

Article

Justice at the House of *Yhw(h)*: An Early Yahwistic *Defixio in Furem*

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Abstract: What was the nature of ritual in ancient Yahwism? Although biblical sources provide some information about various types of cultic activity, we have thus far lacked any extra-biblical ritual texts from Yahwistic circles prior to Greco–Roman times. This article presents such a text—one that has been hiding in plain sight for almost a century on a small ostrakon found on the island of Elephantine. It has variously been interpreted as dealing with instructions regarding a tunic left at the “house of *Yhw*”—the temple to *Yhw(h)* that flourished on the island from the middle of the sixth to the end of the fourth century BCE. While there is little debate regarding the epigraphic reading of this text, it has hitherto failed to be correctly interpreted. I present an entirely new reading of this important document, revealing it to be written in poetic form and to match the characteristics of a “prayer for justice” curse ritual. It is, in fact, the oldest known example of this genre; its only known specimen in Aramaic, its unique witness in a Yahwistic context, and the sole record of any ritual performance at a temple to *Yhw(h)*. Significantly, it is administered by a priestess.

Keywords: Yahwism; ancient Judaism; ancient magic; curse texts; women in religion; elephantine

1. Introduction: The Elephantine Yahwistic Community

A remarkable Yahwistic community inhabited the island of Elephantine,¹ facing Syene (modern-day Aswan) during the Achaemenid period (for recent treatments, see Barnea 2021; Becking 2020; van der Toorn 2019). They had originally arrived at the island from Palestine, most probably in the middle of the sixth century BCE (Barnea 2023a), and built a full-fledged temple—complete with priests, sacrifices, and an altar—on this important and already millennia-old cultic center at the Nile’s first cataract. This temple was dedicated to their chief ethnic deity, *Yhw(h)*, also known from the biblical tradition and from a few extra-biblical documents at the time.² Some of the leaders of this temple-based community were referred to as “priests of *Yhw*” (כהניא זי יהו) (Porten and Yardeni 1986, A4 3: 1); they expended significant resources and a lot of effort building a temple for their deity (Porten and Yardeni 1986, A4.7: 9–11),³ claimed that he dwells therein (Porten and Yardeni 1989, B3.12: 2), called leading members of the community—both male and female—“servant of *Yhw*” (לחן/ה זי יהו) (e.g., Porten and Yardeni 1989, B3.12), had theophoric names based on his, and raised funds for his service (Porten and Yardeni 1993, C3.15; Barnea 2023b, esp. pp. 369–72).

When compared to the image of Yahwism reflected in the biblical text, however, this Egyptian community might appear to be its alter ego—a parallel, seemingly heretical universe. This is misleading. As Kratz rightly noted, “The Egyptian Jews probably had much more in common with the historical Israel of the pre- and post-exilic age in Palestine than do the biblical Jews. *The Bible is the exception, not Elephantine*”. (Kratz 2006, p. 248, emphasis added). Indeed, the undeniable existence of polytheistic and syncretistic⁴ expressions within a community with clear Jewish-like traits has raised the question of whether or not it can objectively be tagged as such. This topic has been hotly debated and caused discernable discomfort among scholars ever since the texts from the Elephantine archive were first published in 1903 (e.g., Epstein 1912). The texts produced by this community continue to



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generate new insight into Yahwism in the Achaemenid period (Barnea and Kratz Forthcoming). However, practically no evidence has thus far been known to have survived regarding direct expressions of their cultic practices. By “direct expressions”, I mean texts that are overtly cultic in nature such as hymns, curses, or prayers. We certainly do possess papyri and ostraca that shine some light on their cultic profile *indirectly*, namely in letters and legal documents that refer to elements such as the deity *Yhw* and the temple dedicated to him, the mention of “gods” in greeting formulae, and the local Egyptian deities, Levantine deities, and the “god of heaven” (Barnea 2023b; Granerød 2016; Rohmoser 2014; Vincent 1937). We also have a few mentions of priests and passing references to sacrifices as well as the mention of prayers and lamentations in the context of the destruction of their temple—an event which took place in 410 BCE.

However, these do not provide us with the *content* of these practices. They are merely mentioned. We also have a letter, erroneously known as the “Passover letter”, that refers to some form of observance that has been seen as related to the biblical feast of *maṣṣot*. I discuss this document more fully elsewhere (Barnea Forthcoming). Here, it would suffice to qualify it broadly as a set of instructions given by a certain Ḥananiah regarding some sort of observance but, unfortunately, the fragmentary nature of this papyrus precludes us from gleaned definitive details regarding its nature. Other expressions can be found in the onomastic record through Yahwistic theophoric names, certain oath formulae such as *Hy Lyhh* (Porten and Yardeni 1999, D7.16 [=Lozachmeur 2006 CG 152, twice], Lozachmeur 2006 CG 14, 20, 41, 56, 152, 174, 185, 214?, X16, J8),⁵ and finally a contribution list to *Yhw* in which a sum of money is raised and allotted to a triad of deities: *Yhw*, *šmbyṭ l*, and *ṯntbyṭ l* (Barnea 2023b, esp. pp. 16–18). These provide us with important contextualizing information about how they viewed their deity, the importance of the temple in their life and identity, and even certain religious roles within the community; none of these, however, constitutes a ritual text *per se*.⁶

2. The Elephantine Curse Ostrakon (Porten and Yardeni 1999, D7.18)

Given this context, a particularly fascinating document among the Elephantine texts includes a cryptic reference to *Byt Yhh*, “the house of *Yhh*”—the temple of *Yhw* on the island of Elephantine—with an alternative spelling of the divine name *Yhw* (Meyer 2022, pp. 14, 57).⁷ It appears on an ostrakon paleographically dated to the first quarter of the fifth century BCE.⁸ This ostrakon was found at Elephantine in 1925 and was first published by Noël Aimé-Giron (1926). Unfortunately, it was found among the surface debris left over by previous excavations (Aimé-Giron 1926, p. 23), a fact which prevents us from knowing its archeological context. The ostrakon is about 4.5 cm tall and 9 cm wide, written exclusively on its concave side (Figure 1), with its convex side being anepigraphic to which the catalogue number of the item at the Cairo Museum was affixed. In total, 12 words are written on this ostrakon (one of which, *byt*, is repeated, putting the sum of unique words at 11). The hand is generally clear and consistent and the writing poses no difficulty except for the right and left ends of the final line—line four. The final two words “to/against/for *Slw ḥ*” seem to have been written by a different hand or, at least, a new stylus.⁹ The text is complete. There are three small damage markings on the concave but these do not interfere with the reading of the text. In what follows, I will approach the analysis of this ostrakon from two complementing directions—a top-down epigraphic analysis supplemented by a bottom-up contextual analysis deriving from philological observations regarding the text and, especially, from genre-specific *comparanda*.



Figure 1. JE 49624 (concave).

Notation:

- {|} Choice of ambiguous readings.
- / Choice of ambiguous translations.
- ⌈ ⌋ Damaged text.

2.1. Text

חזו כתוני זי
שבקת בית בית
יהא אמרי לאריה
{וי|יה} רמה על סלויא'ה

2.2. Translation

Behold my tunic which
I left at the house, house of
Yhh, command^{FEMININE} the Lion/Uriah?
[and] let him consecrate it. To/for/on behalf of Slw[⌈] Yh.

2.3. Epigraphic Analysis

Line 1: The text begins with the 2p pl. impr. *hzw* (חזו). Aimé-Giron rightly noted that it is used here as an inchoative particle (Aimé-Giron 1926, p. 38) and Dupont Sommer added (Dupont-Sommer 1946–1947, pp. 79–87,) that it is not to be understood simply as “see” or “regard”, but that it has the sense of the French “voici”, noting that the imperative here, as is frequently the case in these ostraca, is the equivalent of *h'* (הא) or *hlw* (הלו) (Dupont-Sommer 1946–1947, p. 80).¹⁰ In English, therefore, this seems to be best rendered as “behold”. The second word on this line, *ktwn* (כתון), is the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew *ktwnt* (כְּתוֹנֶת),¹¹ a linen tunic.¹² The conjunction *zy* (זי) at the end of this line introduces the subordinate relative clause that defines the object of the expression—the tunic.

Line 2: The verb *šbq* (sg. 1c. G-stem)¹³ can take on the meaning of “to leave behind” or, interpretatively, “entrust”. This verb is expected to be followed by the preposition *b* (“in”), which is missing. Aimé-Giron (1926, pp. 27–28) explains this omission as a haplography (or, rather, homoeoarcton).¹⁴ This is also documented in other ostraca—ostensibly by the same scribe (Porten and Yardeni 1999, D7.39, p. 4; see also Naveh 1970, pp. 37–38). The repetition of *Byt* (בית) here is not to be explained away as a “dittography”, as per Aimé-

Giron (1926, p. 28). Nor is it, as proposed by Dupont-Sommer, “la maison (annexe) de la Maison de Yahvé”, (Dupont-Sommer 1946–1947, p. 81), i.e., “the house of the house of Yhw”, which he considered to be a type of “sacristy”,¹⁵ for which there is no record in the texts.¹⁶ Instead, as I will show, it should be read as an appositional poetic gloss (see “literary characteristics” below), further specifying which house is the house in question—literally, “the house, (namely) the house of Yhh”. This type of appositional gloss is a feature of Semitic verse and is found in Hebrew poetic texts such as Ps. 122:4a שָׁשָׁם עָלוּ שְׁבֵטֵי־יְהוָה שְׁבֵטֵי־יְהוָה (“to which the tribes go up, (namely) the tribes of Yh”) or Ps. 133:2c עַל הַזָּקֵן יִקַּן אֶהְרֹן (“down upon the beard, (namely) upon the beard of Aaron”).

Line 3: Aimé-Giron understood *Yhh* (יהה) as the Personal Name (PN) *Yhw*’ (יהוא) here, a proposal which, as Dupont-Sommer rightly noted, cannot be accepted (Dupont-Sommer 1946–1947, pp. 80–81). Conversely, the syntagm “house of *Yhwh*” *Byt Yhh/w* (בית יהה/ו) is attested elsewhere in the Elephantine document record in reference to the *Yhw* temple on the island and is ubiquitous in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁷ It is also found on at least two confirmed ostraca outside of Elephantine: one from Tel-Arad, where the term “house of *Yhwh*” might refer to a temple at Arad or to the Jerusalem temple (Aharoni 1968, pp. 1–32) and the other from Khirbet el-Kom/Makkedah (Lemaire 2006, pp. 416–17). Likewise, the Mt. Gerizim temple was also probably known by that title (Magen et al. 2000, p. 31, no 13). This expression forms the center of the text’s chiasmic structure (see “literary characteristics” below). The next unit of the text starts in the middle of this line and, like the beginning of the first unit, begins with an imperative in the second person: the 2pf sg. impr. *’mry* (אמרי, “say”, “tell”, or “command”). The imperative use of *’mr* (אמר) here gives preference to the latter meaning: “command!” The entity to be commanded by the female officiant (see “Women in Yahwistic liturgy” below) is either an *’ryh* (אריה “lion”) or the PN *’wryh* “Uriah”. The latter option has been the preferred reading thus far in scholarship. However, this PN is never spelled defectively in the entire corpus (as already noted by Aimé-Giron 1926, p. 28), where in 21 instances (100% of cases) it is spelled *plene* with a *waw* as *’wryh* (אורייה). The form *’ryh* (אריה) is found clearly written once more on an ostracon for which the context eludes us (Lozachmeur 2006, p. 287 [134]).¹⁸ However, given the remarkable consistency of the *plene* writing, the more probable reading here is “Lion”, *’ryh* which was a common and well-attested representation of *Yhw(h)* prior to and during the Achaemenid period and is well documented in the Bible (see “*Yhw(h)* as a lion” below). Here, the noun *’ryh* features an earlier spelling for the emphatic/determined state *’ary*’. This also fits the proposed dating of the ostracon to the early 5th century BCE since over that period “there seems to be an increasing tendency towards the use of *-’*, instead of *-h*, to indicate *-a*” including in the emphatic state (Folmer 1995, pp. 703–4). This form is documented in several cases at Elephantine (e.g., ביתה כלה for “the whole house”, see Muraoka and Porten 1998, p. 183) and Porten and Yardeni (1986, A2.1: 12–13): שלחה ספרה זנה, among others. In the Hermopolis papyri (1–6), which are probably dated from around the same time as the Elephantine Curse Ostracon, the emphatic state is spelled with a final *-h* consistently (Folmer 1995, pp. 694–95).

Line 4: There is, in all probability, a letter missing in the broken portion of the right-hand side of this line—either a *yod* or a conjunctive *waw*.¹⁹ It is followed by traces of another letter—either a *yod* or, more likely, a *het*.²⁰ The verb at the beginning of the line can be derived either from the root *hrm* (“to dedicate (as sacred)”, “to consecrate”) as Dupont-Sommer suggested (Dupont-Sommer 1946–1947; followed by Grelot 1972 and Folmer 1995) or *rmy* (“to cast, to throw” or possibly “to calumniate, cast aspersions” in the D-stem, which is recorded only in Syriac) as per Aimé-Giron (1926, p. 29) and Porten and Yardeni (1999, D7.18).²¹ The verb *rmy* does appear in Aramaic incantation texts (Levene 2014, p. 22 [VA.2484: 8], 119 [BM 91767: 7]) but in contexts that are unrelated to the Elephantine Curse Ostracon. The reading of a *het* seems more secure here, as analyzed by Dupont-Sommer (1946–1947, p. 82)—an analysis with which I concur—both paleographically and contextually. Dupont-Sommer and those following in his footsteps read this lexeme as the volitive [*y*]hrmh (Folmer 1995, pp. 511–12). This fits the genre of this text particularly well, as per the

comparanda from Greco–Roman curse texts (see “*defixio in furem*” below). They also suggest that this is the last word of the body of the document, considering the remaining syntagm $\text{ל } slw'h$ to refer to the addressee, i.e., “to *Slw'h*”, here placed at the end of the document as opposed to the beginning as would be expected (e.g., Porten and Yardeni 1999, D7.29: 1. Consider also D6 8: 1 and D7 5: 1). There is a small ca. 1.5 cm space between this word and the final syntagm: $\text{ל } slw'h$. The preposition ל (ל) has a wide range of sometimes contradicting meanings and could be understood as “to”, “against”, “concerning”, or “on behalf of”. There are three cases, apparently by the same scribe (Naveh 1970, pp. 37–38), where there is an ל PN address without a sender’s name. Two of these (Porten and Yardeni 1999, D7.6, D 7.29) begin with the ל PN address. The only instance in which a text ends with this address—if this were indeed the case—would be here (Folmer 1995, p. 624). However, as I explain below, the genre-specific *comparanda* suggest a reading of “for/on behalf of”, and suggests that the last word is the name of the *defigens*, i.e., the person for whom the ritual is performed. Though faded, it is still fully legible and is the well-attested PN *slw'h* (סלואה) of several women at Elephantine, covering the entire documented timeframe (Porten and Yardeni 1989, B4.6, B5.1, B5.2, B6.4, C3.15). Interestingly, it seems to be written by a different hand, or, at least, a new stylus. This suggests the use of common curse formulae that “could be copied by a scribe ahead of time and set on a shelf with blank spaces that could be filled in later by or for a specific customer” (Faraone 2001, pp. 4–5)²²—a practice well-known from Greco–Roman sources.

3. Commentary

Porten and Yardeni labeled this ostrakon “instructions re Tunic”, which is a faithful summary of the interpretations of their predecessors, even though minor details differed slightly over the years, such as whether it is a “regular” tunic or a “sacred garment” and whether it is intended to be “cast/thrown” or “dedicated/consecrated” (Dupont-Sommer 1946–1947, pp. 84–85, 87).²³ However, a closer reading of the text reveals several previously unnoticed distinctive features that show that it is, in fact, a magical curse text/incantation, specifically in the genre of “prayers for justice”, and, more precisely, a curse against a thief, a “*defixio in furem*”. Our knowledge of curse texts from antiquity has made great strides over the past three decades and has produced a significant body of contextual data that was not readily available to my predecessors and from which the present analysis greatly benefits.

3.1. Literary Characteristics

The text of this ostrakon is not nearly as simplistic as it has been portrayed by previous scholarship. In fact, it betrays a number of distinctive literary features that have not been noticed thus far: it is metered,²⁴ it has a chiasmic structure, and it employs poetic devices. It seems to have been carefully composed as an incantation and was probably considered a “standard text” for its purpose. It is written in a simple *accentual meter* or rhythm (Helle 2014, pp. 57–58) where, characteristically, “the number of stresses in a line is fixed” (Vance 2000, p. 97). It contains five stichs overall with two *ictus* per stich, as follows (Figure 2):

כתוני	חזו	A
בית	זי שבקת	B
יהה	בית	C
לאריה	אמרי	A
סלואה	[י]חרמה על	B

Figure 2. Accentual meter and chiasmic form.

The form is a chiasmic interlocking ring pattern, A-B-C-A-B, centered on the words “house of *Yhh*” (בית יהה). The A-B distich always begins with an imperative in the second person, referring to someone physically (or logically) present, while C appears once at the

center of the composition, stressing the words *Byt Yhh*, the temple to the deity *Yhw*. Though chiasmic structures can and do appear in contracts and letters (Porten 1981), the combination of a distinctive meter, the chiasmic ring structure, and the use of poetic features such as the appositional poetic gloss “*Byt* (namely) *Byt Yhh*”, clearly show that this is not a random or ordinary instruction text regarding a tunic but that it was crafted in a careful literary form.

3.2. *Defixio in Furem*

The Elephantine Curse Ostrakon’s text falls into the genre of “prayers for justice”, as defined by Henk Versnel (1991) and, more specifically, to a sub-category of these curses known as “*defixiones in fures*” (“curses against thieves”) as cataloged by Auguste Audollent (for a list of these, see Audollent 1904, p. 472). These curses were usually written on lead but not exclusively. In fact, the material on which they were found was diverse: bronze, gold, tin, marble, lapis specularis, and earthenware vessels/ostraca (Sherwood Fox, p. 120). Finding such a curse on an ostrakon is not extraordinary.

These texts are practically always attached to a temple, rhetorically and/or physically. They were deposited and possibly exhibited there for public viewing (Faraone 2011, pp. 29–30), a fact that makes them a distinctive feature of cultic life (Simón 2021, p. 25). Although this feature is not unusual, the fact that the Elephantine Curse Ostrakon is written exclusively on one side offers the possibility to speculate that it might have been exhibited at the Yahwistic temple on that island as well—possibly next to a “matsebah” or a statue of the deity (Cornell 2016). These curses were often meant to transfer the stolen goods to the divine ownership of the deity that is invoked in order to make the theft the deity’s own business “in the hope that they will become angered at the theft of what is now their own property and, as a result, pursue the criminal vigorously. In simple terms, by ceding the stolen goods to the god, the curse retroactively turns a common thief into a blasphemous temple robber” (Faraone et al. 2005, p. 170). To make this transfer of property cultically binding, the victim of the theft “consecrates” or “dedicates” the lost or stolen property to the deity which is now expected to pursue justice for the stolen item as if it were robbed from its own temple (Faraone et al. 2005, p. 171), effectively turning the thief into a temple-robber. Finally, as is the case with the Elephantine Curse Ostrakon, *defixiones in fures* differ from most other forms of curse texts in that they “tend to name the person who has been robbed (i.e., the *defigens*)” (Faraone et al. 2005, p. 171), in this case, the woman *Stw ḥ*. Clothing items are a frequent subject of these curses (Simón 2021, p. 34).

The Elephantine Curse Ostrakon displays all these features. The stolen item—the tunic—is specifically said to be *šbq*, “left” at (i.e., entrusted to) the temple of the deity *Yhw* in order to be consecrated *hym* (חַרַם) to him and by him; in fact, the priestess/sorceress performing the ritual is instructed to command “the Lion” to render the tunic consecrated. *Yhw* is referred to as “the Lion”—a popular image of this deity at the time, also found in the Hebrew Bible—reflecting his majesty and sense of vengeance (see “*Yhw(h)* as a lion” below). That being said, there are examples where the stolen object was dedicated/consecrated to a priest rather than a deity, as in the case of a third-century BCE bronze tablet from Calabria which reads: “Kollyra consecrates (ἀντιαρίζε) to the servants of the goddess the three gold pieces that Melitta received but does not return”. Here, the “servants” of the goddess are probably priests or temple personnel who will “take ownership of the coins on behalf of the goddess” (Faraone et al. 2005, p. 170). Thus, the distinct possibility that a person by the name of Uriah is referenced here rather than “the Lion” opens up, especially given that a contemporary Uriah seems to have been involved with libations around the same time frame and was possibly a priest (Porten and Yardeni 1999, D 7.9). However, the appeal to the deity directly is significantly more common in the *comparanda* and more in line with the genre; it also fits the context better—especially considering the unique spelling of the name (as explained above) and the well-documented popularity of the image of *Yhw(h)* as a lion at the time—and is thus preferred here.

The similarities with this genre of curses from the Greco–Roman world from around two–three centuries later are striking. For example, the following text found in Asia Minor and dating to between 100 BCE and 200 CE states explicitly:

I dedicate (ἀνατίθημι) to the Mother of the Gods the gold pieces that I have lost, all of them, so that the goddess will track them down and bring everything to light and will punish the guilty in accordance with her power and in this way will not be made a laughingstock. (Versnel 1991, p. 74)

A similar but more developed curse text was found at the temple of Demeter and dated to the second or first century BCE:

Artemis “dedicates” (ἀνιεροῖ) to Demeter and Kore and all the gods with Demeter, the person who would not return to me the articles of clothing, the cloak, and the stole, that I left behind, although I have asked for them back. Let him bring them in person (ἀνευέγκα[ι] αὐτός) to Demeter even if it is someone else who has my possessions, let him burn, and let him publicly confess ([πεπρη]μένος ἐξ[αγορεύ]ων) his guilt. But may I be free and innocent of any offense against religion. if I drink and eat with him and come under the same roof with him. For I have been wronged (ἀδίκημαι γάρ), Mistress Demeter. (Versnel 1991, p. 72)

The Greek verb-synonyms ἀνατίθημι and ἀνιερόω have both been used in Bible translations to translate the verb *hym* (חָרַם)—as used in the Elephantine Curse Ostrakon—in Greek²⁵ and thus reflect precisely the vocabulary used here.

4. Biblical Parallels

The Elephantine Curse Ostrakon is dated to the first quarter of the fifth century BCE and was produced in a distinctly Yahwistic context, in a community that most probably had Israelite/Northern Kingdom origins (Barnea 2021; van der Toorn 2019). It is interesting to note that there are other examples from Yahwistic sources related to curses regarding stolen items. An interesting biblical parallel (already suggested by Faraone et al. 2005) of a story taking place in the north (Mt. Ephraim), where the item was consecrated to the deity *Yhw(h)*, is the story of Micha’s mother in Judg. 17: 1–5 (author’s translation):

¹ There was a man in Mount Ephraim whose name was *Mykyhw*. ² He said to his mother, ‘The eleven hundred silver that were taken from you, and you uttered a curse, and even spoke it in my hearing—here, I have the silver. I took it.’ And his mother said, ‘blessed be my son to *Yhwh!*’ ³ And he returned the eleven hundred silver to his mother, and his mother said, ‘I have consecrated the silver to *Yhwh* from my hand for my son, to make a graven image and an object of cast metal.’ ⁴ And he returned the money to his mother, and his mother took two hundred silver, and gave it to the silversmith, and he made it into a graven image and an object of cast metal; and it was in the house of *Mykyhw*. ⁵ And the man *Mykh* had a house of god, and he made an ephod and teraphim, and installed one of his sons, who became his priest.

This passage, like the rest of the epilogue to the book of Judges, is particularly difficult to date (Spronk 2022). It might even date to roughly the same time the Elephantine Curse Ostrakon was written, i.e., the early Achaemenid period. However, the custom of consecrating the similitude of what was stolen to the deity within a curse ritual in order to make it the deity’s own business is certainly more ancient and probably has Levantine/Canaanite origins (Faraone et al. 2005, p. 182). Fox (1914) noted that the mother’s curse showed some parallels with the Greco–Roman *Tabellae Defixionum*. The theme of the deity itself issuing a curse against theft or of the deity persecuting thieves seems to have been a popular theme in Persian-era texts. For example, in Malachi 3:8–10 (author’s translation) we find:

⁸ Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How are we robbing you?’ In your tithes and offerings. ⁹ You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me; the whole nation of you. ¹⁰ Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house; and thereby put me to the test, says *Yhwh*

Sb'ot, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.

Similarly, in Zechariah 5:2–4 we see *Yhwh* as the one who persecutes all thieves “over the face of the whole land” (author’s translation):

² And he said to me, “What do you see?” I answered, “I see a flying scroll; its length is twenty cubits, and its breadth ten cubits”. ³ Then he said to me, “This is the curse that goes out over the face of the whole land; for everyone who steals shall be cut off henceforth according to it, and everyone who swears falsely shall be cut off henceforth according to it. ⁴ I will send it forth, says *Yhwh Sb'ot*, and it shall enter the house of the thief, and the house of him who swears falsely by my name; and it shall abide in his house and consume it, both timber and stones.

This cursory review of biblical parallels shows that *Yhw(h)* was perceived, as were other deities of antiquity, as one who protects the innocent against thieves and robbers and to whom one can dedicate a stolen item, understanding that the deity will consider cursing the robber his/her own business.

5. *Yhw(h)* as a Lion

If the meaning of *'ryh* (אריה) in line three does, in fact, refer to *Yhw(h)*—which is the preferred interpretation for the reasons explained above—it will be fully in step with the common image of this deity among Yahwists at the time. This image is relatively ubiquitous in the Hebrew Bible (Strawn 2005 and, more recently, Saari 2020). A vessel handle from Ramat Rahel shows a lion with a solar disk over his head which, as suggested by Keel and Uehlinger (1998, p. 389), “may represent a solar connotation of Yahweh of Zion”. Stamp impressions from Judah in the Persian period also depict *Yhwh* as a Lion (Ornan and Lipschits 2020, p. 80). The image of *Yhwh* as a lion might have been used in the Elephantine Curse Ostrakon with the intention of invoking the majesty of the deity—akin to the invocation of the *maiestas* of the deity which was “a characteristic of various *defixiones* found in sanctuaries” (Simón 2021, p. 32).

6. Women in Yahwistic Liturgy

A particularly noteworthy aspect of the Elephantine Curse Ostrakon is the fact that—as part of the performance of the curse—an anonymous woman is to command the deity *Yhw*, “the Lion”, to render the tunic used in the ritual consecrated. The tunic has been entrusted to the “house of *Yhw*” for this purpose and in all probability, this woman was part of the temple’s high-ranking cultic personnel—certainly a priestess—since she is in a position to *command the deity* to consecrate the object. Even if, in the case of the alternative interpretation, i.e., that she is to command a certain “Uriah” to consecrate the object in the performance of this curse, she is still the one in charge of the ritual and to whom the demand is addressed.

I have already mentioned the female “servant of *Yhw*”, *lhnh zy Yhw* (לחנה זי יהו) in passing—a title that was given to the Egyptian woman Tapemet who was married to a certain ‘Anani son of ‘Azariah, a (male) *lhnh zy Yhw* (Porten and Yardeni 1989, B3.12). The meaning of this designation for the Egyptian-turned-Yahwist Tapemet is not clear. It can be understood as a “wife of a temple servitor”, as proposed by Azzoni (2013, p. 92 note 34) who notes that it was an “Egyptian practice” to refer to the wife of temple personnel by the same title as her husband. This may indeed be the case, although it was certainly not uniformly practiced, and wives who held prestigious titles did not necessarily share them with their husbands. Still, even if this were the case, it does not mean that she did not serve in the temple in a cultic capacity, even on the same footing as her husband. Here, it is worth quoting from Mariam F. Ayad’s recent study “*Moving Beyond Gender Bias*” in Egyptology:

In spite of consistent efforts by (predominately female) Egyptologists from the late 1970s onward, titles and epithets denoting ancient Egyptian women’s work outside the home still are often dismissed as honorific, or treated in an overly

sexualized manner, or reduced to servant status. Considered separately, some of these arguments may appear cogent, logical, or even plausible. However, viewed collectively, they have the effect of a concerted effort—conscious or unconscious—to undermine ancient Egyptian women’s agency, as seen in their ability to exercise power in influential positions, in their self-expression through written modes of communication, or in exercising economic autonomy. (Ayad 2022, p. 16)

Indeed, Ayad and her colleagues’ contributions brilliantly highlight the fact that gender roles were complex and extremely varied throughout Egyptian history and geography and should not be viewed through a modern and all too simplistic prism of the patriarchy. For example, *hmt-ntr* (not to be interpreted as “wife of god”, but as the feminine of *hym-ntr* “servant of god”, a generic title for a priest in Egyptian cult) is the exact cognate of *lhnh zy Yhw* and denotes a priestess, not merely the “wife of a priest”. This title is used, for instance, by Qar, an official of the sixth dynasty, who was known as *hym-ntr M3t* (“priest of Ma t”) similar to that borne by his wife Gefi (*gfi*): *hmt-ntr [hwt-hr]* (“priestess of Hathor”)—a significant title that was certainly not given merely as an “honorific”.

In the Yahwistic sphere, on a lengthy papyrus that was probably composed in the Achaemenid period, we find a woman holding the role of *khnh*, the feminine form of *khn* (Pap. Amh 63 col. ix 13). Tawny Holm suggests that since no priestess of Yahō is mentioned in other Egyptian Aramaic texts, one might assume that women could not be priestesses of Yahō in Egypt (just as no woman is called a priestess of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible). Yet, one wonders if the *khnh* in col. ix is given precisely this title instead of *kmrh* because Bethel and Yahō may sometimes be identified with each other on the papyrus (Holm 2022, p. 343)

The Elephantine Curse Ostrakon calls for a reconsideration of what we know and assume about the participation of women in Yahwistic cultic practice²⁶ since herein, there is a clear-cut example of a woman serving a priestly function, commanding the deity (or a male priest) in the performance of a curse ritual attached to—and, most likely performed at—the temple of *Yhw*.

7. Conclusions

This study of the Elephantine Curse Ostrakon cannot pretend to do more than provide an introduction to the text of this document and its context and suggest some implications and directions for future research deriving from its interpretation. It is primarily the first publication of this document in which the form and meaning of its text are analyzed carefully according to their poetic features and in light of the major advancements in the study of ancient curses over the past few decades. I have shown that the text, though short, is written using a relatively complex set of poetic devices and thus is not a simple account of a piece of clothing deposited at the temple of *Yhw(h)*. In addition, the rich collection of comparable curse texts from Greco–Roman times allows the text to be better reconstructed and understood. It has already been proposed that the genre of “*defixiones in fures*” originated in Levantine, Canaanite, or even Yahwistic circles (Faraone et al. 2005). This ostrakon, from a Yahwistic setting attached to a full-fledged temple to *Yhw(h)*, gives us an invaluable first-hand glimpse into the reality of curse rituals in the ancient world—specifically among those for whom *Yhw(h)* was the chief ethnic deity. In addition, it is the only known direct record of a ritual tied to—and even performed at—a Yahwistic temple. It is to be expected that similar rituals were performed, possibly even by priestesses, in other Yahwistic cultic sites such as Jerusalem, Mt. Gerizim, Arad, Tel Dan, and similar locations.

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Notes

- ¹ The island and its colony/fortress are referred to as Yeb (יב) in the Aramaic and Ἐλεφαντίνη in Greek. This name derives from the word for “elephant”, or “elephant tusk” (*ʾbw*) in the Egyptian language although it is not clear what precisely its connection to elephants might have been.
- ² Outside the Bible, *Yhw(h)* is relatively scantily documented and is not necessarily a specifically Israelite deity (Cf. the Hittite governor of Hamath, Yahu-Bihdi whose name was written with the DINGIR divine determinative). For a recent *status Quaestionis* on the origins of *Yhw(h)* see (van Oorschot and Witte 2017).
- ³ According to their own description of the temple, it contained stone pillars: at least five carved stone gateways with bronze hinges, a cedarwood roof, and woodwork.
- ⁴ The dictionary definition is “the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought”. (Soanes and Stevenson 2004).
- ⁵ See also (Dupont-Sommer 1947, p. 185). A similar expression was found in Letter 3 from Lachish Letter 3:9 היהוה.
- ⁶ Lindenberger (2001) proposed that the description of the demise of Vidranga, the (in-)famous governor of Upper Egypt at the time of the destruction of the Yahwistic temple at Elephantine (410 BCE), which is described in the petitions for help in restoring the temple (Porten and Yardeni 1986, A4.7, A4.8) was a quote of a curse-text or a prayer recited by the Yahwists against this man. However, the main problem, which I consider fatal to his argument, is that his entire analysis hinges on interpreting the conjunction *zy* as introducing direct speech (Lindenberger 2001, p 147). While this is common (=d'/dy) in Talmudic Aramaic and even found in Qumran, the use of *zy* as a conjunction introducing direct speech is practically non-existent in OfA. It is often still admissible to adopt later forms when none are recorded in OfA but the case of *zy* is on an entirely different scale. This conjunction is so common, so well-documented, and so central to OfA that the fact it is never used at the time for direct speech is striking (Muraoka and Porten 1998 and Folmer 1995 are very cautious with one possible and very tentative example each of such a theoretical case. (Pat-El 2012) notes that if this occurs in OfA at all, then it is only documented as *kzy* not *zy*). Yet, Lindenberger’s entire argument hinges on this conjunction since—in the context of being quoted in a letter—if it does not introduce direct speech, it is by definition not the content of a “curse” or a “prayer”. I think that based on the weight of evidence from OfA sources, which are practically unanimous on this point, the chances that *zy* here introduces direct speech, or that this is direct speech at all, are nil. Therefore, this cannot be seen as a curse or a prayer. I consider the description of what happened to Vidranga historical, though somewhat poetical and not entirely clear, and that Porten and Yardeni (1986, A3.9) refers back to the (in)famous Vidranga rather than a still living one.
- ⁷ Practically all of the treatment of this ostrakon thus far has been limited to the fact that it mentioned *Byt Yhh*—the “house of *Yhw*”, with the tunic mentioned being seen as that of a priest or a secular member of the community.
- ⁸ Egyptian museum catalogue numbers: JE 49624, SR 7/21488, and SR 1/12416. The ostrakon is currently kept in the Nubian museum in Aswan.
- ⁹ The stylus for this syntagm, *ʾl Shw h*, is noticeably sharper, making the letters visibly thinner than the rest of the text. This could be due to a number of reasons such as a different manner of holding the stylus (different hand), a change of stylus, or the sharpening of the stylus mid-writing.
- ¹⁰ (Grelot 1972, §90), note c, proposed a slight nuance here: “veille (à ou sur)”. See also in an epistolographic context, (Schwiderski 2013, pp. 171–72).
- ¹¹ Cf. for example Targum Job 30:18 בסוגי חילא אתבליש כסותי אגב כתוני יזרונגי.
- ¹² A tunic is a garment that serves both sexes. See Gen 3: 21 where both sexes are clothed with a tunic. Consider also Tamar wearing a tunic in 2 Sam 13:18–19 as well as the “bride” in Song 5:3. This is also documented in a “Halakhic” text from Qumran known as 4QOrdinances^a: יכס בשלמות אשה ואל ילבש כתונת אשה (4Q159 2–4: 7).
- ¹³ The context of the text starting with “Behold *my* tunic”, supports the reading of *šbqt* as a sg. 1c. G-stem verb (“I left”). This cannot be a sg. 2m. “you”, given the sg. 2f address in imperative *ʾamry* (“say”) in line 3. Neither can this be a (defective) passive sg. 3f. form since the *ktwn* with the *nisbe* in line 1 is manifestly masculine (if it were seen as feminine, it would have been written as *ktwnty* rather than *ktwny*). There are a couple of cases of gender disagreement involving a *ktwn*, e.g., Porten and Yardeni (1986, A2 2:11) (Muraoka and Porten 1998, p. 278) but in most cases, the verb or adjective agrees with the noun.
- ¹⁴ These terms are usually used in discussions concerning the textual transmission of the Hebrew Bible. However, not every case of letter omission should be ascribed to these phenomena. A better term, in some cases, would be *haplophony*—the omission of a

letter because of how it sounds—possibly because of dialectical or diachronic differences rather than copying errors. Cf. 1 Kings 7:48a: וַיַּעַשׂ שְׁלֹמֹה אֵת כְּלֵי־הַבָּיִת אֲשֶׁר בָּיִת הַהוּא.

15 See also discussion in (Kraeling 1953, pp. 96–97) where he considers the first *byt* as “a construct before the compound ‘house-of-Yahoh.’ The latter was the designation of the temple as a whole, while the first is ‘the house’ in the narrower sense of the adyton, or ‘Holy of Holies.’”

16 There is also no possibility of reading *byt* as “between” here since this preposition must refer to two objects (=between X and Y) or a plurality (=between the Xs), which is not the case here. The reading of the verb *bwt* (“to spend the night”) must also be rejected since it cannot fit the grammar of the clause or the context.

17 At Elephantine, it is mentioned in Porten and Yardeni (1986, A3 3: 1 D4 9: 1). There are well over three hundred mentions of this syntagm.

18 If this is a list of names, it would be the only clear defective writing of this PN.

19 The conjunctive *waw* was proposed by Porten and Yardeni in their edition but neither Aimé-Giron nor Dupont-Sommer considered this to be the case. Both read this as a volitive without a conjunction. The former considered the first word of this line to be *וַיַּעַשׂ* and the latter *וַיְהִי*].

20 The reading of a *het*, as first suggested by Dupont-Sommer, is practically certain here for a number of reasons. The mark below the first trace of ink on the righthand side of this line is not ink but a damage mark and thus cannot be a *yod* (unless the second stroke is exceptionally low and was entirely lost to damage). This is visible by careful examination of Aimé-Giron’s photo (Figure 1); I was able to confirm it via recent color photos I was privileged enough to examine during a recent trip to Egypt in June 2023. Unfortunately, for geo-political reasons, I was not given the authorization to publish these photos. Regrettably, Yardeni’s sketch of this ostrakon in (Porten and Yardeni 1999, D7.18), presents the damage mark as a thick trace of ink which, as can be seen when compared with Figure 1 (and more so with the color photos) is misleading. The trace fits the top of a *het* as seen in the first letter of *hzw* at the top of the ostrakon. Other options, such as a *Zain*, a *nun*, or arguably a *bet* followed by *rm* (i.e., *zrm*, *nrm*, *brm*) are either non-existent, do not fit the context, or are very late and esoteric.

21 The epigraphic possibility that this might be a different verb where the *resh* is to be read as a *dalet* (such as *ydmh*) has rightly been rejected by previous scholars and cannot fit any interpretation of the context.

22 I thank Dr. Theo Beers for this reference.

23 Most recently, Díez Herrera (2023) proposed a non-cultic interpretation of this ostrakon, suggesting that similarly to large temples in ancient Mesopotamia, such as *Ebabbar*, the tunic mentioned might have alluded to the existence of a textile production function at the Elephantine temple. This hypothesis, which the author admits is “not unquestionable”, finds no support in the record.

24 Curses with attention to poetic characteristics such as meter appear in Greek cruse texts—even to the point of forcing the text to fit the overarching meter (Lamont 2023, pp. 197–98).

25 Cf. Lev 27:29 וְיָדָה לֹא יִפְדֶּה מִן־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יָרַם כְּלֵי־הַרְחֵם (καὶ πᾶν, ὃ ἐὰν ἀνατεθῆ ἂπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, οὐ λυτρωθήσεται) and Ezra 10:8/1 Esd 9:4 וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָבֹא לִשְׁלֹשַׁת הַיָּמִים כְּעֵצַת הַשְּׂרָיִם הַזֵּהוּבִים יִחָרֵם כֹּל רִכּוּשׁוֹ (καὶ ὅσοι ἐὰν μὴ ἀπαντήσωσιν ἐν δυσὶν ἢ τρισὶν ἡμέραις κατὰ τὸ κρίμα τῶν προκαθήμενων πρεσβυτέρων, ἀνιερωθήσονται τὰ κτήνη αὐτῶν).

26 It is impossible to know anything about this priestess’ titles and position in society from the short text of this ostrakon and thus what might have been her connection to the role of a *qadištu*—known from Akkadian sources—or the Hebrew *qdšh* (e.g., Hos 4:14). For a recent study of these terms, see (DeGrado 2018).

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