

Egypto-Judaiaca: The First Jews in Egypt And the Egyptian Influence on the Bible

KAM Isaiah Israel
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Joey Cross

Ph.D. student, Egyptology and Hebrew Bible

University of Chicago

Nehemiah 8

“When the seventh month arrived—the Israelites being settled in their towns---the entire people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate [of Jerusalem], and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the scroll of the Teaching of Moses with which YHWH had charged Israel...[Ezra] read from it...the ears of all the people were given to the scroll of the Teaching.”

Elephantine

Called *Abu* "Ivory place" in Egyptian,
Yeb in Hebrew and Aramaic.









P.13464

Fragment 1: A long, narrow strip of papyrus with several large holes. It contains approximately 10 lines of handwritten text in a cursive script, likely a form of Greek or Latin.

Fragment 2: A shorter, wider strip of papyrus with irregular edges and some holes. It contains approximately 5 lines of handwritten text in the same cursive script as the first fragment.

[]daniah and his colleagues the Judean []
your brother Hananiah. May the gods [] the
welfare of my brothers []

...Now, you thus count []
[] observe [] and from the
15th day until the 21st day of []

[] be pure and take heed. [] work []
[] Do not drink []
[] not [] anything leaven, []
[] sunset until the 21st day of Nisan []
[] bring into your chambers []
[] and seal them up during [] days...



Numbers 28:16-17

וּבַחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן בְּאַרְבַּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ פֶּסַח לַיהוָה:

In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, there shall be a passover sacrifice to the LORD,

וּבַחֲמִישֵׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה חַג שִׁבְעַת יָמִים מַצּוֹת יֵאָכֵל:

and on the fifteenth day of that month a festival. Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days.

The “Passover Letter”

[To my brothers Je]daniah and his colleagues the Judean [garrison,] your brother Hananiah. May the gods [seek after] the welfare of my brothers [at all times.]

...Now, you thus count [fourteen days in Nisan and on the 14th at twilight] observe [the Passover] and from the 15th day until the 21st day of [Nisan observe the Festival of Unleavened bread. Seven days eat unleavened bread.

Now,] be pure and take heed. [Do not] work [on the 15th day and on the 21st day of Nisan.] Do not drink [any fermented drink. And do] not [eat] anything leaven, [nor let it be seen in your houses from the 14th day of Nisan at] sunset until the 21st day of Nisan [at sunset. And] bring into your chambers [any leaven which you have in your houses] and seal them up during [these] days...



Mishnah Pesachim 3.1

אלו עוברין בפסח. כותח הבבלי ושכר המדי. וחומץ האדומי. **וזיתום המצרי**.
וזומן של צבעים ועמילן של טבחים. וקולן של סופרים. רבי אליעזר אומר
אף תכשיטי נשים. זה הכלל. כל שהוא ממין דגן הרי זה עובר בפסח. הרי
אלו באזהרה ואין בהן משום כרת:

[With] these items [we] would be transgressing on Pesach [since they are considered *chamets*]: Babylonian *kutach* [a type of bread pudding], Median beer, Edomite vinegar, **Egyptian ale**, bran water [used by] dyers, working dough [used by] cooks, and glue [used by] scribes; Rabbi Eliezer says, "Also the adornments [used by] women." This is the general rule: whatever is [made] from a type of grain [and is leavened], behold [with] this, [one] transgresses on Pesach; behold these [incur the penalty attached to the transgression of] an admonitory precept, but they do not [bring about] *karet* [Divinely imposed punishment consisting in severance from Heaven and/or the Jewish people].

A letter requesting the temple to be rebuilt

Handwritten text in Aramaic script on a fragment of papyrus. The text is arranged in approximately 15 horizontal lines, though the fragment is irregularly shaped and has some missing sections. The script is a cursive form of Aramaic, likely from the 3rd or 4th century CE. The content is a request for the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, a common theme in Jewish apocalyptic literature of that period. The text is written in dark ink on a light-colored, fibrous material.

A letter requesting the temple to be rebuilt

“To our lord, Bagohi, governor of Yehud, from your servants:
Yedaniah and his associates, the priests who are in the
fortress of Elephantine.

May the God of the Heavens perpetually pursue the welfare
of our lord greatly and grant you favors before Darius the
king ... May you be joyful and healthy at all times.

Now your servant Yedaniah and his associates testify as
follows:

In the month of Tammuz, in the fourteenth year of King
Darius ... the priests of the god Khnum, who is in the
fortress of Elephantine, conspired with Vidranga, who was
administrator here, to destroy the temple of YHW in the
fortress of Elephantine.



A letter requesting the temple to be rebuilt

So that villian Vidranga sent this order to his son Nefayan, who was in command of the garrison of the fortress at Aswan: "The temple of the god YHW in the fortress of Elephantine shall be destroyed."

Nefayan consequently led the Egyptians with other troops. Arriving with their weapons at the fortress of Elephantine, they entered the temple and burned it to the ground. They smashed the stone pillars that were there. They demolished five great gateways constructed of hewn blocks of stone which were in the temple; but their doors (are still standing), and the hinges of those doors are made of bronze . . . and whatever else was there, were all burned with fire. As for the basins of gold and silver and other articles that were in the temple, they carried all of them off and took them as personal possessions.



A letter requesting the temple to be rebuilt

Now, our ancestors built this temple in the fortress of Elephantine in the days of the kingdom of Egypt; and when Cambyses came to Egypt he found it already built. They knocked down all the temples of the Egyptian gods; but no one damaged this temple.

But when this happened, we and our wives and our children wore sackcloth, and fasted, and prayed to YHW, the Lord of Heaven, who has let us look upon Vidranga.



A letter requesting the temple to be rebuilt

Let a letter be sent from you to them concerning the temple of the god YHW to construct it in the fortress of Elephantine as it was before. And the grain-offering, incense, and burnt-offering will be offered in your name, and we will pray for you continuously—we, our wives, and our children, and the Yehudites who are here, all of them—if you do this so that this temple is reconstructed. And you shall have honor before YHW, the God of the Heavens, more than a man who offers him burnt-offerings and sacrifices worth a thousand talents of silver and gold.

Because of this, we have written to inform you. We have also set forth the whole matter in a letter in our name to Delaiah and Shelemiah, the sons of Sanballat, the governor of Samaria...”



Preponderance of Semitic loanwords in Egyptian

- Egyptian *birita* “obligatory service, treaty of submission.” Refers to the forced labor that certain temple personnel could have been subjected to. Also is used for a binding agreement between individuals, like a promise.



- = Hebrew ברית *berit* “treaty, covenant”

Preponderance of Semitic loanwords in Egyptian

- Egyptian *shalama* “peace, greetings.”



- = Hebrew שלם *shalom* “peace”

Egyptian mentions of Ancient Israel?

Execration texts

- From ca. 1800 BCE
- Pots and figurines inscribed with names of enemies

“Their strong men, their messengers, their confederates, their allies, who will rebel, who will plot, who will fight, who will say that they will fight, who will say that they will rebel, in this entire land.”

Earliest mention of Jerusalem.





The Merneptah Stele, ca. 1200 BCE
(Egypt)

From the “Merneptah Stele”

Canaan has been plundered into every sort of woe:

Ashkelon has been overcome;

Gezer has been captured;

Yano'am is made non-existent.

Israel is laid waste and his seed is not;



Annals of Sheshonq at Karnak,
late 10th century BCE
(Egypt)



Annals of Sheshonq at Karnak,
late 10th century BCE
(Egypt)



Annals of Sheshonq at Karnak

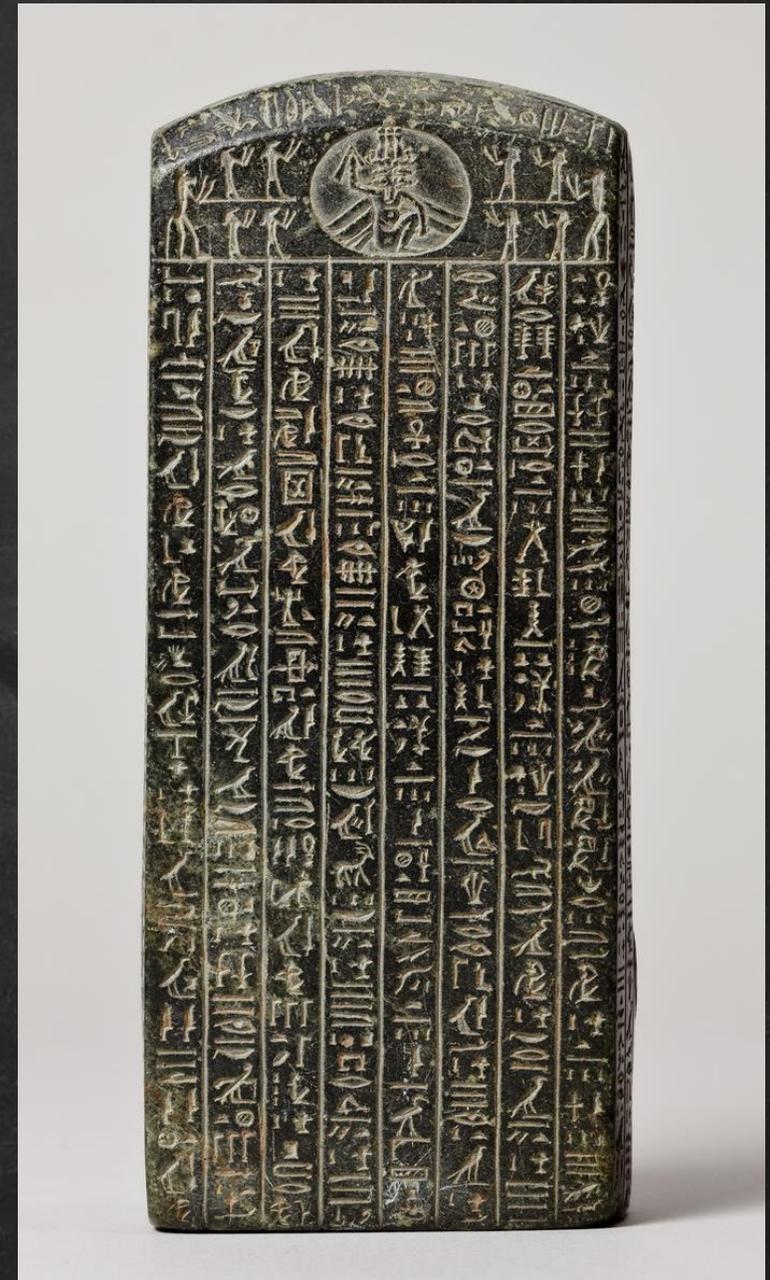
- ◇ Sheshonq listed cities he destroyed when campaigning in the Southern Levant
 - ◇ Including Gaza and Megiddo
 - ◇ Jerusalem and the names Israel or Judah are not mentioned
- ◇ Compare 1 Kings 14:

“In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, King Shishak of Egypt came up against Jerusalem; he took away the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king’s house; he took everything. He also took away all the shields of gold that Solomon had made.”

Evidence in the Hebrew Bible of Interactions
With Ancient Egypt

Numbers 5:11-31

Horus cippus, Oriental
Institute museum
(Ptolemaic Thebes)



Metternich Stele
(Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Carravaggio, *Madonna and Child with St. Anne*
(Galleria Borgese, Rome)



Numbers 5:11-31

- Only understandable in terms of the Egyptian equivalence of *swallowing* and *knowing*.



Egyptian *am* “to swallow” becomes “to know”

Numbers 5:11-31

- Magic is itself neutral, but it can be used for either “bad” or “good” effects.
 - The same action (“swallowing” words) can both protect you from snake bites, and induce a miscarriage.

Numbers 5:11-31

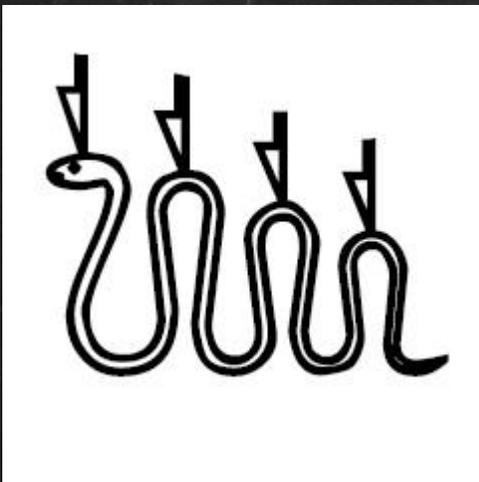
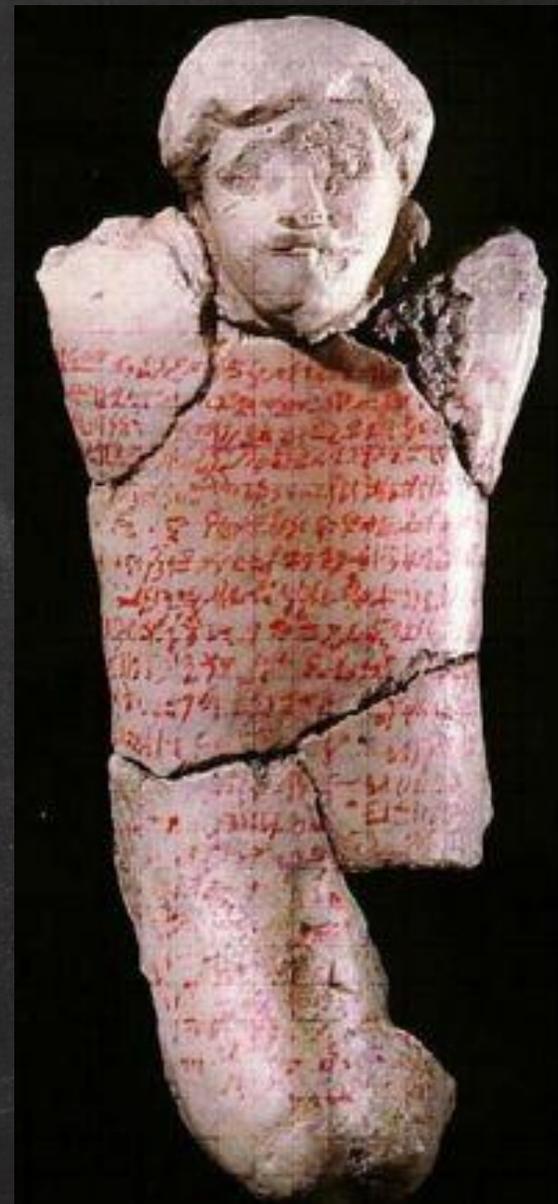
- Swallowing = knowledge in the Hebrew Bible as well:
 1. Ezekiel swallowing the scroll.
 2. The Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden.

Execration objects

- From Jeremiah 19:

Thus said Yahweh: “Go and buy a potter’s earthenware jug...Go out to the valley of the son of Hinnom at the entry of the Potsherd Gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you...

... Then you shall break the jug in the sight of those who go with you, and shall say to them: ‘Thus says Yahweh of Hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter’s vessel, so that it can never be mended.’”

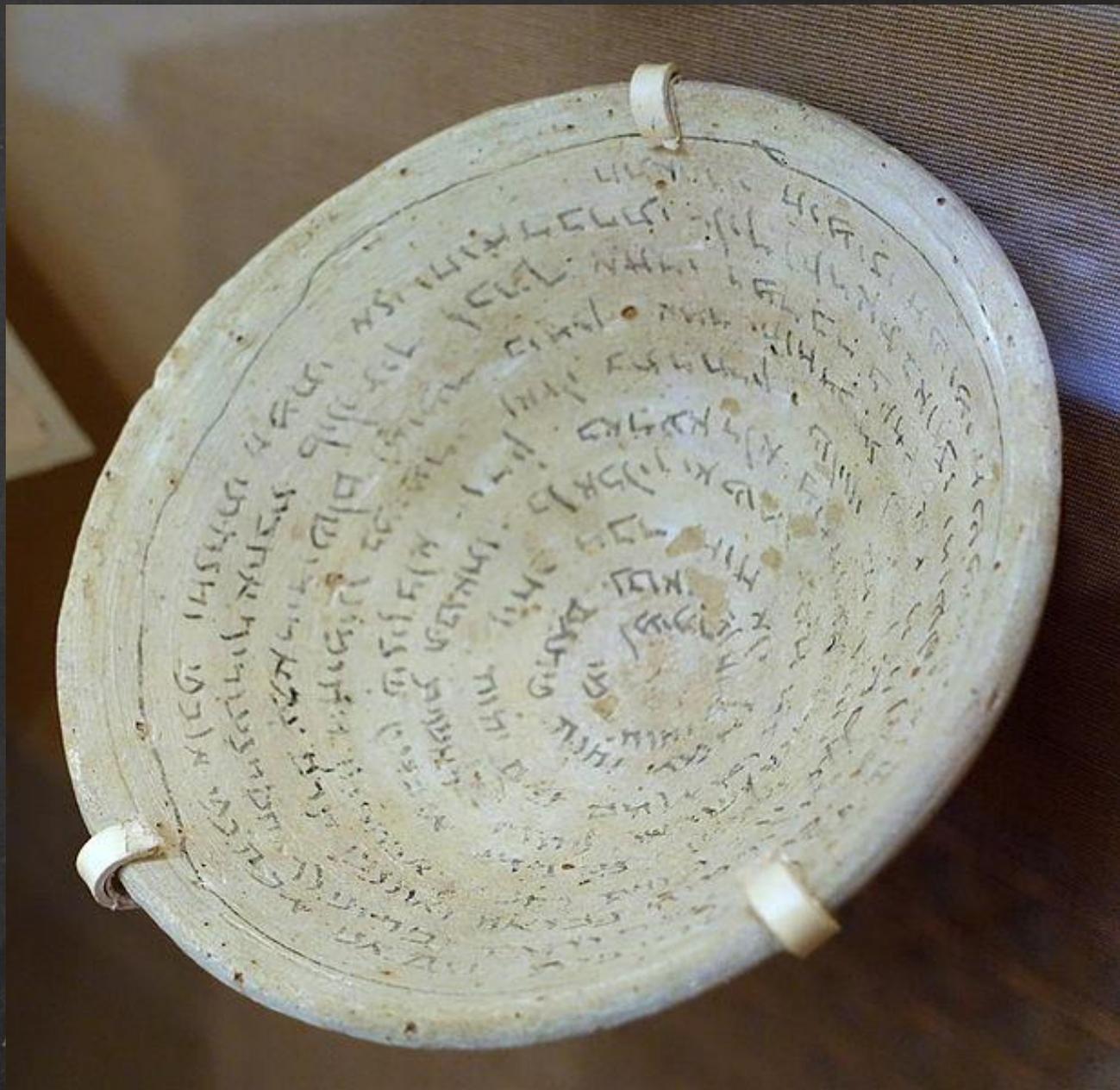


Execration objects

- Compare Psalm 2:9:

You shall break them with a rod of iron,
and smash them into pieces like a potter's vessel.

Aramaic incantation bowl from Nippur, Sassanian Period (Oriental Institute Museum)



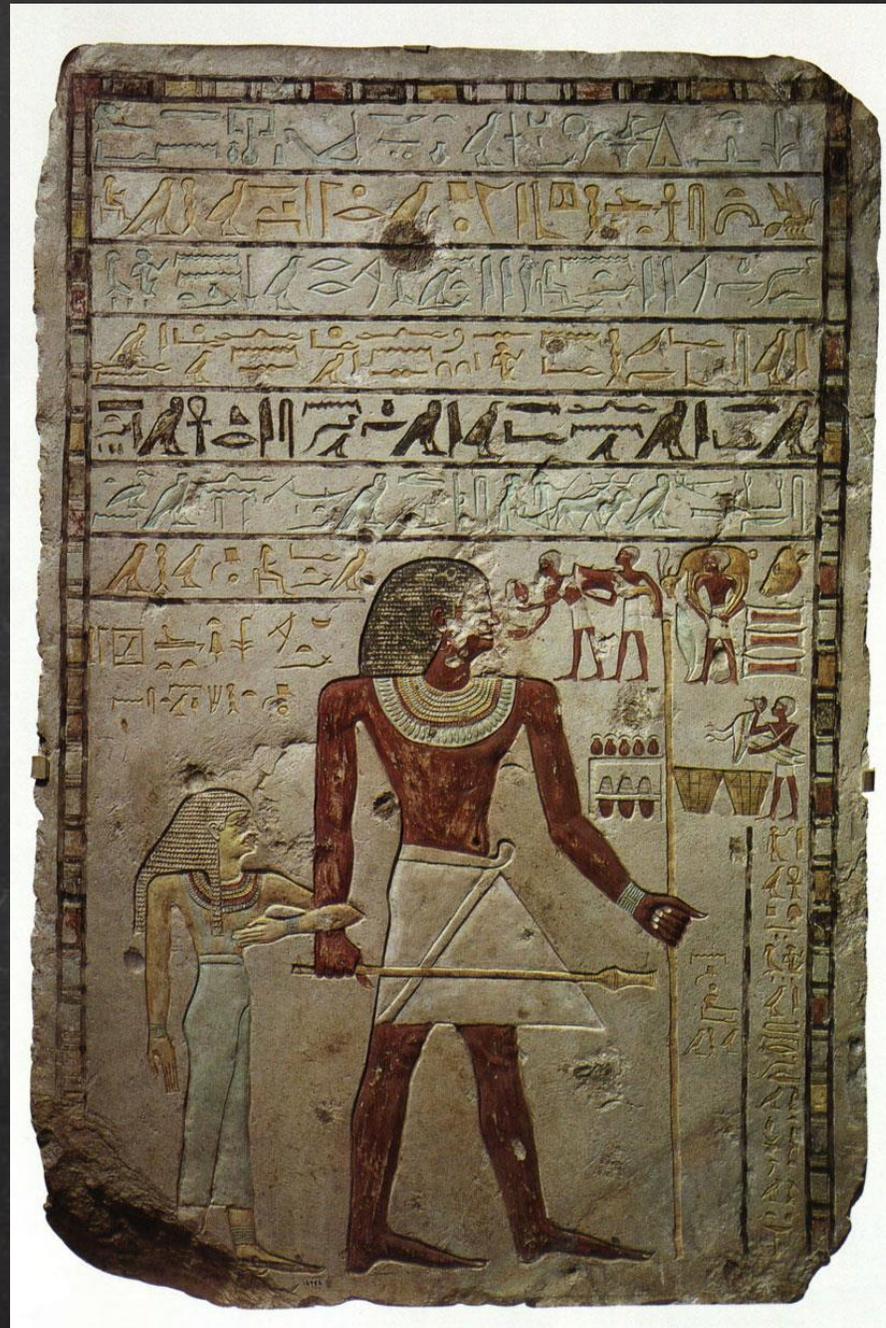
Execration objects

- From Qoheleth (“Ecclesiastes”) 12:

Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come ... because all must go to their eternal home,

The mourners will go about the streets
Before the silver cord is snapped:
The golden bowl is broken
The jug is broken at the fountain
The wheel broken at the cistern
The dust returns to the earth as it was,
And the breath returns to God who gave it.

Stela of Uha (Oriental Institute), First Intermediate Period (2181-2040 BCE)

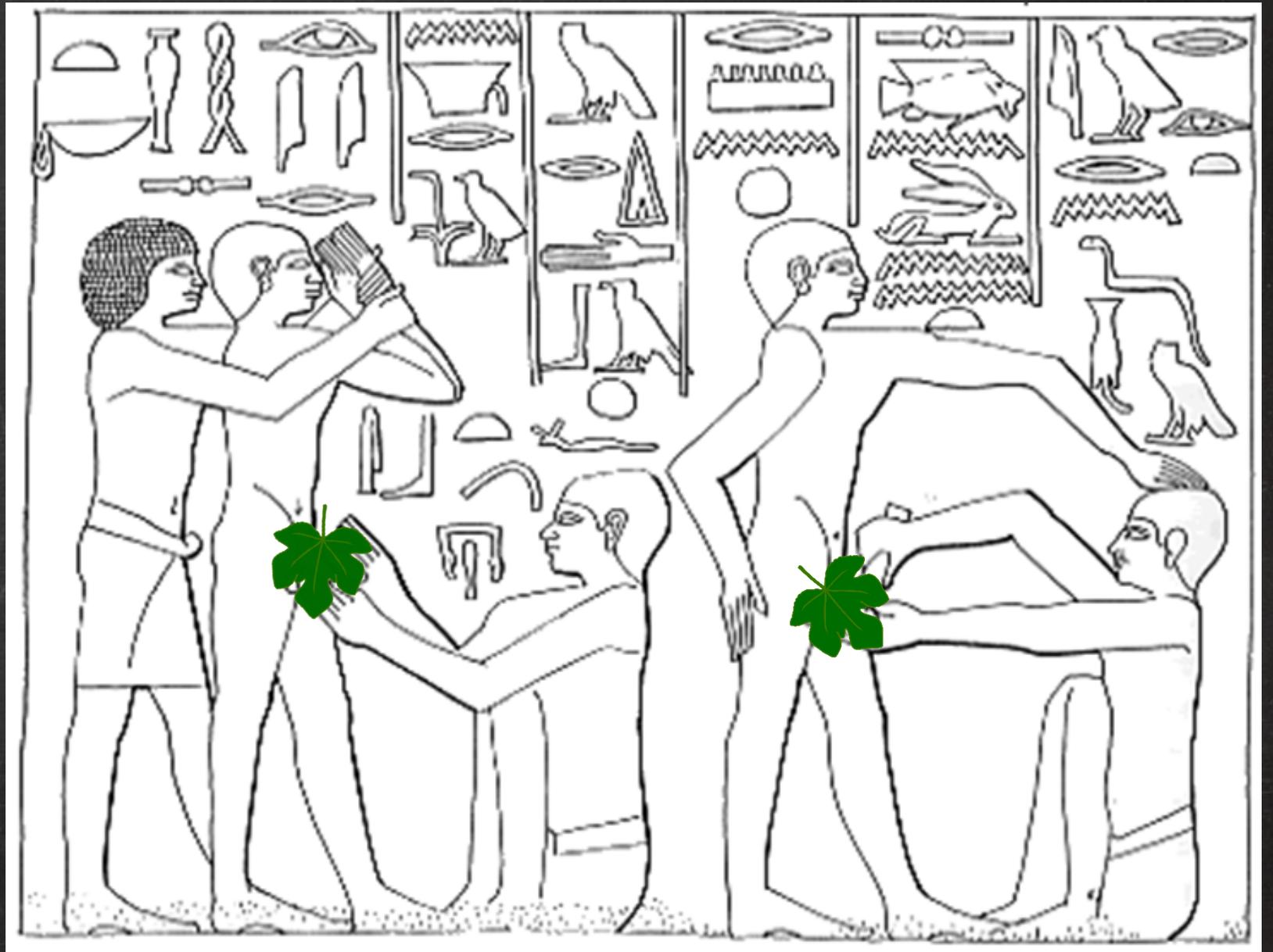




Detail from Stela of Uha (Oriental Institute):

“I was circumcised with 120 men. There was no one who struck, there was no one who was struck. There was no one who scratched, there was no one who was scratched.”

Depiction of circumcision, from the tomb of Ankhmahor, Dynasty 6 (early 3rd millennium)



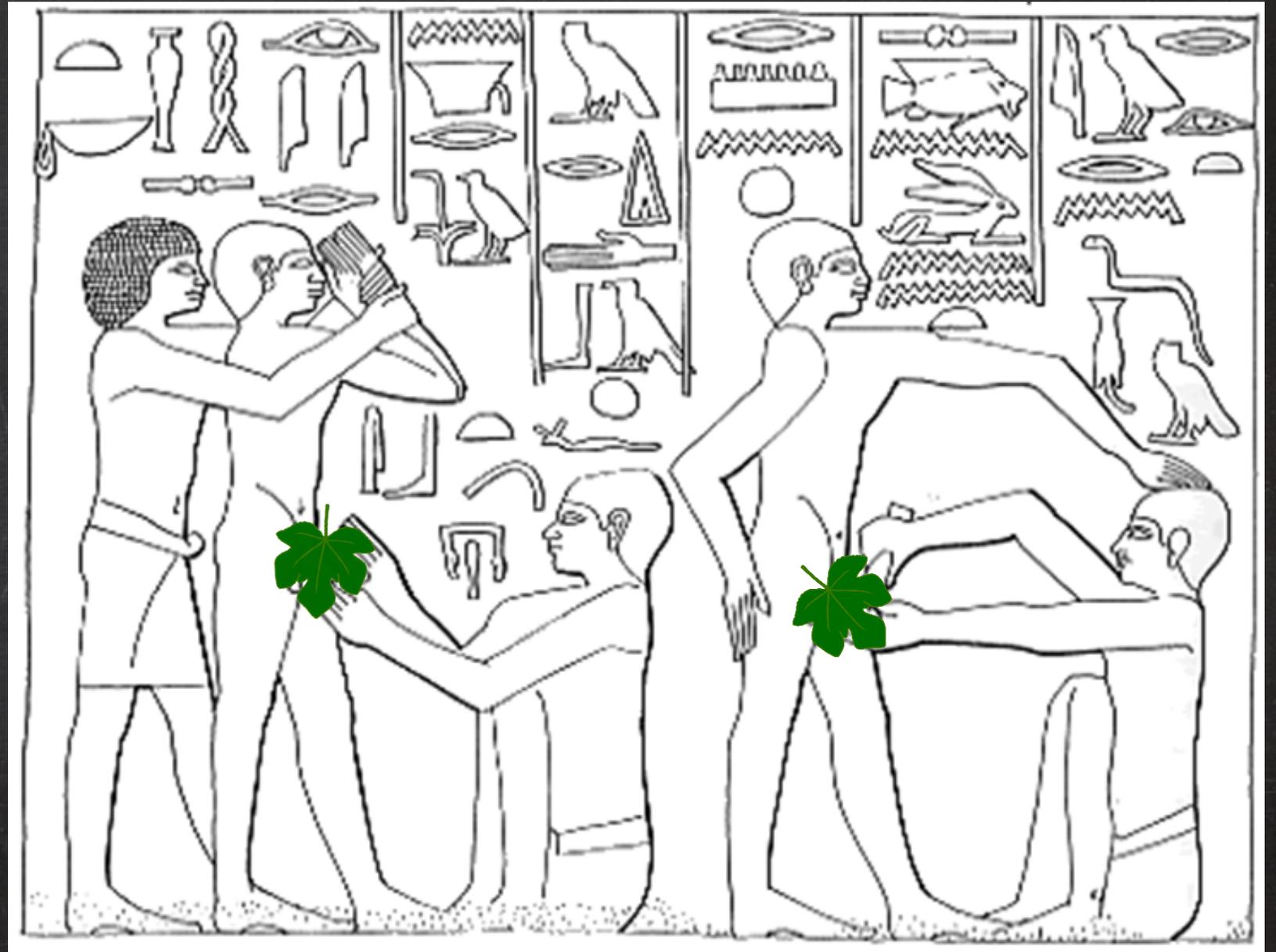
Translation of captions (“speech bubbles”):

“I am doing as you please.”

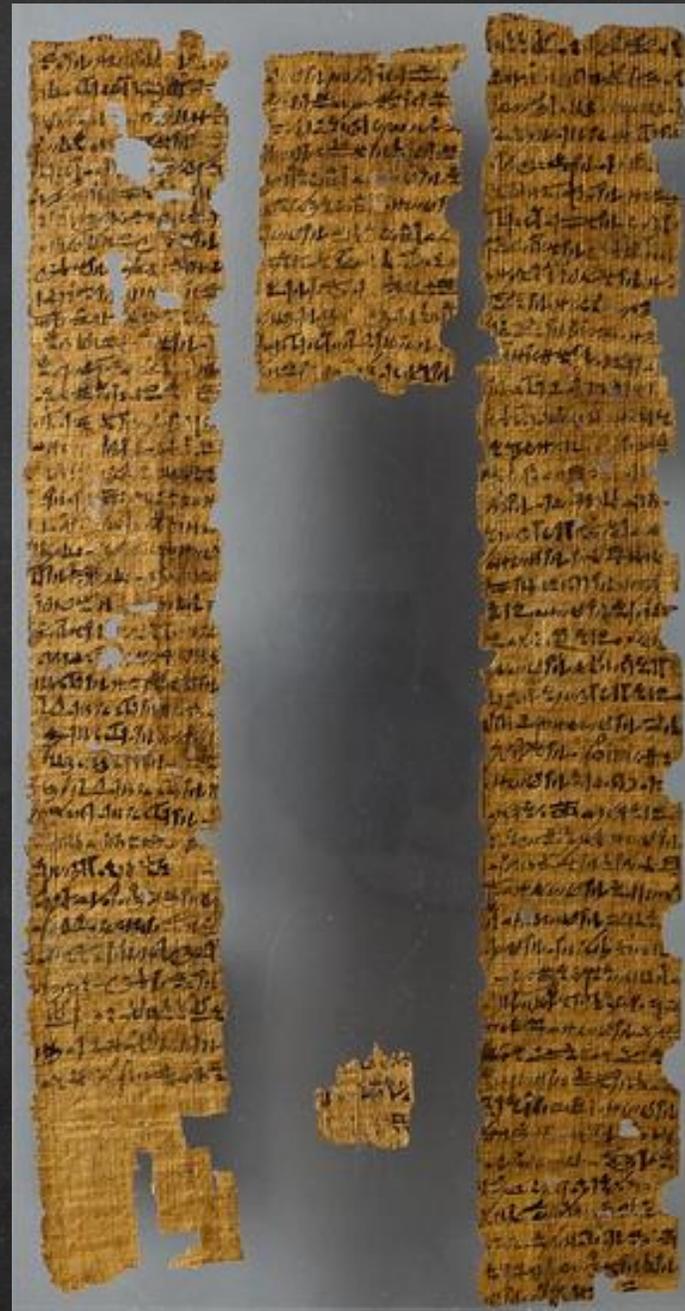
“Hold him! Don’t let him fall down!”

“I will proceed carefully.”

“Make a thorough cut!”

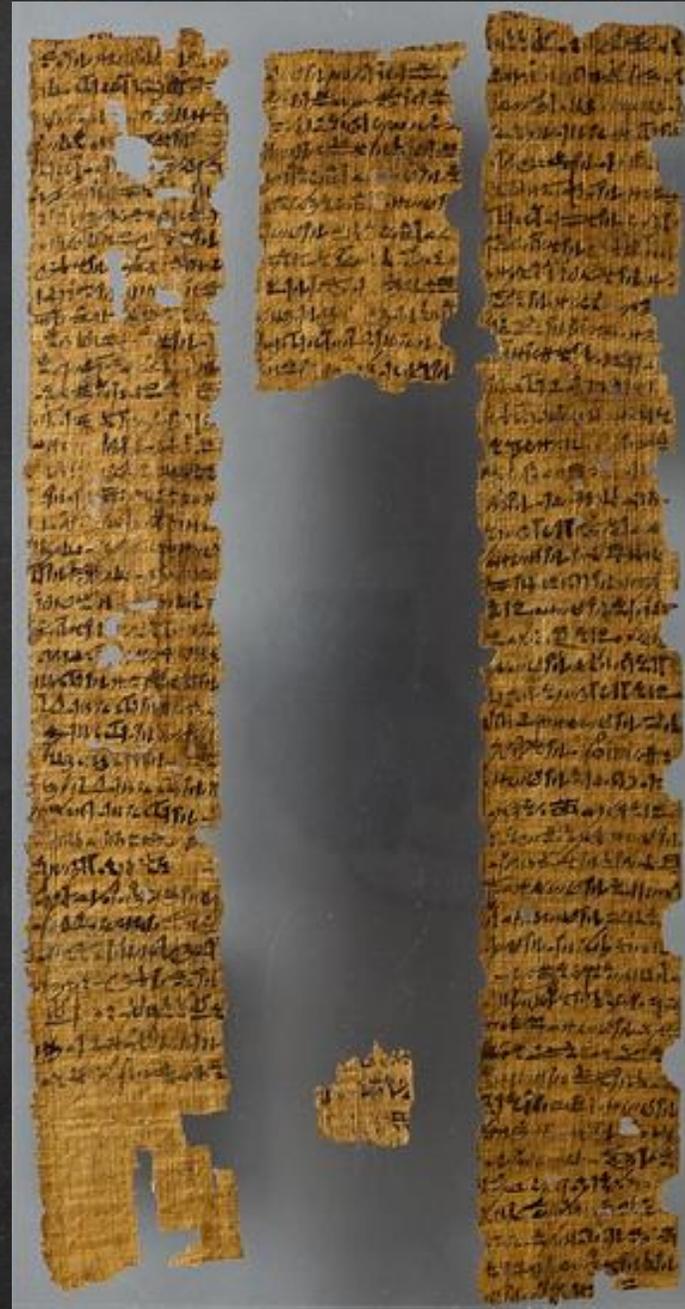


Amuletic oracular decree, Third
Intermediate Period (Oriental Institute)



“I shall keep her healthy in her flesh and her bones...I shall grant her life, health, and a great and goodly old age...I shall keep healthy her whole body---every limb---and her entire frame from her head to her soles...I shall keep her safe from every evil intention of every god and every goddess resident in heaven, earth, or the underworld”

(Trans. Robert Ritner)



From the Ketef Hinnom scroll:

May YHWH bless you and
may he keep you.

May YHWH make
his face shine ...

From Numbers 6:22-27:

May YHWH bless you
and keep you.

May YHWH make his
face to shine upon you,

and be gracious to you.

May YHWH lift up his
countenance upon you,
and give you peace.

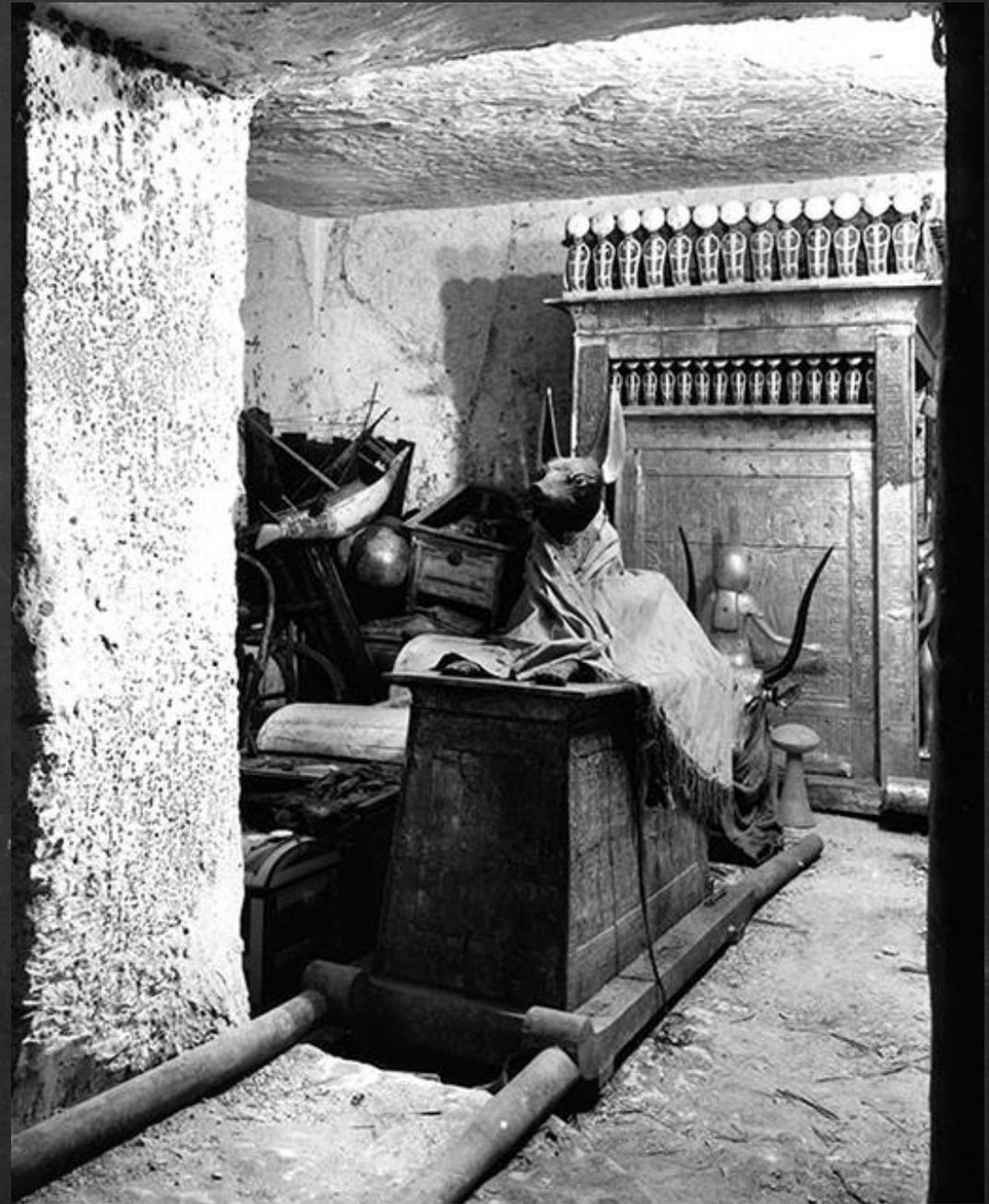
Scrolls as amulets

- Compare the *tefillin* or “phylacteries” from the Hebrew Bible (called *ṭoṭafot*).
 - “It shall be for a sign upon your hand, and as a *ṭoṭafot* between your eyes, for with a mighty hand Yahweh brought us out of Egypt.” (Exodus 13:16).

The “Ark of the Covenant”



Anubis Shrine from the tomb of Tutankhamun
(Dynasty 18), as discovered



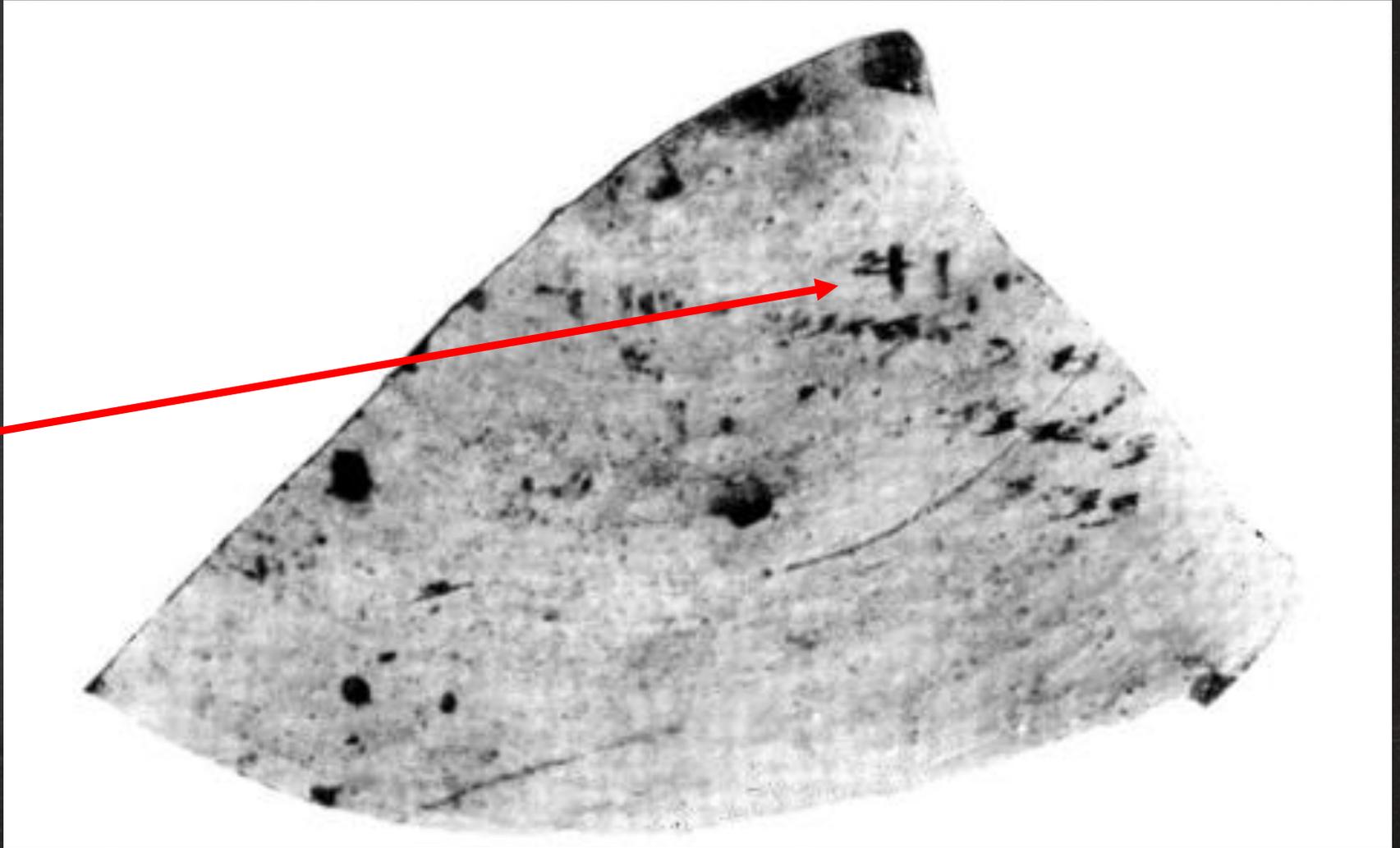
Stele from Abydos (Ramses II)



Ostrakon from Arad (Negev region, far south Judah), no. 25

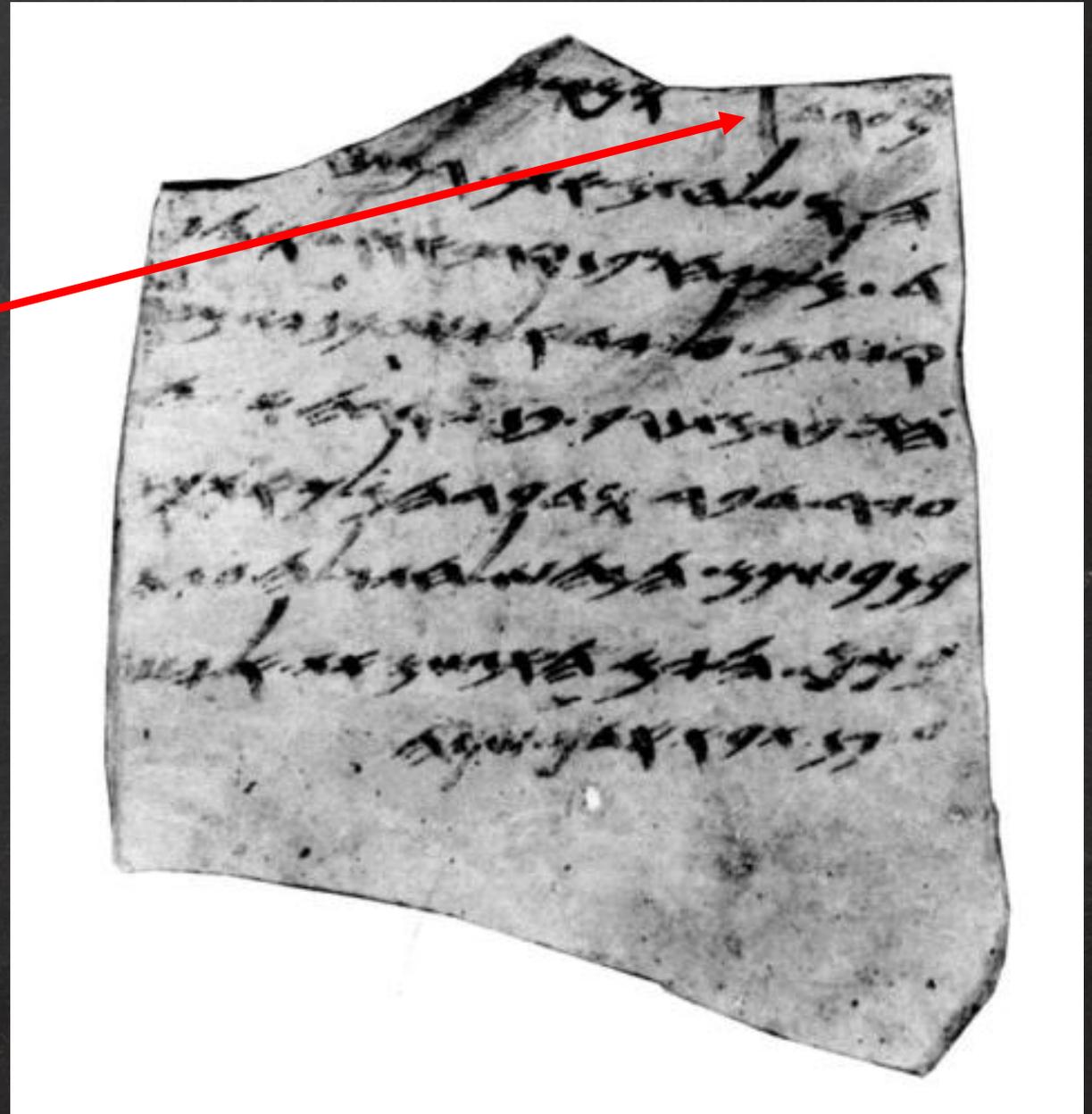


?



Ostrakon from Arad (Negev region, far south Judah), no. 24

The Egyptian numeral 50



Proverbs 22:17-23:11

Words of the wise.

Give your ear and hear my words
And direct your heart to my knowledge,

For it will be pleasant if you keep them in your
belly that they may all be secure on your lips, in
order that your trust may be in Yahweh, I have
taught them to you, even you, today.

Have I not written for you **thirty** in deliberation
and knowledge, to teach you the truest of
words?

Proverbs 22:17-23:11

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Have I not written for you **thirty** in deliberation and knowledge, to teach you the truest of words?

From *Amenemope*

Give your ears,
That you may hear the things that are said. Give your heart to understand them.

Let (my words) rest in the casket of your belly. They will be a mooring ring on your tongue.

Look to these **thirty** chapters: they divert, they instruct. They are the foremost of all books. They make the ignorant wise.

- “Speak not in the hearing of a fool, for he will despise the wisdom of thy word” (Prov 14:7)
 - Empty not thine inmost soul to everyone, nor spoil (thereby) thine influence” (Amenemope)
- "Remove not the widows landmark; And enter not into the field of the fatherless." (Prov 23:10)
 - "Remove not the landmark from the bounds of the field...and violate not the widows boundary” (Amenemope)
- “Apply thine heart unto instruction and thine ears to the words of knowledge" (Prov 34:23)
 - “Give thine ears, hear the words that are said, give thine heart to interpret them.” (Amenemope)

Handwritten text in a cursive script, likely a medieval manuscript. The text is arranged in approximately 15 horizontal lines across the page.

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The Joseph Story (Gen 37-50)

- Potiphar's wife

From Papyrus D'Orbigny, the Tale of Two Brothers

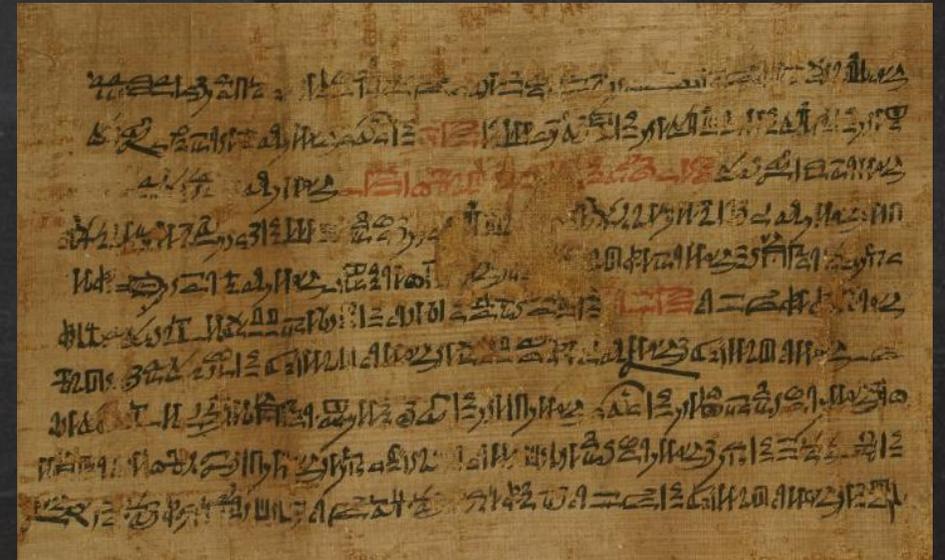
Handwritten text in Coptic script, likely a fragment of the Tale of Two Brothers. The text is arranged in approximately 12 horizontal lines. Several words and phrases are written in red ink, serving as rubrics or highlighting specific parts of the text. The script is dense and characteristic of ancient Egyptian Coptic manuscripts. The papyrus is aged and shows some staining and wear.

From Papyrus D'Orbiney, the Tale of Two Brothers

“Once there were two brothers, of one mother and one father. Anpu was the name of the elder, and Bata was the name of the younger.

Now, as for Anpu, he had a house, and he had a wife. But his little brother was to him as if he were a son. It was he who made for him his clothes; he who followed behind his oxen to the fields; he who did the ploughing; he who harvested the corn; he who did for him all the matters that were in the field.

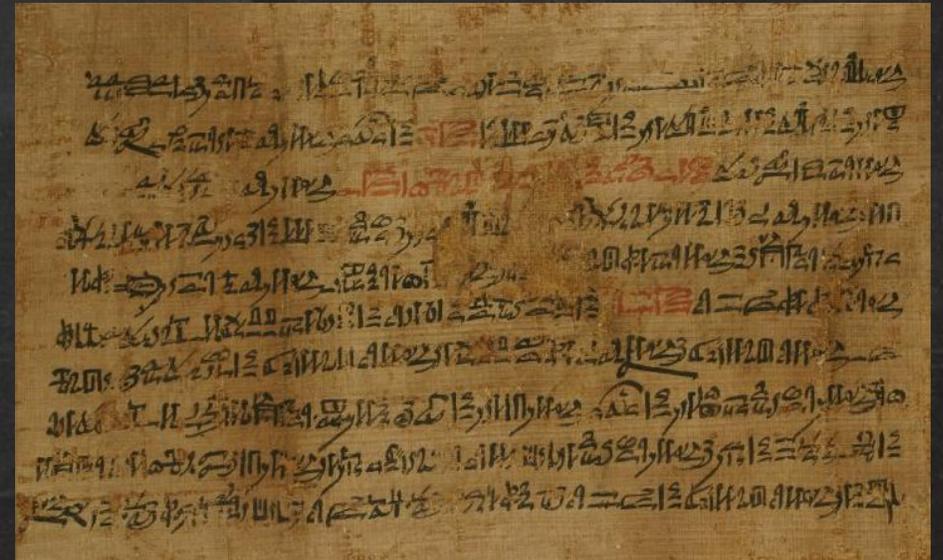
Now his younger brother grew to be an excellent worker, there was not his equal in the whole land. Indeed, the spirit of a god was in him.”



From Papyrus D'Orbiney, the Tale of Two Brothers

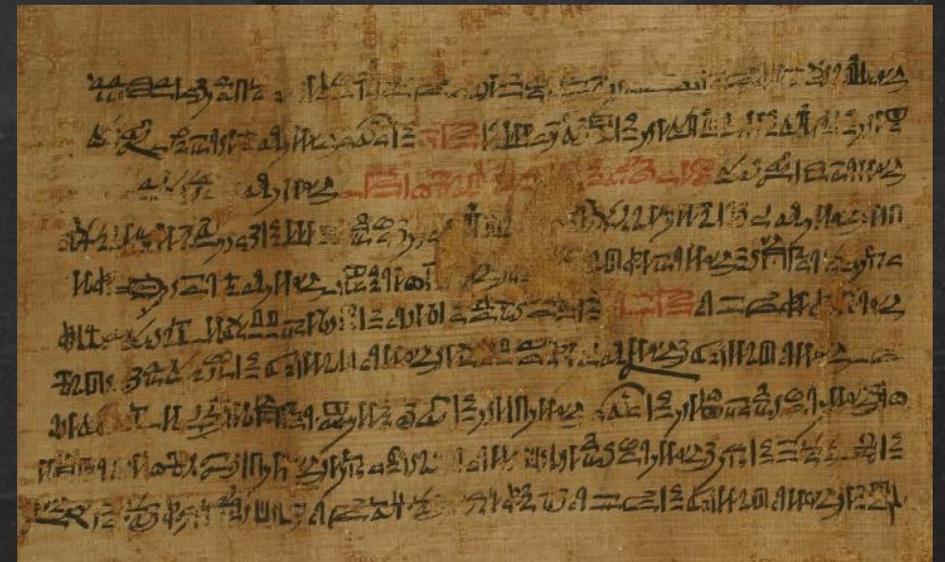
The younger brother found the wife of his elder brother, as she was sitting combing her hair ... The youth went into the stable; he took a large measure, for he desired to take much corn. He loaded it with wheat and barley, and he went out carrying it. She said to him, "How much of the corn that is wanted, is that which is on thy shoulder?" He said to her, "Three bushels of barley, and two of wheat, in all five; these are what are upon my shoulder:" Thus he said to her.

And she spoke with him, saying, "There is great strength in you, for I see your might every day." And her heart knew him with the knowledge of youth. She arose and came to him, and spoke with him, saying, "Come, stay with me, and it shall be well for you, and I will make for you beautiful garments."



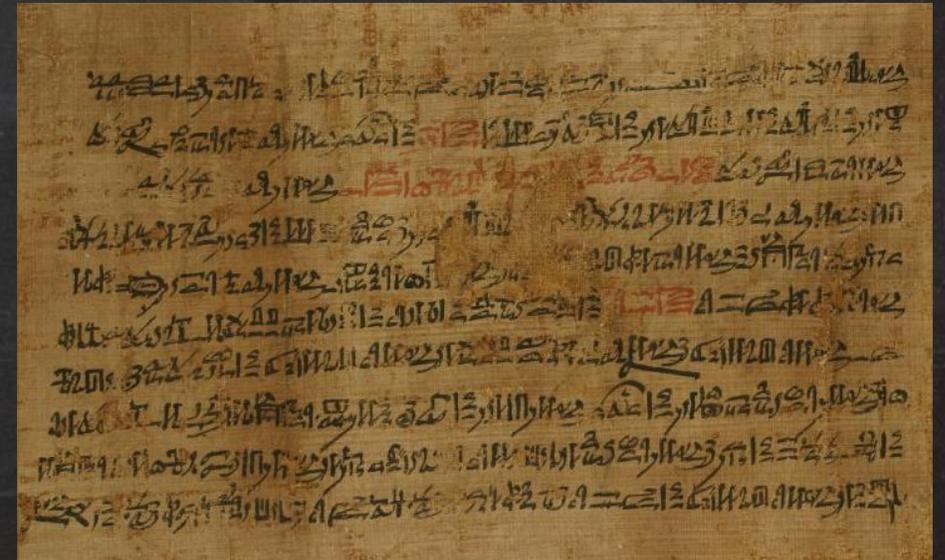
From Papyrus D'Orbiney, the Tale of Two Brothers

Then the youth became like a panther of the south with fury at the evil speech which she had made to him, and she feared greatly. And he said to her, "Behold thou art to me as a mother, thy husband is to me as a father, for he who is elder than I has brought me up. What is this wickedness that thou hast said to me? Say it not to me again. For I will not tell it to any man, for I will not let it be uttered by the mouth of any man." He lifted up his burden, and he went to the field and came to his elder brother; and they took up their work, to labor at their task.



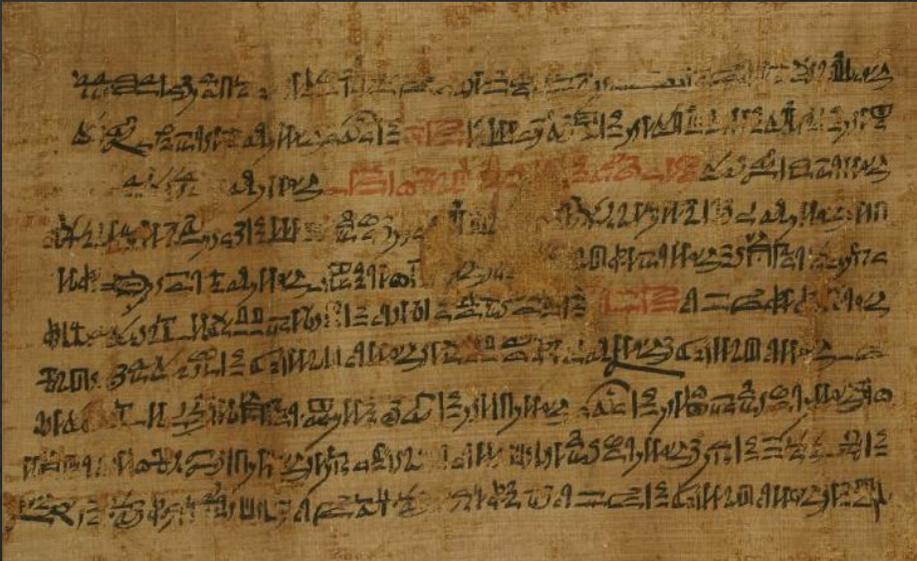
From Papyrus D'Orbiney, the Tale of Two Brothers

Now afterward, at evening, his elder brother was returning to his house, and the younger brother was following after his oxen ... Now, the wife of the elder brother was afraid for the words which she had said. She took a piece of fat, and became like one who is evilly beaten, desiring to say to her husband, "It is your younger brother who has done this wrong." Her husband returned in the even, as was his custom everyday. He came to his house and found his wife sick from violence. She did not give him water upon his hands as he was used to having, she did not make a light before him, his house being in darkness, and she was lying very sick. Her husband said to her, "Who has spoken with thee?"



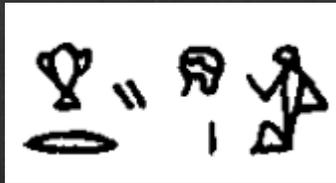
From Papyrus D'Orbigny, the Tale of Two Brothers

Compare Genesis 39!

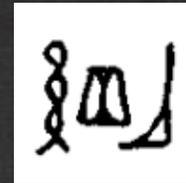


The Joseph Story

- The magicians called *ḥarṭummīm*
 - A conflation of two Egyptian terms for “lector priest” or “magician”:



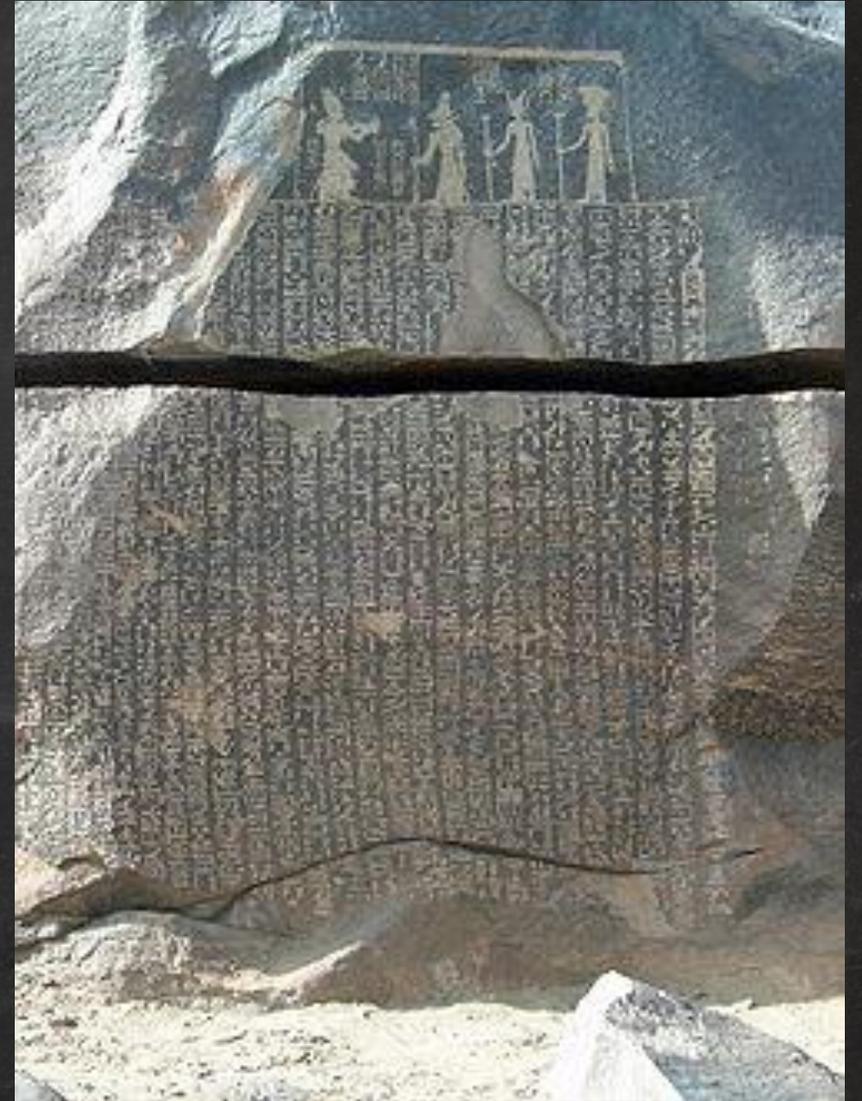
ḥry-tp



ḥry-tb

The Joseph Story

- The seven year famine



The Joseph Story

- Joseph hailed with “’*abrek!*” in Genesis 41:43.

The Joseph Story

- Names of characters
 - Potiphar, Joseph's master: *Pa-di-pa-ra* "He whom Re has given"
 - Aseneth, Joseph's wife: *iw-es-en-net* "She belongs to Neith"
 - Pharaoh: *per-a'o* "Great House," a euphemism for Pharaoh

The Joseph Story

- Joseph's name *Zafnatpa'neah*
 - Joseph is given this name by Pharaoh as an honorific title (Gen 41:45).

Exodus

- “So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor; and they build store cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses.” (Exodus 1:11)



Exodus

- A decree of Ramesses II (P. Leiden 348):
“Distribute grain rations to the soldiers and to the ‘Apiru who transport stones to the great pylon of Ramesses.”

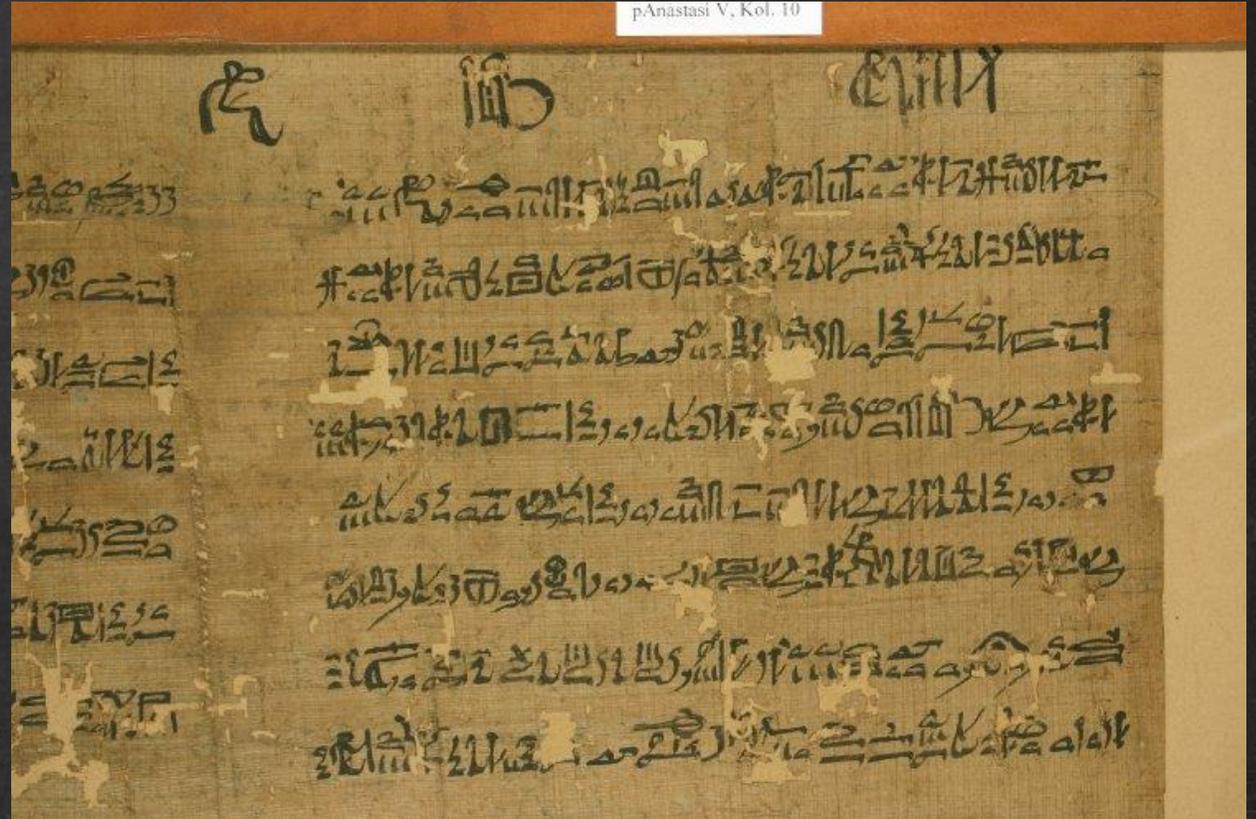


Exodus

- From a New Kingdom letter:

“I was sent forth from the broad halls of the palace...When I reached the fortress, they told me that the scout had come from the desert, saying that they had passed the walled place north of the Migdol of Seti Merneptah.

When my letter reaches you, write to me about all that has happened to them. Who found their tracks? Which watch found their tracks? What people are after them? Write to me about all that has happened to them and how many people you send out after them.”



Exodus

- Names of Hebrew characters:
 - Moses = Egyptian *mos* “born of”
 - Phinehas (grandson of Aaron) = Egyptian *pa-nehesy* “The Nubian”

Exodus

- The contest between Moses and Aaron and the magicians of Pharaoh.
 - This folkloric story resembles, in broad details, the Roman-era Demotic tale from Egypt.
 - Its hero was the legendary Setna Khaemwas.
 - In this story, the magicians of the Egyptian pharaoh fight with magicians from Cush.



Exodus

“The Cushite made another magical spell. He created a great mist over the court, while no one among them was able to see his brother or his colleague. Horus-the-son-of-the-Wolf recited a spell to the sky. He caused it to stop being foul from the vile wind in which it had been.

Horus-the-son-of-the-Nubian-woman made another spell of magical writing. He created a great vault of stone, amounting to 200 cubits in height by 50 cubits in width above Pharaoh and his nobles, so that it was about to make Egypt devoid of a king and the land lacking a lord. Pharaoh looked at the sky, he saw the stone vault above him, and he opened his mouth in a loud cry together with the throng who were in the court.

Horus-the-son-of-the-Wolf recited a magical formula. He created a papyrus bark. He caused that it carry away the vault of stone. It halted with it beside the Great Lake, the large water of Egypt.”



So, how Egyptian is the Bible?

- What is the evidence like?
- How does it compare with Mesopotamia?
- Why is there such a difference when it comes to Egypt?

