Colonial Identity In The Jedaniah "Archive" At Elephantine

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COLONIAL IDENTITY IN THE JEDANIAH "ARCHIVE" AT ELEPHANTINE

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Abstract:
This study will consider the materiality of the Jedaniah collection from Elephantine through the lenses of process theory of identity and temporal-spatial discourse. The Jedaniah collection is composed of ten Aramaic documents, spanning at least twenty years in the mid-fifth century BCE. The documents include copies of letters sent and received by members inside of the "Jewish" community as well as Persian-backed authority figures. Since these texts were discovered in 1907, many scholars have discussed their content in relation to their "Jewish" themes, but few have questioned the theoretical frameworks employed for examining the material nature of the documents. A methodological framework will be presented that sets process theory of identity in conversation with Thomas Tweed's temporal-spatial theory. Process theory of identity has developed in the context of post-colonial discourse in order to explore how colonialized communities construct hybrid, dynamic identities in response to the internalized experience of colonialization. The works of Jon L. Berquist, Christiane Karrer-Grube, and Katherine E. Southwood, in particular, suggest that both the rule of the Persian Empire over the community at Elephantine and the broader inter-cultural interactions in this sub-province of the Persian Empire should be examined through a lens that accounts for the dynamics of imperial power and the hybridity of process identity common to colonized communities. Moreover, it is appropriate to consider temporal-spatial movement in the Persian Empire as it is reflected and developed through the material artifacts of the Aramaic missives in the Jedaniah collection, since a missive by nature is a temporally-delayed text sent between geographically separated communities. The result of this missive communication is an imperially-structured distal community discourse, which develops over time in a network of spatially removed community nodes and authorities. Tweed's analysis of space as differentiated, kinetic, interrelated, generated, and generative is used in this study as a productive means of analyzing these Aramaic letters as texts that actively construct the identity of this colonized group across space and time. In addition, analysis in light of process theory of identity and temporal-spatial theory will shed light on the challenges of this community's debated "Jewish" identity.

As a conquered province within the Achaemenid empire, the population of Yev (יב, that is, Elephantine), and its subgroups are an ancient context ripe with characteristics in common with modern day displaced and colonized communities. Having been dispossessed of their lands and political autonomy, the inhabitants of Yev exhibit the hybridity of their colonial identities through their intertwined relationships with the Persian authorities and one another. The missives central to this study, the Jedaniah letters (5th c. BCE), are a fruitful source of data for the process of identity formation, since they themselves both record and advance an inter-group conflict on the island of Yev.[1] The letters in this collection originated over the course of at least twenty years on Elephantine Island, from 419 to post-407 BCE. The majority of them are addressed to or mention an individual named Jedaniah bar Gemariah, a leader in the community.[2] The content of the letters

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[1] This collection is composed of 10 documents, including copies of letters sent to Yev and letters received at Yev from other locations, referenced in *The Textbook of Aramaic Documents* as A4.1-A4.10 (Porten, Bezalel, and Yardeni, Ada, eds, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt* (Magnes, 1986)).

[2] P. Grelot, 'Études sur le 'Papyrus Pascal' d'Elephantine', *Vetus Testamentum*, 4 (1954), 349-384.

altogether invokes a common cast of characters who are involved in this decades-long conflict that evolves and eventually resolves between the Jewish community on Elephantine, their Egyptian neighbors, and the Judean and Samaritan authorities in Achaemenid Yehud and Samaria whom the self-labeled "Yehudi" community on Elephantine consults. The appellation of the community as "Jewish" is at the core of the discussion to follow, as the challenges of identity in this colonial context will reveal.[3] Simply put, this study uses these letters to critique the validity of the question: Was this community "Jewish"?

Since the publication in 1911 of this corpus, many scholars have discussed its content in relationship to biblical law. Few scholars, however, have considered the material nature of the documents and how they operated as letters. The data available from the original documents will be integrated with the broader socio-political context of Persian period Egypt, based on the assumption that a society's physical treatment of a written artifact tells us about the people who produced it and used it. This material life of the document takes us beyond its semantic content, to a broader reciprocal social interaction that both motivated the document's creation and that results from it. In the case of these letters, they collectively convey a social process developed through their dispatch, reception, and response. This social analysis will be informed by categories derived from spatial theory, that examine the primary role of these documents as traversing geographical locations while addressing a temporally imminent event.

While there is no explicit documentation of how or precisely when this Yehudi community arrived in Yev, a number of scholars have suggested a variety of theories to this point. Of recent note, Karel van der Toorn's work on Amherst 63 has set forth a case for a northern Israelite origin for this group.[4] Since discussions of the group's origin are not yet conclusive, this study will focus upon the language presented in these missives about this particular conflict, which do not give the full picture of this community.[5] What is certain is that TAD A4.9 mentions that the first temple to Yahu on Yev was built prior to the arrival of Cambyses in Egypt, which was in 525. That is to say, there was an established presence of this group worshipping Yahu prior to the Achaemenid conquest of this southernmost reach of Egypt. We will see that it is possible for this Yehudi community to have traditions related both to northern Israel and southern Judah.

Recent scholarly discourse often invokes the materiality of texts to make a variety of points about texts' reflection and influence upon social functions: to discuss the monumentality of a displayed text in a public space, the performativity of a text through its oralization, or the ritual function of a textual artifact. The material role of missives, however, carries intrinsic characteristics that are unique to letters. As either copies or originals of written messages sent between parties, they all connect two geographical locations with a specific temporal profile: composition and/or dictation of an original and a copy in a first location, handed off to a messenger to physically dispatch the missive to the second location and likely verbally deliver the message with its material instantiation, received by one or more of the addressees. This means

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[3] Sugirtharajah sums up how postcolonial criticism has been brought to ancient contexts in the discipline of biblical studies: "What postcolonial biblical criticism does is to focus on the whole issue of expansion, domination, and imperialism as central forces in defining both the biblical narratives and biblical interpretation…It can also explore plurality, hybridity, and postnationalism, the hallmarks of the postcolonial condition" (R. S. Sugirtharajah, 'Charting the Aftermath: A Review of Postcolonial Criticism' in R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (Blackwell, 2006), 17).

[4] Karel van der Toorn, *Papyrus Amherst 63* (Ugarit Verglag, 2018).

[5] "postcolonialist theory consistently concentrates on the conflicts that occur within the ideological space of the colony." This perspective should be contrasted to a view of empire as teacher, civilizing the barbaric colonies. In the postcolonial framework, it is observed that imperial ideology requires the ruled to participate in their own subjugation – to believe that the rulers are justified or that they need external social control; the pattern continues because the colonized do not rebel, and the lack of rebellion results from the imperial social and ideological practices that reproduce the imperialist system (Jon L. Berquist, 'Postcolonialism and Imperial Motives for Canonization', in R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (Blackwell, 2005), 85-86).

that there was always a delay in the conveyance of the message, and that some party on the receiving end stored these missives along with copies of their replies. The preservation of the received letters and copies of those dispatched allows us to access the development across time and space of the community discourse according to a number of insider voices. The individuals connected by these documents are therefore very specifically directed: the letters identify an individual sender, and nearly all are addressed to multiple recipients who are either named individually or specified as a group (such as "the priests of Yahu the god," or "the troop"). Presumably there was some ongoing use for the documents that necessitated their preservation; clearly there were legal ramifications for the events described in the letters, and midway through the conflict it would have been uncertain how the whole situation would unfold.

Discussion of the geography of these missives and the relative power of each of the senders and recipients cannot be fruitful without discussing them in the specific geo-political dynamics of the Achaemenid Empire. The empire-colony relationship is one which intrinsically politicizes space. With the conquering of "othered" political entities, and the subjugation of those defined entities within an imperially administrated hierarchy, geographical spaces within an empire develop dynamics of power that reflexively play out over time. The missives express a matrix of locations between which these geo-political dynamics were already established. As one skims through the events and parties involved in this corpus, the involvement of the Persian empire on many levels is woven throughout – individuals are cited according to their position in the Persian hierarchy of administration, authorization for action is appealed to according to that hierarchy, and groups are referred to according to their ethnic-religious affiliation *as recognized by the Achaemenid administration*.

The earliest of these letters, TAD A4.1, dates itself to the fifth year of Darius, 419 BCE. This is the so-called "Passover letter," which is addressed to Jedaniah and his compatriots of the Yehudi troop, from an individual named Hananiah on the topic of a festival from the 14th to 21st of Nisan involving removal of leavening from homes and abstinence from fermented drink as well as work. The sender, Hananiah, is known from TAD A4.3 as well. This letter implies that his arrival aroused animosity from Egyptians towards the Yehudis: "Khnum has been against us since Hananyah was in Egypt until now."[6] This letter portrays the Yehudi community ("us") as one which is recognized as a distinguishable ethnic group by the Persian government. This entitled them to the rights of a Persian-recognized entity which was permitted to follow the traditions and cultic practices of its own religion.[7] Such a perception of an ethnic group's relationship to their religion is also implied by the reference to "Khnum," the Egyptian deity, as standing for the Egyptian community set in opposition to them. The "Passover" missive is a message directed "from the king to Arsames" the satrap, imperially authorizing the instructions about the dates and rites of this festival which Hananiah provides in the letter. This sets the stage for eventual Achaemenid involvement in the settling of the dispute described in the following letters that would take place at Yev nine years later.

The missives TAD A4.2 through 4.6 are sent mostly to Jedaniah and his colleagues from other individuals inside of the community, either fellow leaders or subordinates to these Yehudi leaders. The first events of these missives appear to have taken place in January or February of 410 BCE, since A4.2 mentions the month and A4.9 states that the temple was destroyed in June or July of year 14 of Darius. The letters here both record and ask for action in response to the events of the conflict. The dispute appears to stem from a theft committed by members of the Yehudi

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[6] With reference to this line in TAD A4.3:7, van der Toorn asserts that "Khnum" is used to refer to the whole of the Egyptian community on Yev (Karel van der Toorn, 'Ezra in Egypt? The Significance of Hananyah's Mission', *Vetus Testamentum*, 67 (2017), 604).

[7] van der Toorn reasons that in order for a group to have official authorization of their particular practices, their group must have been recognized administratively as a discernable entity (van der Toorn, 'Ezra', 602).

community, a resultant arrest, ensuing legal cases and investigation, and further action against the Egyptians on the part of the Yehudi troop. After the initial conflict reported in A4.2 & 3, A4.4 lists out more than fourteen individuals who were arrested due to a theft that took place in Yev, some of them having been captured in Yev and some in Thebes. Amongst these individuals is included Jedaniah bar Gamariah. A4.6 is quite fragmentary, but it at least in part reports the imprisonment of some Egyptian individuals. This reinforces the idea that from the perspective of the Persian law-keepers, parties on both sides of the conflict instigated action, including through leadership of the priests of Khnum on the Egyptian side and the priests of Yahu on the Yehudi side.

TAD A4.7 & A4.8 are parallel copies of a letter sent from Jedaniah and his colleagues in Yev to Bagohi (or "Bagoas" or "Bagavahya"), the governor of the Persian satrapy of Yehud, dated to the seventeenth year of Darius in 407 BCE. In this letter, Jedaniah and colleagues request permission to rebuild the temple to Yahu on Elephantine. This missive makes reference both to a previous letter that they had sent to Bagohi and had not been answered, and a previous request to the sons of the governor of Samaria for the same authorization. This letter also summarizes the whole of the conflict, between the Yehudis and an alliance of the local Persian authorities under the leadership of a man named Vidranga with local Khnum priests, who ultimately had destroyed the temple to Yahu.

The Yev community's relationship to both Samaria and Yehud is confirmed by TAD A4.9. This is a memorandum from Bagohi, governor of Yehud, and Delaiah, who was a son of the governor of Samaria under the Persians. Since it lacks the common address formulae of Aramaic letters, it may have served as a note that a messenger used to orally deliver a response to the Elephantine request letter in TAD A4.7 from the governors of Yehud and Samaria to Arsames, the satrap of Egypt. While it could be possible that this document might be an initial draft later used to formulate a formal letter, what is preserved in this document is a first person note from the perspective of the messenger to Yev.

Tying up the story of the temple to Yahu on Yev, TAD C3.15, sometimes called the Great Name List or the List of Temple Contributions, records the names of those who contributed to the rebuilding of the temple on Yev, as well as the amounts they contributed.[8] This piece of administration closes out the documentation extant for this inter-community conflict, dating to approximately 400 BCE. The Jedaniah collection is a group of documents that are thus gathered together on the basis of their content. They reflect common events and characters based in Yev, even though the letters were not all discovered together as an archaeological archive on Elephantine.

Persian imperial authorization frames the letter from Hananiah regarding the festival of unleavened bread (line 2: "from the king to Arsames"). This imperial involvement in the local cultural practices illustrates the Persian policy that encouraged maintenance of conquered groups' previous religious practices. Certainly, Achaemenid administration may not have been concerned with the diversity of tradition or genealogy within such colonial groups; these divisions primarily communicate Persian perception of kinship groups with relatively common cultural practices. This use of kinship ideology meets Yelvington's basic definition of "ethnicity as a 'social identity

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[8] Rosenberg concludes that the partial remains currently identified as the temple to Yahu parallel the Wilderness Tabernacle in Exodus 25-27, suggesting that the inhabitants of the "Aramaic" quarter of Yev originated in the Northern Kingdom (Stephen G. Rosenberg, 'The Jewish Temple at Elephantine', *Near Eastern Archaeology*, 67/1 (2004), 12). This conclusion is based on archaeological evidence discovered since earlier reconstructions of the temple neighborhood based on Aramaic contracts and letters (see Bezalel Porten, 'The Structure and Orientation of the Jewish Temple at Elephantine - A Revised Plan of the Jewish District', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 81/1 (1961), 38–42.).

characterized by fictive kinship'."[9] However, the Persian-defined ethnic communities were viewed by the empire as *other* to the norm that was Persia.

David Janzen examines Achaemenid royal inscriptions, including the Behistun inscription, with a view towards determining the empire-colony relationship during the Persian period:[10]

> In postcolonial analysis, hegemony is the ideology of the empire that claims to be normative and universal, that is accepted as such by the center of empire and by the colonized, and thereby functions as a non-violent form of control, since it justifies the empire's rule over the colonized, groups that are inevitably portrayed as in need of such rule. The narrative creates what postcolonial analysis refers to as hybridity, a reference to a formation of identity on the part of the colonized subalterns who do not entirely accept the identity through which imperial hegemony defines them, but who combine this imperial portrayal with aspects of their own culture. In a hybrid creation of identity, a colonized culture thus revalues and subverts the identity of the colonized subject imposed on it by imperial hegemony, writes Homi Bhabha, creating a communal identity that is at once compliant with and resistant to empire.[11]

Indeed, a papyrus copy of the Behistun Inscription was kept at Elephantine in Aramaic, for the purpose of keeping the empire at the center of colonial perception. Janzen points out that Xerxes' inscriptions often refer to Ahuramazda's creation of the world and establishment of Darius as king. In this imperial ideology, Ahuramazda created the world and the empire, and the building projects at the empire's center are a manifestation of this truth, since the point of colonies is to build up the empire's center. From the Persian perspective, this part of the empire was apportioned to them by Ahuramazda, and belongs to them as part of all habitable lands.[12] Post-colonial theory of identity recognizes that a colonized people will internalize the hegemonic "othering" imposed upon them by the empire.[13]

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[9] Katherine E. Southwood, *Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9-10: An Anthropological Approach* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012), 20.

[10] David Janzen, 'Yahwistic Appropriation of Achaemenid Ideology and the Function of Nehemiah 9 in Ezra-Nehemiah', *JBL*, 136/4 (2017), 845.

[11] There was probable circulation of the Bisitun inscription on clay and parchment, as other pieces of official Achaemenid writing probably did. "Before the Achaemenids, multilingual royal inscriptions were rare in the Near East, but the Persian kings made them the norm, apparently so that their ideology could be more widely understood. Darius claimed at various points that writing is an important way to convey the truth that the king wants to communicate." These inscriptions purpose to make the colonized aware of why the Achaemenids should rule them (David Janzen, 'A Colonized People: Persian Hegemony, Hybridity, and Community Identity in Ezra-Nehemiah', *Biblical Interpretation*, 24 (2016), 28).

[12] An inscription at Darius' tomb became the standard opening formula for the Achaemenid inscriptions (DNa 1-8): "A great god is Ahuramazda, who created this earth, who created that sky, who created mortals, who created happiness for mortals, who established Darius as king, one king of many, one lord of many." It is a common feature of other Persian inscriptions to reference the Achaemenid ruler as "the great king, king of kings, king of [many] peoples/countries." Some inscriptions emphasize the extent of the empire controlled by the king, sometimes saying that Ahuramazda has given the world to the Achaemenids to rule, or by giving long lists of subject peoples, by suggesting that the king rules all habitable lands. Other inscriptions have the formula "Proclaims PN the king" to indicate that the king's speech provides the true interpretation of the events relayed (Janzen, 'A Colonized People', 32).

[13] Segovia also emphasizes that the othering executed in the process of colonialization is structurally polarizing: "the reality of empire should be seen as a structural reality that is largely defined and practiced in terms of a primary binomial: on the one hand, a political, economic, and cultural center – more often than not symbolized by a city; on the other hand, any number of margins politically, economically, and culturally subordinated to the center. This grounding binomial entails and engenders, in turn, any number of secondary or subordinate binomials: civilized/uncivilized; advanced/primitive; cultured/barbarian; progressive/backward; developed/undeveloped – underdeveloped." (Fernando

Considering the intrinsic politicization of space that occurs in the empire-colony dynamic, it is valuable to discuss the geography of empire through the lens of spatial theory. For geographers like Doreen Massey who argue against essentialized or static notions of place, space is not a neutral descriptive material measurement, but rather an open and dynamic process.[14] In Thomas Tweed's words, "'space' is not a preexisting static container isolated from other spaces. Space is not an absence waiting for a presence…It's not static or outside the flow of time. It's not self-contained or beyond the flow of causes."[15] Phrased positively, space is interrelated, kinetic, generated, and generating.

The letters present in this collection map out space as it was perceived for the community on Elephantine. That is, Yev is a location on the farthest southwestern border of the Achaemenid empire which has military power only so far as it is granted by and beneficial to the Persian rulers. The space of Elephantine's society is also contingent on Persian hierarchy to delimit elements of its social practice, in the religious and cultural practices that are officially permitted for the recognized ethnic groups. Examining Yev within its Persian context is not only an activity that historians should do in order to do their due diligence for historical purposes, but more importantly is what the letters themselves set as a frame of reference. The events unfolding on Yev in these missives are related to Persian authorities at different levels of the imperial hierarchy in nearly every letter.

One of the defining characteristics of the empire-colony relationship is the ongoing relationship that Jon Berquist calls "resource extraction." Social theorists have described imperialism as a social process involving the asymmetrical distribution of resources and power to create a centralized imperial core and a number of peripheral colonies that serve to support and finance the imperial power and expansion. Functionalist sociological discourse defines an empire as a large-scale social unit that extracts resources (including labor) from other social units, the colonies.[16]

By the early fifth century, Darius had instituted much of the administrative standardization for which he is known.[17] These Persian strategies of ideologically colonizing features are all evident at Elephantine: the use of Imperial Aramaic, construction of provincial bureaucracies, appointment of Persians to roles within colonial governmental structures, military control of vast regions, taxation and other distribution of resources, conscription of people into imperial service, and ideologies of race and ethnicity within the empire.[18] Maintenance of these structures are directly financially and politically beneficial to the empire, serving as the long-term assertion of power over the conquered communities, and reinforcing their status as subjugated to the imperial primacy. In return colonies receive targeted support of local projects, like that portrayed in Ezra-Nehemiah where the Persian kings authorize and finance rebuilding of Jerusalem's temple and

F. Segovia, 'Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies: Toward a Post-Colonial Optic', in R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (Blackwell, 2006), 37–38).

[14] Kim Dovey, *Becoming Places* (Routledge, 2010).

[15] Thomas Tweed, 'Space', *Material Religion*, 7/1 (2015), 117.

[16] Berquist, 'Postcolonialism and Imperial Motives for Canonization', 79.

[17] "Darius, the third emperor, reigned from 522 to 486 BCE, and in his time the empire made important shifts from conquest extraction to other forms more suited to long-term imperialization. Although Darius participated in military endeavors, he is remembered more for his innovations in social organization and legal administration." Persian investment of resources in Yehud maintained it as a colony for long-term extraction. Darius' administration required colonies to develop written documents that explained each colony's past history and current legal traditions, along with cultic practices (Berquist, 'Postcolonialism and Imperial Motives for Canonization', 80–81).

[18] Resource extraction ideology from a Marxist standpoint is "a justifying veil for the repressive process by which the system enforces the submission of majorities into acquiescence and conformity with minority will" (Berquist, 'Postcolonialism and Imperial Motives for Canonization', 81).

city walls, as well as the infrastructure established throughout the empire. The empire is thus a process, and not just a conquest accomplished at a fixed point in time, or a static entity.[19]

It is especially pertinent to remember this ongoing element of empire for the fifth century events on Yev. This is a period in which the initial conquest by the Persians had been established in 525 (and again reestablished subsequent to an Egyptian rebellion in the late sixth century BCE), and still the continuing assertion of Persian power over the colonial locale impacted the inhabitants on a regular basis. Resource extraction is thus a relationship established over the space of the empire and through a temporal duration, for the purpose of maintaining the empire as a sovereign entity in the long term. This expresses one of Tweed's concepts, which is the *interrelated* nature of space, in which there is a "linking to other spaces and memories, opening out to other times and wider spaces."[20] Here there is a linking of colony to empire through resource extraction and imperial ideology.

What is spatially interrelated for the purposes of these missives, however, is not limited to the top-down power relationship that the Achaemenid Empire had with the colony in Yev and Syene. As one reads the letters, one starts to see the hybrid nature of this community's identity and relationships. The community from whom and to whom the letters are written is one that has typically been called "Jewish" due to self-reference in the letters as "Yehudi" (יהודי) or "Yehudaiay" (יהודיא), their worship of Yahu who was presumably Yahweh the god of the Israelites and Judahites, and the fact that they kept festivals of unleavened bread and Passover. However, the geographical locations – the spaces – referenced in the letters hint at the interrelationship of present Persian hierarchy experienced by the Yev communities and the past Israelite and Judahite connections re-imagined by the "Yehudi"s there. Yev's connection to three locations in particular is simultaneously defined by the Persian interpretation of this ethnic group's origins and by their version of their own past traditions. The geographical spaces referenced in the missives are the external Yev-Persia relationship, the internal Yev-temple relationship, and the hybrid Yev-Samaria-Yehud relationship.

From the external Achaemenid perspective, the Yehudi community on Yev is subject to the colonial structure present throughout their empire: regional satrapies overseeing local provinces. The Egyptian satrap at Susa from 411-408 BCE, Arsames, is frequently named in the missives as receiving messages from the Persian king regarding the governance of the local community (A4.1:2), as receiving appeals for legal suits (and potentially bribes from opposing parties, A4.2:5, 8, 9, 14), as "our lord" who took the local community's concerns to the king (4.5:2), and as receiving authorizations for local community's actions in rebuilding their temple (4.9:3). As such his mediation between Yev and the king takes on a necessary role in the local activities, and perpetuates the empire-colony relationship that permits ongoing resource extraction. The Persian interest in local stability and local recognition of Persian authority in community building doubtless was driven by the desire to continue taxation and resource acquisition. Arsames' role illustrates the colonial interrelated relationship to Persia across the wider space of empire. While we could view this as a relationship external to Yev, the role attributed to Arsames in these letters demonstrates the interrelated, intertwined nature of the empire-colony connection in which empire is not separable from local colony development. As an expression of this interrelatedness, letters were sent from community members with Persian authorization; internal affairs were not independent of imperial support.

While the Yev-Persia relationship is one playing out in the present time of this missive collection, the internal Yev-temple connection is more temporally complex. The temple to Yahu on the island embodies a Yehudi presence on the island, established before Persian conquest. This

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[19] Berquist, 'Postcolonialism and Imperial Motives for Canonization', 79.
[20] Tweed, 'Space', 120.

space is one that evoked some version of memories of Israelite and Judean history and of other temples to Yahweh (possibly both in Samaria and Jerusalem). As such, it interrelates the present Yehudi group on Persian-ruled Yev to a past political entity and a set of religious traditions that had played out in Israel and Judah. While there is a stream of tradition present in the Hebrew Bible that centralizes the cult to Yahweh in the Jerusalem sanctuary, and no texts in the Hebrew Bible mention any temple to Yahweh in Egypt, it is clear that this Yev sanctuary is a key piece of this community's identity. The conflict with the local Egyptian group is headed by the priests of Khnum/b in conjunction with the garrison chief Vidranga, and culminates in the destruction of the temple to Yahu as a means of asserting definitive victory over the Yehudi group. The Yev sanctuary is important enough that this group went to great lengths to rebuild it, as documented in their multiple correspondences with Samaria and Judah and the long accounting list of those who donated funds to the rebuilding effort. How the Elephantine Yehudis viewed their temple space is not directly described, but its value is evident in the actions taken around it. When the conflict arose with the Egyptians, they defended themselves, and the Egyptians used its destruction as an ultimate quashing of Yehudi assertion of relative power. This conflict demonstrates the process of the Yehudis negotiating their minority identity in this Persian colony, in relationship to other subsets of the colony while simultaneously connecting to their past as a people of Yahu. Beyond the most basic definition of ethnicity as expressing fictive kinship, Cohen suggests that ethnicity is most often visible over against the other: "rather than being 'imperative,' ethnicity is something which emerges at times of 'strife…in the course of which people stress their identity and exclusiveness.'"[21] The Egyptians attempt to end the Elephantine temple in order to destroy the process that it enacts, so that it can no longer continue to embody and develop the Yehudi presence and identity.[22]

The Yev-Samaria-Yehud relationship demonstrates a convergence of the previous two spatial relationships. The fact that the Yev Yehudi community appeals to Samaria and Yehud for cultural approval to rebuild their local temple to Yahu *before* asking for authorization from Arsames for imperial approval suggests that from the Persian perspective, this defined ethnic group's practices are a subset of the ethnic presence in Samaria and Yehud. Pierre Briant has argued that the Persian king had conferred upon Jerusalem the right to intervene in the religious practice of the Jewish diaspora, although there is no direct evidence of such an authorization.[23] TAD A4.7 and 4.8 seek approval from Bagohi, the provincial governor of Yehud, but play him off the Samaritan leadership by insisting that he reply to their second letter of appeal since they have also asked for approval from Samaria's governor. It is difficult to know how much the Achaemenid administration would have understood regarding the history of Samaria and Yehud's relations, but if Ezra-Nehemiah is to be believed, even during the fifth century there could have been overt competition between the two provinces for Persian financial support.[24] Ezra-Nehemiah also suggests that Persians viewed Jews outside of Mesopotamia and central Persia as led by the *golah*

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[21] Southwood, *Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9-10*, 20.

[22] "Ethnicity, therefore, in its most immediate sense is a matter of classification; it is the separating out and pulling together of the population into a series of categories defined in terms of 'we' and 'they.' Furthermore…ethnic categories also very quickly become social facts and can take on a life of their own…the boundaries imposed upon reality by categories often become the source of conflict and anxiety" (Southwood, *Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9-10*, 22).

[23] van der Toorn, 'Ezra', 608, Footnote 16.

[24] "Apparently Jewish identity at Elephantine did not coincide with the Jewish identity purportedly promoted by Nehemiah in Jerusalem. When the Persians formally recognized the Jews as a separate ethnic-religious community, they did not define it in terms of a formal body of doctrine. In their eyes, Jews were recognizable through their worship of Yaho (or variant forms of the divine name) and a common ritual calendar"; "In the Persian Empire, the Jewish community was a diaspora community with great internal diversity. Hananyah's mission marks a step toward greater conformity in the observation of the ritual calendar; it did not impose ethnic purity nor adherence to a strict monotheism" (van der Toorn, 'Ezra', 610).

community.[25] Nevertheless, the implication of the letter is that consent of either Samaria or Yehud would have been sufficient for Persian support of the Yev temple rebuilding.[26] TAD A4.9 reports in first person that the governors of Yehud and Samaria have jointly approved this unnamed messenger to tell Arsames that the Yev community may proceed with the temple. Although this chain of authority appears to have borne weight for the present Achaemenid administration, the self-ascribed characteristics of the Yehudi group in their documents provides a varied picture of the Persian-defined ethnic group.

The letters, addressed by other members of the community, convey a sense of unity at times in the use of kinship terms when referring to the recipients. The primary example of the kinship ideology is the use of "my brothers" (אחי) to address group members who were not biologically related, a non-literal usage of kinship terms that is common in the ancient Near East. van der Toorn even argues that the address as "my brothers" emphasizes their membership in an ethnic community living across the Persian Empire in Babylonia, Judah, and Egypt – a distinct awareness of Jewish identity.[27] There is never direct mention of the Babylonian *golah* community, but we know that the Yev community is connected to the Samaritan and Yehud provinces, which were connected to the Babylonian Jews. The unity of the group is also suggested by insinuation of ethnic group leadership, when individuals such as Jedaniah bar Gemariah are called "my lord" (מראי) by a sender who calls himself "your servant" (עבדכ) although he also is from the same ethnic group.[28] The phrase חילא יהודיא, which can be translated as "Judean troop" or "Judean community," identifies the community, and possibly the military troop, as Judean or Yehudi (A4.1).[29] This apparent relationship to the southern kingdom of Judah, however, is complicated by the invocation of Syrian and other northern deities in the address formulae of these and other letters from Elephantine Yehudis. van der Toorn has supported his claims of a northern Israelite origin for the "Yehudi" community on Yev with exploration of these deity invocations as well as an argument based on Amherst 63's version of Psalm 20, a probable northern psalm.[30] Certainly the community's willingness to appeal to Samaria nearly as readily as Jerusalem reveals its openness to Samaritan authorization of a temple to Yahu. Furthermore, the garrison also calls itself "Syenian" (סונכנ), which could mean that they served the Syenian garrison in part (A4.10:6)

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[25] If the Persian empire recognized the Babylonian-Persian Jewish diaspora's authority over the colony in Judah, and the Elephantine community were subject to the Judean colony, then potentially there is a chain of authority starting from the Babylonian-Persian Jewish diaspora, via Jerusalem and Samaria, to Yev. Presumably the Babylonian *golah* community would prioritize Jerusalem over Samaria, since they would have had Judean origins, but according to the Elephantine papyri, the Yehud-Samaria relationship appears to have been, at times, more collaborative than the biblical canon reflects. For Ezra-Nehemiah, the repatriate community is not able to develop an identity separate from its parent diaspora community; the direction is all one-way, from diaspora to Yehud (Peter R. Bedford, 'Diaspora: Homeland Relations in Ezra-Nehemiah', *Vetus Testamentum* 52/2 (2002), 155, 158).

[26] "if Jews are considered to be those who live in the Holy Land, revere the Pentateuch as scripture, and worship Yhwh the God of Israel, Samaritans should be included as Jews" (Gary N. Knoppers, 'How It Began and Did Not End: The History of Samari(t)an and Judean Relations in Antiquity', *Conversations with the Biblical World*, XXXV (2015), 189).

[27] van der Toorn, 'Ezra', 605.

[28] "Once the colony begins to feel the imperial power used to extract resources, a local elite begins to stratify the colonial social structure in new ways…This local elite occupies a strange place within the colonial social world. In part, they are colonized, but they are also active in the process of colonization and the reproduction of imperial/colonial ideology. Within the colony, they are the highest-ranking local officials; within the empire, they are the lowest bureaucrats possible. Their position grows not only from the local resources but from the application of imperial power into the colony" (Berquist, 'Postcolonialism and Imperial Motives for Canonization', 90–91).

[29] The only other occurrence of "the Jewish garrison" is in the heading of the List of Temple Contributions; Kottseiper in 2002 argued that the use of the expression the Jewish garrison reflects the official recognition on the part of the local Persian authorities of the Jews as a distinct group (van der Toorn, 'Ezra', 605).

[30] Karel van der Toorn, 'Anat-Yahu, Some Other Deities, and the Jews of Elephantine', *Numen*, XXXIX/1 (1992), 80–101.

– they were not wholly separate from the other ethnic divisions in the military.[31] The interrelationship of spaces, then, in these cases, winds between the present and the past – perhaps even multiple pasts of this enigmatic community which appears to relate readily to worshippers of Yahu in northern Israel and in southern Yehud, beyond the hierarchical relationship provided by the Persian overlords. Group membership in the missive collection is more identified by who is united on each side of the conflict; the Yehudi and Egyptian sub-communities both appeal to the empire for support while asserting their individual kinship boundaries.

The dynamics of Yev's relationship to Persia, its temple to Yahu, and Samaria and Judah exhibit what Tweed calls a "kinetic" feature of space. Characterizing space as kinetic reminds us that space is a process and not a thing, and that spaces change over time. Time and space are interlocked.[32] The missives are enacting the developing, kinetic relationship between Jerusalem and Elephantine, as the spaces are imagined through dual lenses: that of the community's past history with Jerusalem and Samaria and that of the Persian empire's province-satrapy hierarchy of power. The conflict that arose between the Egyptians and the Yehudis on Yev expressed and heightened the need to assert both their right to live on Yev and their right to do so as a kinship group who worshipped their own god. The temple to Yahu on Yev was a translocative and transtemporal location which could propel "visitors in time and space, back to earlier miraculous interventions and exemplary actions and up and down sacred sites…So political processes, social relations, and economic forces mark religious spaces, and, therefore, they are sites where power is negotiated as meaning is made."[33] The missives recognize that Yehudi bodies are culturally coded as "other" by the Egyptians, as they are individually named and imprisoned as perceived members of the Yehudi community. Yet, colonial habitation makes conceptions of home and homeland ambiguous, liminal, hybrid, between. Here, they have conflict with the Egyptians, yet they intermarry with Egyptians,[34] own property in Egypt, and have a military delegation that protects both Persian interest in the region and the non-Yehudi inhabitants of the area. An ongoing process of identity negotiation is taking place over time and space, and the letters are a material enactment of that very process.

Closely related to this kinetic characteristic is the idea that space is both generated and generative, a reflexive view of human-created spaces (such as temples, cities, provinces, or empires). This characteristic recognizes that humans not only are the sources of such creations, but that they are also affected actively by those space conceptions. The space of the Achaemenid empire has an effect on how the subgroups on Yev assert themselves, via their internalization of their othering. The temple to Yahu on Yev asserted the Yehudi presence to the extent that the Egyptians destroyed it in order to destroy its active effects. On the level of reflexive social action that furthers the generated and generative boundaries of their group, the Yehudi group generated titles within their group which accept the Persian recognition of their ethnic group, but also created kinship and leadership within the group. Use of these titles ("my lord," "your servant," "my brothers") is thus generative, as it perpetuates the group's self-perception and portrayal as unified, defined, and even subversive in its self-definition.

The continuing Egyptian and Persian perception of the Yehudi community as outsider and immigrant, even, highlights the social consequences of this migrant community. All of the theories regarding the origins of this community agree on one thing: they eventually arrived at Elephantine as a consequence of empire, either a responsive forced migration, refugees of a war,

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[31] van der Toorn, 'Ezra', 605.
[32] Tweed, 'Space', 120.
[33] Tweed, 'Space', 121.
[34] Mibtahia was the aunt of Jedaniah, and one of her husbands was an Egyptian. One man who was steward in the Temple of Yaho was married to an Egyptian girl. In other cases children were named with Egyptian names, so perhaps the spouse was Egyptian (van der Toorn, 'Ezra', 608).

an imperial conquest, or the ensuing socio-economic crisis. Catherine Brun and Anita Fábos emphasize that for refugees and forced migrants, "*place* is a particular articulation of social relations stretched out beyond one location."[35] More specifically, they note the social uncertainty and conflict that can arise for a community like that on Yev, due the state of ongoing displacement.[36] For those in Yev and Syene, although the Yehudi community has lived there for more than one hundred years at the time of this conflict with the Egyptians and has intermarried with them, their presence was viewed as *other* and a threat. The long-term and hybrid nature of their habitation on Yev has not erased the liminality of their status. Brun and Fábos continue, "According to anthropological theorizing, the quality of being in a liminal state – betwixt and between accepted social categories and the norms and expectations linked to those categories – is profoundly threatening to the social order."[37] It should not be surprising that this hybrid, liminal community came into conflict with those who viewed themselves as the original inhabitants of the locale. The diaspora experience "is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference."[38]

The problem of calling this people group "Jewish" exists because of the colonial context in which they find themselves. On Yev, they established themselves as people who will continue to worship Yahu, the god of their ancestors, but meanwhile adapt to their present circumstances, marrying with members of other ethnic groups, recognizing gods from other regions, serving a military role in the Persian empire, and expressing themselves in the language and textual formats of the empire. Simultaneously, other descendants of worshippers of Yahweh from Israel and Judah had settled themselves in Mesopotamia and Syria, adapting in diverse ways to their own settings. The identity of this group in Egypt not only highlights the hybrid nature of colonial communities, but also illuminates the challenge of examining identity. Post-colonial studies have been helpful in providing a model for discussing identity that is a process theory of identity, which may serve as an alternative to a static view of identity. Process theory of identity articulates the process of positioning as a framing of identity by two axes or vectors: one of continuity and similarity that is grounded in the past, and one of difference and rupture.[39] Stuart Hall points out that the problem of identity is one of power dynamics: "Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematizes the very authority and authenticity to which the term 'cultural identity' lays claim."[40] The integration of seemingly *Persian* cultural practices into the Jewish community's life as part of their ongoing production of who they are is expressed in their own words – their own representation – within the Jedaniah missives. Indeed, for Bhabha, mimicry is the effect of hybridity, and the apparent adoption by the colonized subject

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[35] Catherine Brun, and Anita Fábos, 'Making Homes in Limbo? A Conceptual Framework', *Refuge* 31/1 (2015), 6.

[36] "The tensions that accrue as a result of ongoing conflict, volatility, and flux from interactions between people on the move and the institutions, systems, and structures designed to manage particular types of human movement, lead to states of high uncertainty and social fluidity" (Brun and Fábos, 'Making Homes', 6).

[37] Brun and Fábos, 'Making Homes', 10; see also: Said, 'Reflections on Exile', 147. "The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience."

[38] Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds, *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* (Columbia University, 1994), 402.

[39] Hall, 'Cultural Identity', 395.

[40] Hall, 'Cultural Identity', 392.

of the identity imposed upon it is simultaneously a subversive adoption.[41] The choice of the colonized to selectively recognize and validate the legitimacy of some aspects of the culture of the colonizer disrupts the categories that authorize and legitimate imperial power.[42]

The question with Elephantine should not be "were they Jewish, and what does that mean?" but "by what processes does this complex, hybrid community construct their identity/identities during this particular period, within this missive representation?" The missives are particularly pertinent to the question, as they illustrate the unfurling of a dynamic, changing relationship between "us" and "them," in varied voices within the community as the conflict developed over time. The temporal-spatial nature of letters enacts an implicitly dynamic process that contributes to ongoing identity construction. Unlike the Hebrew Bible, whose literature at times attempts to impose coherence on the past of the Judahite community, this set of missives sets out to give voice to the present of one location. The corpus' contribution is in the interrelationship of spaces, connecting the local community within itself to work out this sub-set of the colony's hybrid, liminal, muddy borders, while also drawing out its relationship to the authority of the Persian empire, via provincial administration in Samaria and Yehud. With its insistence upon rebuilding the temple to Yahu on Yev, the Elephantine Jewish community is reasserting its connection to the past in Israel and Judah, and its commonality with Jewish communities in Samaria, Jerusalem, and Mesopotamia, even while living in ways that both convey and subvert its century in Egypt and under Persian rule. For process identity theory, the connection to Israel and Judah would be the vector to the past, while the Achaemenid authority's involvement is a vector to the present. Coming out of their conflict with the Egyptian group led by the priests of Khnum and Vidranga, they reclaim their othered status, while claiming their right to live as *others* on Yev.[43] A parallel process of hybrid reconstruction and definition happens in Ezra-Nehemiah's Yehud, where the Jewish community sets apart foreign women who have intermarried with their men, while simultaneously accepting Persian authorization of the Jerusalem temple.[44] If the empire is continually reconquering its colonies through the structures it utilizes to extract resources and maintain its power through time and space, so also the colonial sub-communities are renegotiating and reconstructing their identities through time and space. Cultural identity should be seen as a positioning process within a sociopolitical context.[45] The missives embody one slice of this community's story, told in the geo-political relationships of authority and law; they are a geo-political *positioning* of the marginal colonial communities to the point of reference that is the

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[41] "The process of imperialization imprints an identity on people, including self-definitions as well as related mind-sets, orientations, beliefs, and roles…Such imposed identities operate to displace other identities of autonomy" (Berquist, 'Postcolonialism and Imperial Motives for Canonization', 62).

[42] Janzen, 'A Colonized People', 29.

[43] "They had the power to make us see and experiences *ourselves"* as 'Other.'" "This 'look', from –so to speak – the place of the Other, fixes us, not only in its violence, hostility and aggression, but in the ambivalence of its desire. This brings us face to face with the dominating European presence not simply as the site or 'scene' of integration where those other presences which it had actively disaggregated were recomposed – re-framed, put together in a new way; but as the site of a profound splitting and doubling – what Homi Bhabha has called 'this ambivalent identification of the racist world…the 'Otherness' of the Self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity'" (Hall, 'Cultural Identity', 394, 400).

[44] "In EN we can study a community's *process of self-constitution and discovery of identity in the tension between its own possibilities for formation and its dependence* on a given political and cultural system. Presupposed here is a *crisis situation* because of which a simple continuation of earlier traditions is impossible"; "Analysis of the ideas in EN clearly reveals a *fundamental problem in the construction of identity*: precisely in conditions in which foreign systems of norms and traditions are dominant, the construction of one's own identity requires the fencing off of 'others,' 'foreigners.' This requires a continually new decision about how much association and integration is possible and how much rejection and separation is necessary" (Christiane Karrer-Grube, 'Ezra and Nehemiah: The Return of the Others', in Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker, eds, *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature* (Eerdmans, 2012), 194, 205).

[45] Hall, 'Cultural Identity', 395.

Persian administrative hierarchy. This is a history of which we do not have an extant communicative memory which claims to be a complete or definitive history of this hybrid and particular people.[46] This collection of letters is a fractured and incomplete collage of voices testifying to facets of an uncertain and mutating whole.

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[46] See Jan Assmann, 'Communicative and Cultural Memory', in A. Erll and A. Nuenning, eds, *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (de Gruyter, 2008), 109–118.

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