

## **Egyptian Papyrus Reveals Israelite Psalms**

Jewish community on Elephantine, Egypt

Marek Dospěl

Critical studies of the Bible have demonstrated that most Biblical texts have gone through a chain of stages before they reached their canonical form we know today. Uncovering and documenting the process by which the texts came to be, however, depends on discovering the material evidence—the manuscripts.



Papyrus Amherst 63. Photo: The Morgan Library Museum/Art Resource, NY.

Since its publication in the 1980s, there has been general agreement that the Egyptian Papyrus Amherst 63 contains a composition strikingly similar to the Biblical Psalm 20 and that it might have originated with the Jewish community on Elephantine. But these are not the only fascinating facts about the Egyptian papyrus, which was reportedly discovered in the late 19th century at Luxor, Egypt.

Containing about 35 literary texts in Aramaic that date to the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E., Papyrus Amherst 63 is written in a cursive Egyptian script known as Demotic. This unusual combination of the Aramaic language and the Demotic script was among the main reasons why the decipherment took more than 120 years.

Karel van der Toorn (University of Amsterdam), who recently published a new edition and translation of Papyrus Amherst 63, argues that besides the forerunner of Psalm 20, the Egyptian papyrus contains two other Israelite psalms. Professor van der Toorn explains: “The two other psalms of the Amherst papyrus are not in the Bible. That does not make them any less valuable from a historical and literary point of view. These were songs the Israelites chanted before their religion turned monotheistic.” And he adds: “The three psalms clearly belong together: They were evidently composed originally in Hebrew; they celebrate Yaho (an alternate form of the name Yahweh) as king of the gods; and they are part of the liturgy of the New Year’s festival as celebrated by an Aramaic-speaking community.”

As if this were not enough, the story of Papyrus Amherst 63 and the Jewish community on Elephantine gets even more intriguing. Van der Toorn contends that even though the Egyptian papyrus was penned in the fourth century B.C.E. and was found in Egypt, its contents are several centuries older and must have originated not in the land of pharaohs, but in Palmyra in modern-day Syria.

### **Papyrus Amherst 63 Up Close**

Israelite psalms in an Egyptian papyrus?

Karel van der Toorn

Dating to the fourth century B.C.E., the enigmatic Papyrus Amherst 63 was likely created by the descendants of the Aramean and Judean soldiers, who in the fifth century B.C.E. had been stationed at the southern Egyptian border. Recorded in a cursive script derived from Egyptian hieroglyphs, the Aramaic texts of the Amherst papyrus keep challenging what we know about the Aramean religion and the history of the Hebrew Bible.

Karel van der Toorn contends that three Israelite psalms appear in Papyrus Amherst 63—although only one is attested in the Bible. Below, read Van der Toorn’s translations of the psalms from Papyrus Amherst 63.

**Papyrus Amherst 63,  
May Yaho Answer Us in Our Troubles  
(xii, 11–19),  
“Psalm 1”**

May Yaho answer us in our troubles.  
May Adonay answer us in our troubles.  
Be a bow in heaven, Crescent!  
Send your messengers  
From all of Rash!  
And from Zaphon  
May Yaho help us.  
May Yaho give to us  
Our heart’s desire.  
May the Lord give to us  
Our heart’s desire.  
Every wish, may Yaho fulfill.  
May Yaho fulfill,  
May Adonay not diminish  
Any request of our heart.  
Some by the bow, some by the spear—  
Behold, as for us, my Lord, our God is  
Yaho!  
May our Bull be with us.  
May Bethel answer us tomorrow.  
Baal-Shamayin shall bless the Lord:  
“By your loyal ones I bless you!”  
End.

**Papyrus Amherst 63,  
Our Banquet is For You (xiii, 1–10),  
“Psalm 2”**

Hear me, our God!  
Fine lambs (and) sh[ee]p  
We will sacrifice for you among the Gods.  
Our banquet is for you  
Among the Mighty Ones of the people,  
Adonay, for you,  
Among the Mighty Ones of the people.  
Adonay, the people will bless you.  
Your annual offerings we will perform.  
From the pitcher, saturate yourself my God!  
  
Let it be announced forever:  
The Merciful One exalts the great,  
Yaho humiliates the lowly one.  
  
They have mixed the wine in our jar,

**Book of Psalms,  
Psalm 20**

*(author’s translation)*

To the leader. A Psalm of David.  
May Yahweh answer you in the day of trouble!  
may the name of the God of Jacob protect you!  
May he send you help from the sanctuary,  
and give you support from Zion.  
May he remember all your offerings,  
and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices. *Selah*  
May he grant you your heart’s desire,  
and fulfill all your plans.  
May we shout for joy over your victory,  
and in the name of our God set up our banners.  
May Yahweh fulfill all your petitions.  
Now I know that Yahweh will help his anointed;  
he will answer him from his holy heaven  
with mighty victories by his right hand.  
Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses,  
but our pride is in the name of Yahweh our God.  
They will collapse and fall,  
but we shall rise and stand upright.  
Yahweh will give victory to the king;  
answer us when we call.

In our jar, at our New Moon festival!  
Drink, Yaho,  
From the bounty of a thousand bowls!  
Be satiated, Adonay,  
From the bounty of the people!

Singers wait upon the Lord,  
The player of the harp, the player of the lyre:  
“We will play for you  
The song of the Sidonian lyre,  
And our flutes resoundingly,  
At the banquets of humankind.”  
End.

**Papyrus Amherst 63,  
The Host of Heaven Proclaims  
Your Rule (xiii, 11–17),  
“Psalm 3”**

Who among the Gods,  
Among humankind, Yaho—  
Who among the Gods,  
Among king and non-king,  
Who is like you, Yaho, among the Gods?  
From the very beginning, Adonay, avenge  
Your worshippers, the longstanding people.

Take note of our pursuer,  
And restore my strength.

Beneath you, Yaho,  
Beneath you, Adonay,  
The host of heaven is (as plentiful) as sand.  
Yaho, the host of heaven  
Proclaims to us your rule.

Take note of our pursuer,  
And restore my strength.

Let Baal from Zaphon  
Bless Yaho.  
Arise, Yaho, to our rescue.  
Let his ears turn  
To the prayer, Lord.  
Arise Yaho!  
Do protect,  
As you have been protecting  
Your people since olden times.  
End.

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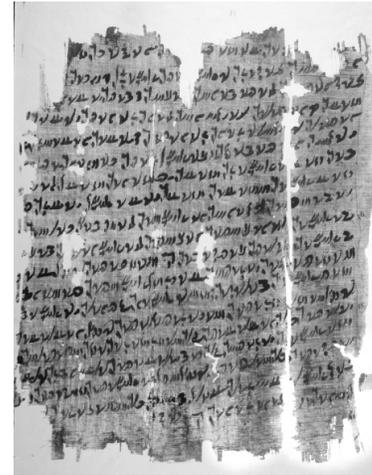
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Papyrus Amherst 63, as it came to be known, has attracted scholarly curiosity since its discovery in Egypt more than a century ago. When it was recently finally deciphered and translated, it revealed Israelite Psalms. *Photo: Courtesy of Oriental Institute Museum Archives, Box 009.*



The island of Elephantine at the southern Egyptian border was once home to an Aramaic-speaking Jewish community. *Photo: YuliaLim, licensed under CC BY-SA-4.0.*

Karel van der Toorn (University of Amsterdam), who recently published a new edition and translation of Papyrus

Amherst 63, argues that besides the forerunner of Psalm 20, the Egyptian papyrus contains two other Israelite psalms. In the article “Egyptian Papyrus Sheds New Light on Jewish History” in the July/August 2018 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Professor van der Toorn explains: “The two other psalms of the Amherst papyrus are not in the Bible. That does not make them any less valuable from a historical and literary point of view. These were songs the Israelites chanted before their religion turned monotheistic.” And he adds: “The three psalms clearly belong together: They were

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This papyrus document, dated to December 402 B.C.E., is a receipt for a grain loan. Ananiah, who was a Jewish temple official on Elephantine, certifies that he borrowed two monthly rations of grain from Pakhnum son of Besa. Composed in Aramaic and written with ink on a papyrus sheet, the manuscript belongs to a group of documents that allow a unique glimpse into the lives of the Jewish community on Elephantine that in the fifth century B.C.E. shared the island with native Egyptians and the occupying power—Persians. *Photo: Courtesy of Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of Theodora Wilbour.*