitch of the declamation fastened together a unified community of the attentive. In all the scholarly concerns with flattening the differences between Israelite religion and the conventions, practices and images

of its neigbours, it is easy to miss how momentous was this distinctively Judaic foregrounding of 'the people' in bonded, direct covenant with their single God, whose presence was embodied in sacred words. Whether errant or obedient, penitent or heedless, they are actors in their own history, not just a faceless chorus summoned or dismissed by priests, princes and scribes. From the start, Judaism – uniquely at the time – was conceived as a people's religion.

The public reading before the Water Gate rehearsed ancient customs of oral recitation. The Hebrew for reading presupposes vocalisation before an audience: the word *qra* means literally 'to cry out', and *miqra* derived from it is the noun form of a gathering of listeners and readers.[9] That same reading obligation would become *the* characteristic practice of Jewish observance outside the Temple, where the spectacle of sacrifice defined membership of the believing community. While Temple sacrifice was a hierarchically organised business in the hands of the priestly caste, reading was intrinsically a shared, common experience, the impact of its vocalisation not even dependent on literacy. What was said was now becoming a written literature, but it is telling that the written form paradoxically exalted a long and cherished history of moments of dictation, all the way back to Moses himself taking dictation directly from the Almighty. Deuteronomy had imagined Moses being ordered to 'read the Torah in the presence of all Israel, in their ears. Gather together the People, men, women and children and the strangers in your gates, that they may hear, learn.'[10] Ezra's elevation above the rapt multitude is not just a reiteration of that first Mosaic transcription but a self-conscious re-enactment of it. Nehemiah writes about it as though it was to reacquaint people who had lost those words with their substance: the Law and the history revealed as if freshly given, brought to life by the spark of public voice. The scroll itself must have been significant too: the compact roll of portable memory, something that had a chance of being carried through the fires of disaster.

Nehemiah, the orchestrator of the spectacle, knew what he was doing. Though Mesopotamian law codes were of immense significance in establishing the king as sovereign adjudicator, Babylonian and Persian court rituals, often enacted before monumental statuary, were principally designed to astonish the eye. The performance assigned to Ezra was all about mouth and ear, about the living force of words. It

established, very early on, the Jewish philosophy of reading as unquiet. Jewish reading in the style of the Hebrew Bible, at the dawn of this people's self-consciousness, is not done in silent solitude (the invention of monastic Christianity); nor is it done for the enrichment of the reflective conscience (though that is not entirely ruled out). Jewish reading is literally loud-mouthed: social, chatty, animated, declamatory, a demonstrative public performance meant to turn the reader from absorption to action; a reading that has necessary, immediate, human implications; reading that begs for argument, commentary, questioning, interruption and interpretation; reading that never, ever shuts up. Jewish reading refuses to close the book on anything.

Ezra's performance takes on the austerity of a legal code – the Torah – into the realm of collective public theatre: a holy show. It is the climax of a three-act drama of reconsecration and reawakening: first the repair of Jerusalem's walls; then the building of a second Temple in situ, and finally the public manifestation of the law of Moses without which the other two acts would have had no meaning. None of these deeds were merely ceremonial. Together they meant to assert an unapologetic Jewish singularity: the Yahwist difference. The rebuilt walls were an architectural declaration that Jerusalem was the citadel of David, that the core of the Yahwist royal cult had risen again even though there was no longer any king in Judaea. The rebuilt House of YHWH would stand as the only true Temple of the Jews, the arbiter of what was and what was not proper observance, and the authorised Law of the Land as, in effect, the Jewish constitution. The words of the Torah, giving people the governing content of their singularity, did not need a king, much less a god-king, for their authority. Behind them stood the belief in an invisible YHWH, whom Talmudists much later would even depict as consulting a pre-existent Torah, before proceeding to create the universe![11]

As long ago as the seventeenth century, Baruch Spinoza, inaugurating biblical criticism by insisting that the Pentateuch was a historical document written by human authors many generations after the events described, identified Ezra as the most likely candidate for prime authorship.[12]

All this was needed because Ezra and Nehemiah were acutely conscious of the difficulties they faced in redefining who was and who was not a true member of this community of YHWH. Both scribe and governor

belonged to the elite uprooted by Nebuchadnezzar, along with the royal clan, its judges and magistrates, perhaps most of the literate class, and taken to Babylon in 597 BCE. Perhaps some of the rest of the Judahite population (their ranks swollen by the descendants of the thousands of Israelites from the north who had come to Jerusalem after the Assyrian destruction of their kingdom in 721 BCE) followed in the train of the elite class. There were, after all, no less than three mass deportations – in 597 BCE, in 587 BCE and then again in 582 BCE. The archaeological record shows an indisputably brutal shrinkage in the number of villages in the Judaean highlands in the sixth century BCE. Vineyards, olive groves and pasture went to waste. Soldiers were left to fend for themselves as the foothill fortresses of Judaea fell one by one and travelled, as the Book of Jeremiah suggests, to Egypt, to the Nile cities and to Pathros, the south country of the first cataract.

Though the population collapse was extreme, Judaea and Samaria were not entirely emptied. Some thousands must have clung to their terraces and ancient villages in the hope of subsisting after the flares of war had turned to cold ash. In the traumatic circumstances of the Babylonian onslaught, there is every reason to suppose that those who did stay behind clung for comfort and hope not just to YHWH, but to the household and local gods and cults of their own ancient traditions. Cultic pillars, amulets, even inscribed references to gods other than YHWH – not least his female consort Asherah – have survived from an earlier generation, even at the time when the scribally written books were doing all they could to promote uncompromising monotheism. In Samaria in particular – where some of those most badly affected by the Babylonian fire invasion must have fled – the survivors would have been open to gods other than the one who had manifestly failed them against Nebuchadnezzar.

The targets of Ezra's and Nehemiah's public proclamations of Torah Rule were precisely local survivors suspected of acquiring 'foreign' cult practices along with 'foreign' wives. The truth was that it was the fierce 'Yahweh Alone' book-fixed monotheism that was the novelty, not the ancestral habits of keeping a little, full-breasted hearth goddess figurine at home or in larger houses even a small uninscribed standing stone. But the Ezra–Nehemiah exclusivism now held co-religionists to a higher stricter standard, and they presented their version of YHWH worship as having *always* been that demanding, even though

this was historically not the case. For the first time (but not the last), the 'who is a Jew' debate was sounded, with Ezra launching a comprehensive and merciless winnowing out of those considered to have been contaminated by 'foreign' cults. This happened at *precisely* the time – the mid-fifth century BCE – when the Yahudim of Elephantine, innocent of the new Judaean puritanism, were marrying Egyptians and cheerfully invoking in their solemn vows the pagan gods of their Aramean neighbours, sometimes in the same breath by which they also swore by YHWH. The argument between a narrow and a broad view of what it means to be Jewish had got under way.

Ezra was hardline, fasting out of mortification that 'the children of the captivity' had taken 'strange wives', thus compounding 'the trespass of Israel'. In keeping with his assumption that those who had intermarried needed to be shamed from their sin, the final twenty-five long verses of the Book of Ezra consist of nothing except a list of the ignominious, including many priests and Levites. (Needless to say we do not hear the names of their unfortunate wives.) The culprits 'gave their hands that they would put away their wives and being guilty offered a ram of the flock for their trespass'. In reality there would have been many thousands. Ezra's motivation was precisely to weed out heterodoxy, to make Jerusalem the sole Temple for pilgrim festivals and sacrifices, and to place in the hands of the Temple priests the judgement over those who could, and those who could not, be admitted to this reborn, re-covenanted nation.

The scroll-book itself was supreme as the object of orthodox allegiance, exalted by Ezra as both law and history. It was the instituted cult of the Book and the obligation of shared reading out loud which, more than the worship of a single god, made this Israelite Yahwist religion unique in its time and place. The eighteenth-dynasty pharaoh Akhenaten in Egypt had also proclaimed the exclusive cult of a single sun god and effaced all images of him save the sun-disc. Egyptian, Babylonian and Zoroastrian cults were embodied in statuary and relief sculpture, both in fixed specific shrines and temples, and the great epic inscriptions that proclaimed the divine judgements and wisdoms of the king were likewise inscribed – in cuneiform – on immovable, monumental stone. When Assyrian and Babylonian armies went into battle they did so with just the images of gods and deified kings to fortify them. Israelites, on the other hand, were commanded to take with them their sacred scrolls.[13]

The genius of the Israelite–Judahite priestly and scribal class (together with their free outriders, the itinerant visionary prophets and their patron kings, with whom they were often at odds) was to sacralise movable writing, in standardised alphabetic Hebrew, as the exclusive carrier of YHWH's law and historic vision for his people.[14] Thus encoded and set down, the spoken (and memorised) scroll could and would outlive the monuments and military force of empires. It was fashioned to be the common possession of elite and ordinary people, and for the vicissitudes of political and territorial impermanence. The desert tabernacle sanctuary that was said originally to house the Torah, and thus be the residence of YHWH amid His people, was nothing more than a modest-sized if somewhat ornamented tent; and within it the specifications of the chest of the Ark make it smaller than your kitchen cabinets. But it was the obsession of the makers of Israelite book-religion to make the Torah ubiquitous, *inescapable*, not just established at some sacred site, but available in miniaturised forms on property and person. Instead of an image of a divine creature or person hung over a doorpost to repel demons, it was the Torah writing of the *mezuzah* that would keep Jews safe. Phylactery boxes, the *tefillin*, were made so that its words would even be bound on the head and arms of the observant as they prayed. Protective amulets worn around the neck or on the chest for luck and health, which in other cults would have had the image of a god, now likewise bore the words of the Torah. No part of life, no dwelling or body, was to be free of the scroll-book.

The Torah, then, was compact, transferable history, law, wisdom, poetic chant, prophecy, consolation and self-strengthening counsel. Just as the sanctuary could be erected in safety and dismantled in crisis, the speaking scroll was designed to survive even incineration, because the scribes who had composed and edited it had memorised its oral traditions and its texts as part of their basic education. Some debate surrounds the exact nature of the role of *mazkr*, inappropriately translated in the King James Version as 'herald'. But the Israelites had no heralds. The root of the word is *zkr*, or in rabbinic Hebrew *zakhor*, memory, so such a person, lay or priestly, would have been a memorialist, a recorder. With writing and human memory in sync, the people of YHWH could be broken and slaughtered but their book would be indefatigable.

So we should not wonder that the Book itself, as physical object, features in some of the most powerful scenes in the Hebrew Bible. It was not, of course, our kind of modern book, with serially consecutive pages, a story-casing which, in its early form of a codex of gathered and folded sheets, would appear only with the Romans. The scroll-book appears in the Hebrew Bible in potent, magical forms. The fantastical priest-prophet Ezekiel (probably writing in exile, so clinging to the scroll with particular intensity) has a vision of a hand holding a scroll, full of warnings and lamentations, but he is ordered by one of the four-faced, four-winged Living Creatures who feature in the dream not to read it but to eat it – in fact chomp, and swallow it right down. 'Son of man cause thy belly to eat and fill thy bowels with this roll that I give thee. Then did I eat it and it was in my mouth as honey for sweetness.' Only after the Bible-muncher had physically crammed his mouth with the contents of the book, and literally digested its contents, could that same mouth become the organ of prophetic eloquence.

This is heady stuff, but the same scroll-book makes an even more dramatic appearance in the reign of the boy king, Josiah. His story is narrated twice in the Hebrew Bible, first in Kings 2:22–3, and then in more elaborate form by the author of Chronicles 2:34–5. Both versions were composed at moments of prolonged crisis. The original account in Kings was most likely penned in the late eighth or early seventh century BCE with the memory of the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 721 BCE still sharp. The much later rewrite in Chronicles would have been composed in the mid-fifth century BCE, contemporary with Ezra and Nehemiah, so that it is a self-conscious prologue to the performance-reading of the Torah at the Water Gate.

The Josiah story is a fable of recovered innocence. Josiah becomes king at the age of eight following a nadir in Judahite history: the long reign of his grandfather Manasseh, who according to the Bible writers was unparalleled in his eagerness to profane the Temple with pagan 'abominations', and his father, Amon, named for the sun-worship of Egypt, which says it all. Generations alternated between piety and impiety. Manasseh's father before him, King Hezekiah, had been a purist reformer, co-opted retrospectively by the writers of Kings as a smasher of idols, heeding the warnings of Isaiah, the patron of scribes

who were writing the books of what would become the Bible. Subsequent annalists – and the scribal vocation ran in families – attributed Jerusalem's narrow escape from the Assyrian invaders (who succumbed to epidemic sickness) to Hezekiah's Yahwist zeal.

Manasseh chooses the opposite path. Living dangerously between Egypt and Assyria, he had been not only indifferent to Yahwist purism, but, according to the distaste of priestly scribes, an enthusiastic polytheist, raising up altars to the Phoenician god Baal, building altars for 'all the host of heaven' (astral deities), making a pagan grove, 'using enchantments', 'familiar spirits and wizards' and most infamously of all resorting to child sacrifices including his own son who, according to the horrified Bible writers, is made to 'pass through the fire' to Moloch. The response to this catalogue of iniquity (much of it, of course, the repertoire of popular religion throughout Palestine) is YHWH's vow to 'wipe Jerusalem as a man wipeth a dish'.

Heavenly washing-up is put on hold for a bit. 2 Kings was almost certainly written (or rewritten) by the 'Deuteronomist' historians, the sixth- and fifth-centuries BCE generation of priests and scribes aggressively committed not just to YHWH as a supreme deity, but to His exclusive identity as the *only* God. The Book of Deuteronomy had been added to the first four books of the Torah as the spoken valedictory counsel of the dying Moses himself, reiterating (and editing) the details of the Sinai-given law (including the Ten Commandments), offering foreign-policy advice to the tribes ('meddle not with Edom, Distress not Moab'), formalising blessings and curses – a common Near Eastern tradition ('cursed be he that lieth with his mother-in-law'), and solemnising a renewed covenant but also with the express commandment to remember and repeat (out loud) the exodus story. Running throughout both Deuteronomy, and the later Book of Kings, is a red ribbon of mistrust – both in the capacity of the people to keep to the Mosaic straight and narrow, and, as in the case of Manasseh's exotic crimes and transgressions, in the willingness of the monarchs of the House of David to enforce righteousness. At issue is whether Hezekiah or Manasseh represents the norm for Judaean kings of the line of David. The story of Josiah gives a decisive answer.

The drama unfolds while Josiah is still young, succeeding to the throne after the murder of his father, the iniquitous Amon. The Book of Kings has the decisive event for Josiah happen in his eighteenth

year; the Chronicler, anticipating the possibility of questions arising from a ten-year gap between accession and vocational self-discovery, advances the epiphany to twelve. But the heart of the story is the same. The Temple is in a shocking state of disrepair and pollution, neglected and desecrated by Manasseh. Repudiating the 'abominations' of his errant grandfather for the strictures of the Heavenly Father, the boy king orders taxes in silver to be collected from the people of Judah to restore the purity and beauty of the Temple. (And to be sure there are surviving pottery shards commanding such payments.) The work of restoration duly commences with 'carpenters and masons and builders' under the supervision of the high priest, Hilkiah, the personification of Yahwist orthodoxy.

While the building works are proceeding, lo and behold, Hilkiah happens to stumble across a lost 'Book of the Lord' half buried in the construction debris. He gives it to the scribe-counsellor Shaphan, who wastes no time in reading it aloud to the young king. Josiah is thunderstruck by what he hears and is also filled with some foreboding, not least because the book is (surprise!) Deuteronomy, with that exhaustive list of curses. For failure to obey the Mosaic commandments, 'Cursed shalt thou be in the city, and cursed shalt thou be in the field. Cursed shall be thy basket and thy store . . . The Lord will smite thee with the botch of Egypt, and with the emerods, and with the scab, and with the itch, whereof thou canst not be healed.' No wonder then that Josiah felt 'Great is the wrath of the Lord that is poured out upon us, because our fathers have not kept the word of the LORD, to do all that is written in the book'.

The king does not leave it at that. In an anticipation of Ezra's staged reading in front of the gated walls of Jerusalem, Josiah assembles priests, Levites, 'and all the people great and small' and reads 'in their ears all the words of the book of the covenant found in the House of the Lord'. He 'stands in his place' and makes before the entire assembly a public profession of penitently renewed covenant. Then, around the year 620 BCE, he sets about a thorough cleansing operation, starting with the Temple where he executes the Passover to end all Passovers. Thirty thousand lambs and kids, exactly 2,006 'small cattle' and three hundred oxen are rounded up, so everyone can keep the Passover properly. Sacrificial slaughter proceeds round the clock; much blood sprinkling; and then roasted meat divided up for the people.

'In all the days of the Kingdom,' the Chronicler exclaims, a little redundantly, 'there was no Passover like that kept by Josiah.' And with the Temple redeemed from the profanities of Manasseh, the king (or his priests and counsellors) rules it to be the only site for the ritual sacrifices and festival pilgrimages that made up the calendar of religious observance.

The Josiah story of the fortuitously rediscovered Book is the most artful of the Deuteronomist makeovers of Jewish/Israelite identity in the image of exclusive Yahwism. At the heart of their sacred fiction is the scribal denial of their own authorships of the Deuteronomist Bible. The literary pretence is that it has existed immemorially and independent, of course, of any human hand; even Moses is merely taking dictation. So the Words, the Writing and the Book have a life entirely separate from the kings who are their provisionally appointed guardians, but who for the most part prove themselves wayward and untrustworthy, easily corrupted by foreign practices and – as in the case of Solomon's thousand wives, among them the Egyptian princess – foreign women. (Women, trapped in the Jezebel paranoia of the Deuteronomist writers, are repeatedly cast as demons of temptation.) By repudiating his evil grandfather, the boyish Josiah manages to recover the legacy of David and Solomon (and overlook their own manifold transgressions) to restore the credentials of the House of David as fit custodians for the Book.

But it is the speaking Book itself which is the agent of the reformation, lying in wait for Hilkiah's 'discovery' and Josiah's true coming-of-age, a kind of royal bar mitzvah, as the conscious inheritor of Mosaic Law and the story of its revelation. It was Moses who was speaking again, directly through Josiah, just as God had spoken through Moses. So it is the glimmering mystique of that Lost Book, its words awaiting eyes to read them and mouths to speak them, left somewhere half buried amid the detritus of disbelief, awaiting resurrection, that is the core of the narrative. The economy of the mystery is the genius of the story. Its force lies not in triumphal statuary, mines of precious metals, or an innumerable army, but a mere scroll of words: which is why the Greek 'Deuteronomy' ('Second Law') is much better rendered from the Hebrew *dvarim*, meaning 'words'. From the beginning of the culture's own self-consciousness, to be Jewish was to be Bookish.

Notwithstanding YHWH's repeated promises to lay the mighty low at the feet of the covenanted, however, the Book never guaranteed invulnerability, not even to its rediscoverer, Josiah. The Book may have supplied great detail on which birds were permissibly edible and which not (no osprey, bearded vulture, kite or eagle; and forget about lapwing, bat or owl), but it was not much help in offering strategic guidance for the beleaguered kings of late-seventh-century BCE Judah. Having escaped the Assyrians, the cramped little hill-country realm was squeezed two generations later between two aggressive expansionist river powers of the Nile and the Euphrates. In Mesopotamia, the Babylonians had all but finished off Assyria and, recognising the threat, Pharaoh Necho II (who in all likelihood had his Jewish mercenaries stationed at Elephantine) decided in 609 BCE to come to the aid of the besieged Assyrians and confront Babylonia before it was too late to stop its armies establishing themselves as an unassailable hegemonic power. Forced to choose, Josiah bet on Babylonia, putting his own army, and himself, squarely in the way of the Egyptian advance north.

The Chronicler, writing after the disaster, dramatises the story by having Necho send ambassadors to Josiah imploring him to stand aside: 'I come not against thee but against the house wherewith I have war. Forbear thee from meddling with God that he destroy thee not.' But it may be that Josiah gave little credence to the word of God purporting to come from the mouth of a pharaoh, and gave battle to the Egyptians at Megiddo in the north of the country. An arrow from the Egyptian archers found its mark. Mortally wounded, Josiah was taken back to Jerusalem 'and he died and was buried in one of the sepulchres of his fathers. And all Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah.'

The Josian moment proved a false dawn for the alliance of holiness and power; rather it was a prelude to catastrophe. In the aftermath of Megiddo, Josiah's son Jehoiahaz, who was crowned in his father's place, was unceremoniously driven from his throne by Necho and taken as captive to Egypt, and his brother Jehoiakim was put in his place as a dependable Egyptian ally. Four years later, in 605 BCE, two devastating defeats for Necho's armies at the hands of the Babylonians, at Carchemish and Hamath, made Jehoiakim rethink the strategy of survival. Through the better part of a decade, he played both the bigger powers off against each other, but could never (perhaps

understandably) make up his mind, siding with whichever of the two seemed to have the military upper hand. When he died, either by the hand of an assassin or in defence of Jerusalem in the spring of 597 BCE, he was already paying the price for prematurely assuming the worst of the Babylonian threat was over.

After the final destruction, the Book of Jeremiah (whose author was in all likelihood Jeremiah's own secretary-scribe, Baruch) gives a tellingly scribal explanation for Jehoiakim's death: the stopping of his ears, his obstinate refusal to listen to the speaking Book. In one of Jeremiah's most vivid scenes, Chapter 36, the king who has been ignoring the prophet's warnings sits before the fire in his 'winter house', grudgingly allowing his counsellor Yehudi to read the latest gloomy pronouncements from the scroll: 'And it came to pass that when Yehudi had read three or four leaves, he [Jehoiakim] cut it with the penknife, and cast it into the fire that was on the hearth until all the roll was consumed in the fire.' Needless to say, Jeremiah is commanded by YHWH to have Baruch rewrite the burned scroll – with some additions – bringing more bad news that Jehoiakim's dead body would be cast out to rot in the heat of the day and freeze in the chill of the night. You can stop your ears, you can burn the Book, you can ignore it, you can pulp it. Its message will still ultimately get through, loud and clear.

Without a new Hezekiah or Josiah (kings who paid attention when the Book spoke), there would be no 'Assyrian miracle'. Jehoiakim's son, confusingly called Jehoiachin, lasted three months before being deposed by Nebuchadnezzar and carried off, with 'princes' and 'men of Judah', as prisoner to Babylon. In his place, the youngster's uncle, Zedekiah – the last son of Josiah and, as it turned out, the last king of Judah – was set on the throne.

It was not quite over. The kingdom had been turned into a puppet state of the Babylonians, but neither Zedekiah nor the people of Judah were reconciled to their subjugation, something that irked prophets like Jeremiah who preached that Babylon was carrying out the punishment of YHWH. Those prophets may have reviled Zedekiah, but their opinion was not necessarily shared. We have documented evidence that for almost ten years, Zedekiah and those in the hill country south and west of Jerusalem flirted with revolt, and gave the Babylonians continuous trouble. Towards the end of the decade, the fortresses with

which kings from David onwards had studded the hilltops, heavily provisioned from the abundant countryside of the Shephelah, held out even when, in 588 BCE, Jerusalem itself was encircled. The hope of the commanders of these strongholds must have been that if Zedekiah could hang on, and the Hezekian water supplies hold out, then the new pharaoh, Apries (with, perhaps, Jewish mercenaries from the Nile), might yet pull the iron from the fire. For once, the hope of Judah lay in Egypt.

But Apries was more interested in securing his southern frontier against Nubians and Ethiopians, and abandoned Palestine and Syria to the Babylonians. It was only a matter of time before the immense machine of Babylonian military force ploughed into what was left of the Judahite kingdom. And from exactly that period, 588–587 BCE – the very last years of Judaean independence – we hear from a Jew on the front line, in fragmentary letters written in Hebrew on clay, by an officer, Hoshayahu, in the great walled stronghhold of Lachish, commanding the road from Ashkelon on the coast to Hebron in the hills.

Hoshayahu – like everyone else in Judaea in the nervous summer of 587 BCE – is sweating out a waiting game. His voice, allowed its full colloquial gruffness by his scribe, is understandably testy given his situation, attempting to get messages through to a senior officer elsewhere. He seldom minces his words and is habitual in taking the name of YHWH if not in vain then certainly in his stride. Presumably answering the request of a superior officer, 'Lord Yaush', for some information about troops or supplies, Hoshayahu writes back: 'Why should you think of me? I am (after all) nothing but a dog. May YHWH help you get the news you need.' For the moment, crucially the Jerusalem road is still open, but as the horizon darkens, Hoshayahu's letters are punctuated with arrests, confiscations, ominous interruptions of correspondence. One of them, near the end, mentions that from Lachish he cannot see the fire signal of another hill citadel closer to Jerusalem, Azekah. Romantic interpretations have read this to mean the fire has been extinguished by the Babylonians taking the fort, but it is just as likely to be an expression of Hoshayahu's defensive vigilance about the visibility of Azekah's beacon along the chain of signals.[15]

Two Jewish stories approach us, then, from the same agitated time, written alongside each other, one from the archaeological record, one

through the infinitely edited, redacted, anthologised, revised work that will end up as the Hebrew Bible. One is poetic, the other prosaic, but no less vivid a record of Jewish life for being so. One exalts the name of YHWH; the other uses it casually (though unlike the Elephantine Jews not with the names of other local deities attached) as part of vernacular speech. One voice is hard-bitten and practical; the other seer-like, poetic and high-pitched. One is concerned with oil and wine and troop placements and defence beacons; the other with ecstatically singing the praises of YHWH or prescribing the sufficiency of animal slaughter for sacrifice, with imprinting on the wards of YHWH the obligation to observe the strictures of Moses' farewell commandments. One kind of voice is attempting to reach fellow Jews over the next hill; the other is trying to reach Jews through all eternity. One cannot imagine the future after an apocalypse; the other is frantically trembling with its imminence.

Just how much of the books of the Hebrew Bible (and which ones) were written *before* the mass deportation of 597 BCE and the final destruction of Jerusalem ten years later, and how much afterwards, we will never know with absolute certainty. But the most ancient elements of it (epic songs of triumph like the 'Song of the Sea' in Exodus 15, exulting over the drowning of Pharaoh and the army pursuing the Israelites) have been identified by some scholars as having been composed as early as the eleventh century BCE – in other words *before* the reign of David![16] The style of the song – 'I will sing unto the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously: / the horse and the rider hath he thrown into the sea' – has been convincingly associated with Canaanite mythic poetry in which the challenging god Baal conquers the sea in a great storm. So while the first editors and scribes putting together their narratives, perhaps as early as the late tenth century BCE, were wanting to single out YHWH as their distinctive supreme local deity, they owed some of the most distinctive passages to the poetic tradition of their neighbours. When they came to write their histories of more relatively recent events, they made sure to incorporate those ancient forms of chorus and refrain into their narratives, to give the identity-forming written book a strong sense of immemorially inherited oral memory. It's no accident that in their epic pitch they bring to mind the near contemporary war chants of the *Iliad*.

But in the Hebrew–Israelite case, they are presented as a common inheritance for a shared audience. They echo poundingly with authentically archaic chant and dirge, whether in exultant triumph ('Song of Deborah', Judges 5: 'Speak, ye that ride on white asses, ye that sit in judgement, and walk by the way. / They that are delivered from the noise of archers in the places of drawing water . . . Awake, awake, Deborah: awake, awake, utter a song'), or the tragic 'Lament of David' in 2 Samuel 1, over the death of Saul and Jonathan: 'Tell it not in the squares of Gath; proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon; lest they rejoice, the Philistine maidens . . . I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war perished!'[17]

The epic poems and chants lend the scribal compilations of the Bible narrative their air of deep antiquity, so that they could work backwards from the relatively recent history of David (a century and a half before) recorded in Samuel, through Judges and Joshua's conquests, to the great, seminal foundation myth of the Exodus; then further back to its patriarchal prequel, the meandering in and out of Egypt, stumbling through the dramatic epiphanies of trial and covenant: Sarah's nonagenarian pregnancy; the near sacrifice of Isaac; Jacob's exploitation of the famished Esau; Joseph's many-coloured coat and the interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams. All these fables of origination continued to be embellished, enriched, varied and repeated over many generations, to give Israelites the strong sense of divinely ordained history and imagined collective ancestry their scribes and priests believed were necessary to sustain a common identity under threat from painful historical reality.

Four separate threads of narrative were identified by the German Bible scholars of the late nineteenth century – above all Julius Wellhausen, the formidable inaugurator of the 'Documentary Hypothesis', which holds that the first five books of the Bible originated from independent cultures, each of which styled the supreme deity differently. Each of them offers distinctive versions of the same events – even the Creation – which get written over twice, and different tonal accents that testify to their respective preoccupations.

The early Jahwist or 'J' text calls the Israelite God YHWH, and since forms of that name occur in south Canaan and desert worlds,

the narrative is thought to have been initiated by southern scribes. The Elohist or 'E' text that hails God as '*El*', identical with the name of the supreme Phoenician-Canaanite deity, marks it as the work of a more northern culture. In the eighth century BCE, probably in the reign of the reforming Hezekiah, those texts were brought together. It may be that scribes responsible for the 'E' text, or their descendants (both vocational and familial), came south to Jerusalem after the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE by the Assyrians, and there wove their narrative into the Judahite 'J' text. At some point in the seventh century BCE, probably in reaction to the flagrant polytheism of Manasseh, a self-consciously Priestly or 'P' text is put together with its corrective, compulsive obsessions with the minutiae of observance, the structure of the Temple, and the sacred hierarchy of tribe and people. The same thunderous trumpet note of Deuteronomy sounds towards the end of that century, as Josiah revived the reforms of his great-grandfather Hezekiah, and along with it a trenchant reworking and expansion of the histories of Joshua, Samuel, Judges and Kings: the Deuteronomist or 'D' version.

With the later prophets, though, a fifth strain registers, more poetically high-pitched and more viscerally beautiful than anything that has gone before – albeit in an occasionally trippy-delirious Ezekelian vein. It reaches its acme with whoever was responsible for 'Second Isaiah', the Book's last twenty-six chapters. References to the decrees of Cyrus the Persian date the addition to the sixth and even possibly fifth centuries BCE, and much of the writing is evidently a response to living in a world of pagan colossi and the reverence of cult images and statuary.

Second Isaiah is the first book of the Hebrew Bible to insist unequivocally not just on the supremacy of YHWH but on the exclusiveness of His reality. 'I am God and there is none else. I am God and there is none like me,' the book has the deity proclaim; 'I am the First and the last and beside me there IS no other God.' But the chapters do more than simply make a flat declaration, or give warnings against idolatry, the absurdity of which is painted in Chapter 44. A carpenter is seen at work, with his rule, compass and plane making a sculpture 'after the beauty of a man'. Then the writer switches to a vision of cypresses, cedars and oaks falling to the axe so that the same carpenter may bake bread and roast meat. 'He burneth part thereof in the fire;

with part thereof he eateth flesh; he roasteth roast, and is satisfied; yea, he warmeth himself, and saith, Aha, I am warm. I have seen the fire. And the residue thereof he maketh a god . . . he falleth down unto it, and worshippeth it, and prayeth unto it, and saith, Deliver me; for thou art my god.' By contrast YHWH is 'verily the God that hide thyself', a god without human or any other form, a god of voice and words. 'The Lord God hath given me tongue.'

Second Isaiah is conscious that his words are doing something new; not just recycling immemorial memory, an injunction to Mosaic obedience, but providing an anthem of consolation ('comfort ye, comfort ye my people'), expectation and patient hope. Through its verses runs a strain of contempt for the worldly power of empires that could not have been in stronger contrast to the triumphal inscriptions of Egypt, Assyria and Babylonia: 'Behold, the nations are as a drop in the bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance . . . All nations before him are as nothing; they are counted to him as less than nothing and vanity.' This is indeed a voice tuned to the needs of the powerless, the 'captive' and the uprooted. The 'new song' it sings seems tailored for those destined for displacement, for relentless journeyings and uncertain sojourns. The waters and fires of Mesopotamia lap and flicker through its verses: 'When thou passest through the waters I will be with thee, and through the rivers they shall not overflow thee; when thou walkest through the fire thou shalt not be burned.'

A central fact, possibly *the* central fact, about the Hebrew Bible is that it was not written at a moment of apogee, but over three centuries (eighth to fifth BCE) of trouble. That is what gives the Book its cumulative sobriety, its cautionary poetic, and saves it from the coarseness of triumphal self-congratulation found in imperial cultures. Even when it claims a covenanted bond with YHWH that no other nation could share, any temptation to brag of exceptionalism is undercut by the confounding epic of division, betrayals, turmoil, deceptions, atrocities, disasters, transgressions and defeats that unfolds in its pages. David's best-loved son, Absalom, is killed in a particularly horrifying way while in rebellion against his father. Solomon's imperially aggrandising kingdom lasts not even one generation after his death. King Manasseh institutes the horror of child sacrifice by fire. The Egyptians are always at one gate and the Mesopotamian empires at the other.

This is not to say, though, that the Bible was made *primarily* as a

document of solace, that from the start its scroll was spotted with tears. That would be to read backwards, to reinforce the anachronistic impression that the Jewish story is clouded with tragic foreknowledge from the start, that its words were always set down with the presentiment of impending annihilation: Babylonian, Roman, medieval, fascist. That would be to endorse the romantic tradition of the wailing Hebrew – hair-tearing, breast-beating, the *schreiyer* in the ashes. That is not to say there has been nothing to grieve for in the long story that follows – the Hebrew Bible and much subsequent history do indeed walk through the shadow of the valley of death – but its pages, and the history of Jews over the millennia, exit from the bonefield to better places, and Jewish voices change their pitch from dirge to full-throated song more often than you would suppose.

The many generations of Bible writers made their book not assuming the worst but preparing for its possibility. That, as any Jew will tell you, is a big difference; the difference, actually, between life and death. Much of the speaking Book is not a rehearsal for grief but a struggle against its inevitability; another big difference. It is the adversary, not the enabler, of fatalism.

It is not as if the long years during which the Hebrew Bible came into being are shrouded in silence beyond the writing cells of the scribes who made it. For over a century, archaeology has liberated from mute oblivion a surprising chatter of Hebrew voices, running alongside the sonorities of biblical diction. Inevitably, their sentences are as broken as the potsherds on which they are often inscribed. Sometimes they are no more than the equivalent of a Hebrew tweet, serving notice that this wine or oil jar belongs to such-and-such, or (very often) a *lmlk* seal impression, indicating the property of the king. But sometimes (and we mere historians owe this magic unfolding to the perseverance of epigraphers) the tweets turn into true texts: stories of grievances, anxieties, prophecies, boasts. The sheer cacophonic abundance of those voices, the welter of their traffic, make it clear that there was a life in Judah and Samaria – the territory of the old united kingdom, distinct from, and not absolutely dominated by, the core narrative of the Bible. It was the difference between parchment and potsherd; the animal skin, drawn, primed, carefully inscribed, meant for ceremonious memory and public recitation; the other, ink-written

on whatever scrap of broken pottery happened to be at hand. These were simple, poor, rough-and-ready materials for whoever wanted to use them. You imagine heaps of them stacked up somewhere in the corner of a room or courtyard. The mere physical *fact* of these densely written texts, letters about a millimetre high, packed into the available space of the shard, the hand curling over the often curved surface, the scrappy to-handedness of them, is itself evidence of the craving for chatter, the uniquely irrepressible unquietness of Hebrew and Jewish culture. Sometimes the writing is so marvellously crowded onto the pottery shard that it feels the equivalent of Jews (we all know) talking over each other, not letting the other get a word in edgeways. The edgeways on these fragments are up for grabs too.

This hectic chat was not utterly separated from classical Hebrew, spoken or written. It used the same standardised alphabet; more or less the same letter forms, grammar and syntax, even though it might be written *either* right to left or the other way round. But the Hebrew of everyday life, evolving from Canaanite-Phoenician language, was unedited; fractured, packed with clumsy exclamatory energy. The Bible's eloquence is poetic; the eloquence of the clay fragments and papyri is social. But its mundane din nonetheless carries through the walls of scriptural meditation to make the Jewish story uniquely vocalised among the books of the monotheism. The Bible may have shaped Hebrew but it did not create it; rather, as Seth Sanders has illuminatingly written, it travels *through* an animated early tongue that, by the eighth century BCE, is already available for being reworked for the purposes of history, law and the necessities of genealogy and ancestry – all answers to the perennial questions: who are we, and why is this happening to us?[18] The crossovers – between sacred and social language, between oral and written, between what is distinctively Hebraic-Yahwist and what is very close indeed to neighbouring cultures (Moabite, Phoenician, even Egyptian) – all work both ways, feeding back and forth between scripture and society. If the Bible owes its infinite vitality, its pulse of earthly life amid all the visions and mysteries (the deviousness of Jacob, the irritability of Moses, the lusty charisma of David, the cowardice of Jonah, but also its harps and trumpets, its figs and honey, its doves and its asses) to its importing winningly unheroic versions of humanity from the animated matrix of spoken and written Hebrew, it is likewise true that daily existence

in Judah was also imprinted by the Bible – by its prayers and portents, laws and judgements.

The sensuous exuberance of the Bible text owes much to a writing that does not supersede the spoken language so much as cohabit with it, retaining its spirited bounce and shout. The fact that those key stories of the repeatedly Discovered Book involve both a reader and the read-to, does not mean that the listeners sit in a state of passive obedience (any more than in, say, a reading of the Passover Haggadah text now). Sometimes they take offence at the presumption that they must be read to at all. Hoshayahu, our military officer, holed up in the beleaguered fortress town of Lachish on the eve of the Babylonian invasion, found time and space to wax indignant at the assumption of his senior officer, Lord Yaush, that he was illiterate. After the usual polite preliminaries ('May YHWH send you good news') Hoshayahu lets Lord Yaush have it. 'Now then would you please explain to me just what you meant by the letter you sent last night? I've been in a state of shock ever since I got it. "Don't you know how to read a letter?" you said. By God nobody ever had to read *me* a letter! And when I get a letter once . . . I can recite it back verbatim, word for word!'[19] The letter – one of sixteen found in a guardroom by the monumental gateway when Lachish was excavated in the 1930s – is not only evidence that literacy in Judah had spread well beyond the scribal, priestly and court elite, but that ordinary soldiers like Hoshayahu, much given to 'son of a dog that I am' veteran vernacular, would make an issue of their ability to read. This letter alone goes some way to answer the question of who might be a readership for the written scrolls of the Bible, as well as a listening audience for their reading.

Education in at least the rudiments of reading and writing went back at least three centuries before the short-fused Hoshayahu. 'Abecedaries', the linear alphabet and the West Semitic script evolving from Canaanite into recognisable Hebrew (the basis for Greek and all subsequent alphabetical writing), have recently been discovered at Tel Zayit, a little inland from the coastal port of Ashkelon, dating from the Davidian–Solomonic period of the tenth century BCE, and at the northern Sinai outpost of Kuntillet Ajrud dating from the eighth century BCE. Both have all twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet (though with some significant changes in order) that mark a break

from the dominant writing systems of their bigger neighbours – Assyrian and Persian cuneiform and the earlier Egyptian hieroglyphs.[20]

It may be that these practice and training alphabets were a feature of scribal education, and (pushing the evidence a bit) there have been suggestions that scribal schools could have been established throughout the country by the eighth century BCE. But it's the *commonplace* quality of the abecedaries, their strong sense of being practice tablets, stone jotters – with the direction of the word formation still variable (left to right or, as now in Hebrew, right to left) – rather than any sort of official instructional form that is actually startling and original.

Both Tel Zayit (where the letters are cut into a limestone boulder) and Kuntillet Ajrud are remarkable for being culturally provincial but nonetheless crossroads of trade, military movements and local cults. So it is entirely possible that the much greater simplicity of the linear alphabet over cuneiform meant that literacy skills – even if often exercised on functional prosaic messages – could have been spread far beyond and below the elite. The bundle of blessings, curses, hymns of praise and – most remarkable of all – stylised drawings (of women playing lyres, a cow feeding a calf and the like) at Kuntillet Ajrud suggest a kind of exuberant hubbub that spills back and forth between the realm of the sacred and the business of everyday life. In the same style, a famous ninth-century BCE farming almanac found at Gezer, in the Shephelah lowlands about twenty miles west of Jerusalem, with its months divided into agricultural routines ('a month of making hay / a month of harvesting barley / a month of vine-pruning / a month of summer fruit') also suggests a kind of writing entirely apart from the formal scribal-bureaucratic style that was the monopoly of those who ran the royal state elsewhere in the region. Sanders convincingly characterises the phenomenon as a home-grown craft writing, rather than the product of any 'Solomonic enlightenment'.

Something profound happened between the eighth and fifth centuries BCE, when the Bible was being put together, in the parallel world that surrounded the scribes and Temple priests. As a writing medium, Hebrew evolved from Phoenician-Canaanite into a standard form that was much the same language up and down Palestine (and east over the Jordan): a unified tongue, even though the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were divided (or in Israel's case, destroyed). It was a language that extended beyond the Yahwist kingdoms, for the ninth-century BCE

stone of Mesha, king of the Moabites, celebrating the liberation of his people from Israel, was nonetheless written in vigorous classical Hebrew, the language of his enemy.

Within Judah and Samaria, that same Hebrew connects rather than divides different classes of the population. Those who write petitions and those who entertain them are not cut off from each other by different language worlds. Part of the continuity may be due to the way the scribes who write on behalf of petitioners express themselves, but the same Hebrew undeniably lives in many different places, socially and geographically. It has been found (and the finds keep on coming, in what is unfolding as an exceptionally fruitful generation of excavations) in the storehouses of Arad, another military garrison town in the northern Negev, where the quartermaster, Elyashib ben Eshyahu, facing the Babylonian threat, receives letter after letter requisitioning oil, wine, wheat and flour by the donkey-load.[21] Twenty or so years earlier, a farm labourer in a frontier coastal region close to Ashdod, where a Judaean fort was holding out against the Egyptian advance against Josiah, appealed to someone in authority in the garrison for the return of a shirt or coat that had been taken from him as collateral for a loan, notwithstanding the biblical prohibition of such confiscations.[22] 'After I finished my harvesting a few days ago he took your servant's [the way the petitioner describes himself] garment . . . All my companions who were harvesting with me in the heat of the sun will testify that what I have said is true. I am innocent of any offence . . . If your governor does not consider it his obligation to return your servant's garment do it from pity. You must not remain silent.' It's a sad story but it speaks to us of more than just the desperation of a labourer to get back the shirt that had been, as he saw it, stolen from his back. It also presupposes that the petitioner knew something about the biblical law code, especially the injunctions in Leviticus and Deuteronomy against harsh treatment of the poor. It is as though elements of the 'social' commandments enshrined in the Torah had already become internalised, not just as semi-official and legal precepts, but somehow as part of the expectations of the people, protected by the Yahwist king.

Alphabetic writing is shared between God and men. YHWH, who by the sixth century BCE at the latest, is said to be the only real God, may be faceless and formless, but there are occasions when He resolves

into one revealed aspect: the writing finger. In one of the accounts of the theophany to Moses, that finger writes the commandment directly onto the stone tablet; in the Book of Daniel it writes the warning on the wall to the feasting King Belshazzar. God is the finger; God is writing; God is, above all else, words. But He doesn't keep them to Himself. Any attempt by the temple priests to make writing conditional on religious obedience is defeated by the liberated versatility of the form. The genie is out of the bottle. In fact it was at large and circulating before the Bible bottled it in the first place. So that this Hebrew writing, like so much of Jewish life that would follow, is connected, but not slavishly tied, to observance. It is off and having its own stupendous, argumentative, undisciplined, garrulous life.

There is no more dramatic instance of this independent vigour than a Hebrew inscription chiselled into the wall at the southern end of a tunnel dug by King Hezekiah's military engineers, to take water diverted from the spring of Gihon at Siloam, fed to a capacious cistern-reservoir within the city defences. The creation of the water tunnel was part of Hezekiah's strategic preparations designed to withstand the siege of Sennacherib's Assyrian armies at the end of the eighth century BCE once he had decided to trust in YHWH (whose Temple he had cleaned out of pagan rites and images) and defy the Assyrian king's relentless demands for tribute. But despite being an extraordinary feat – 643 metres long and cut clean through limestone, without the help of any vertical air or light shafts, part of a hydraulic system unknown anywhere else in the ancient world of that time – the new conduit receives only the briefest mention in 2 Kings 20 ('he made a pool and a conduit and brought water into the city') and, slightly less perfunctory, in the much later 2 Chronicles 32 ('this same Hezekiah also stopped the upper watercourse of Gihon and brought it straight down to the west side of the city of David'). But here is another way of describing, or rather dramatising what actually happened at the climax of the work itself. Remarkably, it announces itself as a true-life tale, a miniature history, the first we have of ordinary Jews getting a job done:

> and this is the story [*dvr*] of the tunnel . . . while the men wielded the pickaxes, each man towards his fellow and while there were still three cubits to go there was heard a man's voice calling to his fellow for

> there was a fissure in the rock on the right and [on the left]. And on the day it was broken through, the hewers struck [the rock] each man towards his fellow, axe against axe. And the water flowed from the spring towards the pool for one thousand and two hundred cubits. And a hundred cubits was the height of the rock above the heads of the hewers.

The full 180 words constitute the longest, continuous ancient classical Hebrew inscription we know of; and its subject, unlike the stones of Babylon and Assyria, Egypt or even little Moab, is not the deeds and renown of the ruler, nor the invincibility of their gods. It celebrates, rather, the triumph of regular Jews, workmen – pickaxe-swingers. It is not meant for monumental public view, but for those who, some day, might happen upon it, wading through the sloppy watercourse. It is a kind of ante anti-Bible; something left for posterity, but with the casual spontaneity of someone scrawling graffiti, yet unlike graffiti, cut into the rock in perfect, large (three-quarters of an inch) Hebrew letters. All of which certainly makes it a Jewish story, too.