



Rabbis purchasing an Elephant

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The Elephant and the Jew

A Professor of Zoology, blessed with a cosmopolitan class, once decided to set an essay on "The Elephant". A few weeks later the students presented him with the fruits of their labours: The American student had written: "Breeding bigger and better elephants"; the English, "Hunting the elephant"; while the Frenchman produced, "The love-life of the elephant". The Russian elaborated on "The communal life of the elephant", and the German student presented: "An introductory bibliography to the study of the elephant". The Jewish student wrote: "The elephant and the Jew".

Many are the occasions when a lecturer on topics Jewish has prefaced his remarks with some variant of the above legend: usually this is a preliminary to some piece of information which has no relevance whatsoever to anything Jewish. In my humble opinion this myth that elephants have no connections with matters Jewish has been too credulously adhered to. After a sedulous search of a wide variety of learned Jewish journals I have been unable to find any attempt to adequately investigate these connections, whatever they might be. This is a serious gap in the sphere of Jewish knowledge, especially since the elephant seems to have figured so largely in certain periods of our history: the Rabbis, for example, found it necessary to pass a specific law regarding the blessing to be said on seeing an elephant: "Our Rabbis taught: On seeing an elephant an ape or a long-tailed monkey one says: 'Blessed is He who makes strange creatures.'"

The joint history of the elephant and the Jew falls into three periods: the first covers the Biblical period from the early Hebrew settlements to the

powerful kingdom of Solomon, the second—the Maccabean—is shorter but still important, while the final epoch concerns the great Rabbis and their compilation of the *Talmud*. Since these periods have little connection with each other as far as elephants are concerned, they will be dealt with separately.

It is uncertain whether the early Hebrew forefathers (c. 1700 B.C.E.) ever came into contact with wild elephant in Canaan, though the animals were certainly known and hunted in southern Egypt and the upper reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates. Inscriptions of the time of Tuthmosis III (ruler of Egypt, 1501-1447) describe him as the slayer of 120 elephants at Niy, somewhere along the Euphrates, and we are told that his predecessor received an elephant as a gift from Upper Retenu (northern Syria): since this animal must have passed through Canaan on the way to Egypt this probably marks the first ascertainable date of Judaeo-elephantine relations in the Holy Land/ These relations also seem to have included, at least at Beth Shean near the Sea of Galilee, an elephant cult adhered to by the local inhabitants. (Were elephants included in the idols broken by Abraham?) Excavations of the Beth Shean temple dating from the time of Amenophis III (ruler of Egypt, 1411-1375) unearthed one cult object with the head of an elephant as well as two Hittite god-seals showing respectively, an elephant and an ass.

Ber. 5Sb; Sinaer's Prayer Book p.291. -
Crowfoot J. W. & G. M., "Early Ivories from Samaria,"
Rowe A., in "Lines of Communication" J'lei fm Aug. 1932.

Only considerably later, however, does the elephant come to play an important part in the affairs of Israel. With the establishment of the monarchy after the conquest of Canaan, ivory becomes an important trade commodity; numerous exquisite ivory ornaments have been discovered and the Bible has numerous references to ivory—*shen*. King Ahab (9th century) had his ivory palace, and an Assyrian cuneiform text informs us that Hezekiah's tribute to Sennacherib (701) included elephant hides and tusks¹; while from the Aramaic translation of the Bible we learn that Jacob's body was borne back to Canaan "upon a couch of ivory".¹ In view of all this it is intriguing that nowhere in the Bible is the elephant as such mentioned. One must assume that a pair of these beasts was taken into the ark by Noah, and one commentator even specifies their food as vine leaves and twigs,¹ but they are not named. However, there are two passages, both referring to Solomon's (c. 972-933) far flung trade contacts, which may contain a word for elephant; the word is not the modern *pil* (probably derived from the Assyrian *pint*) and indeed does not seem to have a Semitic origin—this will be shown to have considerable importance.

The passages are almost identical and describe Solomon's imports from Tarshish: "once every three years came the ships of Tarshish bringing gold and silver, ivory and apes and peacocks".¹ Only in these two references is the word *shenhabbim* used for ivory; *shen* is often used elsewhere to mean ivory and so it seems reasonable to conclude that *hah* (plural, *habbim*) stands for "elephant". Hommel¹ suggests a somewhat strained Assyrian derivation for *hab'* but several others point out that *shenhabbim* is a direct translation of the Sanskrit *ibhidanta*, which would mean that the Biblical word for elephant derives from the Indian *abhi*.¹ It is interesting to note that Jerome in his preparation of the Vulgate has *denies ele-dhantorum* for *shenhabbim* which would tend to substantiate the view that *hab* is an elephant—it must be remembered that in his translation he made considerable use of various sources then existing. This use of an Aryan root would suggest that the ivory was brought from some country using an essentially Aryan language and in this context the only feasible location is somewhere on the Indian subcontinent; as additional evidence, the word for monkey is *kof* which could well come from the Sanskrit *kapi*. Now *Tarshish* is usually identified with Tartessos on the Guadalquivir in Spain¹ but such a location would be difficult to reconcile with the use of non African and non Semitic words for at least two of the five products mentioned as coming from there. Moreover placing

Crowfoot f. V. & G. M., "Early Ivories from Samaria," Targ. de Jonathan* Gen.50.1.¹ Malanot Kehuna, on Rab.Gen.31.7, Kings 10.22, rf. Chron.H 9.21. * Hommel, "Namen der Saupethiere." Godbey, "The Lost Tribes. A Myth"; Conder. C. R., "Syrian Stone Lore."¹ Driver.

Tarshish in Spain would not explain the three year journey—surely too great even by the standards of those days; however it would not be an unreasonable length of time for the round trip to India and back via the East coast of Africa to the great Red Sea port at *Ezion Geber*. The only problem preventing the word for elephant linking Solomon with India is that elsewhere in the Bible we are told that Jonah boarded a boat for Tarshish at Jaffa. This, though, is not an insurmountable difficulty. One suggestion is that Tarshish does not refer to a specific place but is a generic term for a smelting place (of gold and silver), derived from the Assyrian root *rasasu*.¹ Another possibility is that "ships of Tarshish" refers not to ships plying to and from that port, but rather to ships capable of so long a journey: that is, ocean going vessels—the passage in Kings does not mention that the ships actually came from Tarshish and the inclusion of that destination in Chronicles may be a scribe's misunderstanding of the earlier passage.

All in all, though, at that period of history the Jews seem to have had little or no actual contact with elephants apart from the important trade in ivory—indeed only a few centuries later a Jewish garrison seems to have been given charge of guarding one of the ivory trade routes into Egypt from the Sudan. The garrison was the Jewish community, complete with own temple, at Yeb (cf. *abhi* above) or Elephantine, as the Greeks called it. This military colony only became known at the turn of the century with the discovery of a series of Aramaic papyri near Assuan on the Nile; these provided a description of their way of life. It seems they were primarily a military outpost and that their city obtained its quaint name of "City of Elephants" by virtue of its being the ivory market.¹ But so much for trade: we now turn to the Maccabean period for the first major physical Judaeo-egyptian contact.

During the Hellenistic period from about the 3rd to the first centuries B.C.E. the elephant was important mainly as a beast of battle. This form of warfare was introduced into the western world after Alexander's Indian campaign and soon grew to fantastic proportions; during the upheavals after Alexander's death some 480 elephants armed for battle took part in the fight between Seleucus and Demetrius.¹ By the time of the Hasmonean revolt, though, the use of elephants in warfare was in its twilight; the last major campaign they took part in was the battle of Magnesia (190 B.C.E.) between Antiochus III (father of Antiochus Epiphanes) and the Egyptian Ptolemies aided by the Romans under the leadership of both Scipios—generals who had perfected their means of defence against elephants in their victories over Hannibal. Though Antiochus was defeated, his elephants were held to be so important that a

¹¹ Cheyne & Black, "Encyclopaedia Biblic.i."

>- Glover, T. R., "The Ancient World."

¹ Tam, W. V., "Hellenistic Military & Naval Developments."



Eziom Caber

special clause was inserted in the peace treaty forbidding their use to the Seleucid monarchs." For a variety of reasons the treaty was never fully enforced (one attempt ended in the assassination of the Roman ambassador¹) and this enabled the later Seleucids to make full use of elephants in their campaigns against the Maccabees.

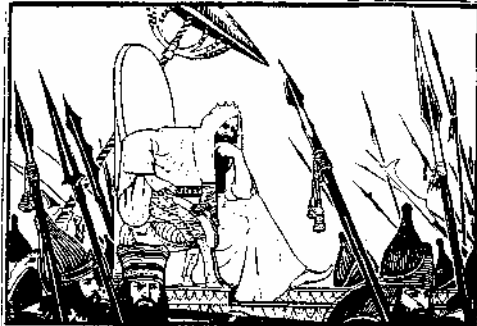
The elephants were brought into Judea as a result of the Hasmonean rising at the anti-Jewish legislation of Antiochus Epiphanes (167 B.C.E.). At the time of the first revolt the king was too busy contending with the Parthians, nor did he expect any serious opposition from the Jews so he merely ordered Lysias (governor of Syria) to put down the rising. Lysias, "elated as he was with his myriads of infantry and his thousands of cavalry and his eighty elephants"^{1a} also anticipated no serious resistance but together with Nicanor the "elephantarch" and General Gorgias he was soundly defeated. The above passage from the Books of Maccabees would suggest that even as early as 165, elephants were used but this is doubtful: eighty elephants are a mighty force and at that stage they were not expecting a hard fight.^{1b} Possibly the chronicler mixed some of his facts since the Selucid armies had mustered some 42 elephants the year before at Daphne, near Antioch. for their great "army festival"^{1c} but they seem to have remained there until the campaign of 163 B.C.E., by which time Antiochus Epiphanes had died and been succeeded by his son Eupator. It is, then, equivocal if elephants actually figured in the early stages of the Hasmonean revolt, but they certainly played a vital part in the later campaigns.

In the year 163 Antiochus Eupator took it upon himself to complete the suppression of the Judean revolt, a revolt which his father had so disastrously tried to quell. He, together with his guardian Lysias (the real commander), invaded with a huge army including over a hundred thousand infantry and some 20 to 30 elephants. The use of these animals, maddened with alcohol, seems to have terrified the Judeans just as they

did the Egyptians in 190 B.C.E.." In their disposition in battle Antiochus appears to have followed the usual pattern of dividing them among the infantry phalanxes, but attaching to each beast a special escort since its drink-crazed course could not be accurately gauged beforehand:^{1m} And they showed the elephants the blood of grapes and mulberries that they might prepare them for the battle. And they divided the beasts among the phalanxes and they set by each elephant a thousand men armed with coats of mail. . . and for each beast were appointed five hundred chosen horsemen. These were ready beforehand wheresoever the beast was; and withersoever the beast went they went with him . . . And towers of wood were upon them, strong and covered, one upon each beast, girt fast upon him with cunning contrivances; and upon each beast were two and thirty valiant men that fought upon them, beside his Indian. "

At first only a few of the Judean army had the courage to face up to these terrifying juggernauts and it was left to the sons of Mattathias to show the troops how to cope with them. Judah himself seems to have been the first to show that by allowing the elephant to pass into one's ranks it could be stabbed from the side: "Giving the watchword to his troops, 'Victory is of God' he (Judah)..... stabbed the largest of the elephants and its mahout."¹ⁿ His brother, Eleazar, was not so fortunate but by his bravery earned an everlasting place among legendary Jewish heroes:

When Eleazer Avaran saw that one of the beasts was armed with one of the royal breastplates . . . he thought that the king was on it . . . He slipped underneath and killed it. It fell to the ground upon him crushing him to death!^{1o}



Antiochus Epiphanes

But all this bravery was to no avail and Judah eventually had to sue for peace, albeit an honourable peace. It does, however, seem strange that the Maccabees were able to obtain the favourable terms they did in view of the mighty forces they faced. An answer may possibly lie in an interesting error found in a Josephus manuscript: in the passage "And they divided the beasts among the phalanxes" the word phalanx is replaced by a Greek word similar in shape but meaning 'ravine'-'.^{1p} This is usually discounted as a scribe's error but it may mean that the normal battle

¹ Livy, 38.38.8.
² Polybius, 31.2.
³ Mace II, 11.3-4.
⁴ Dancy, J. C., "Book I Maccabees, a Commentary."
⁵ Polybius, 30.25.
⁶ Mace II, 13.2 f. cf. Mace I. 6.30.

⁷ Livy, 37.40.
⁸ Tarn, V. W., "Hellenistic Military & Naval Developments"
⁹ Mace, I 6f.
¹⁰ Mace II, 13.15.
¹¹ Mate 1.6.
¹² Dancy, J. C., "Book I Maccabees, a Commentary."

order was not in fact followed and that the elephants, due to the nature of the terrain, could not be divided among the infantry but had to advance in single file up the ravines. This would have greatly reduced their military value and may explain the successful resistance by the Judeans; such an interpretation is by no means too strained, since the battles were fought in the very hilly country round about Jerusalem.

The presence of these unique animals in Judea appears to have made a very considerable impression on the Jews, an impression which manifested itself in many ways for a long time afterwards. Only a short time after the wars Simon Maccabeus even struck a coin specially countermarked with a clear impression of an elephant and surrounded by the inscription "The redemption of Zion" And at least one later historian, Josippon (Josephus Gorionides—c. 10th century, South Italy), attributed the death of Antiochus Epiphanes directly to one of his own elephants. While Antiochus was hastening towards Judea, after the defeat of Lysias, "the all-seeing Lord, God of Israel, struck him down with an incurable



"And towers of
wood were
upon them,
strong and covered"

and invisible plague Finally it came about that he fell out of the chariot as it was rushing along and was badly injured in every limb of his body".⁷ Josippon has it that as the chariot passed close to one of the army's elephants the horses took fright and bolted, thus throwing the king to his death. He also claims that the disease was elephantiasis, though more contemporary historians ascribe death to things like insanity.* Another manifestation of elephant consciousness may be the numerous and often important references to the animal in the Talmud, and it is to these that we now turn.

The Talmud is a mine of information on a vast number of subjects but it is far from clear why it should contain so many references to elephants: the animal was no longer known in Palestine and Babylon either as an instrument of war or a domestic help. In most cases the Talmudic statements on elephants seem to use the animal as an example of something very extreme and generally beyond the ken of the average person—but the particular choice of the elephant in preference to some other creature can probably be traced to legends of the Maccabean wars.

The most important reference is certainly that concerning acquisition, where the point in dispute is how various types of animals are legally acquired:

Gemara: But the sages maintain, both (large cattle and small) are acquired by *meshikah*. R. Simeon said: "Both by lifting." R. Joseph demurred: "If so how can an elephant be acquired according to R. Simeon?"—Said Abaye to him: "By *halifin* or by renting its place." R. Zera said: "He (the purchaser) brings four utensils and places them under its feet." Then you may infer from this that when the purchaser's utensils are in the vendor's domain (and a bought commodity is placed in them) the purchaser obtains a title.—The reference here it to an alley. Alternatively (this refers) to a bundle of faggots. -"

It seems that the lifting of the elephant onto the faggots should be on 'no-man's' land such as near a public highway and that it should be lifted, or coaxed to walk up the faggots, to a height of not less than three handbreaths. In spite of the unusual choice of example it is abundantly clear that here are stated some of the most important rules for acquisition of title, though it is doubtful if any of the sages mentioned ever saw an elephant. Elephants also figure largely in dreams of that period—at any rate considerable space is devoted to the explanation of such visions:

All kinds of beasts are of good omen in a dream except the elephant and the ape?—There is no contradiction. The elephants are of good omen if saddled, of bad omen if not saddled. ""

This may mean that saddled elephants are domesticated and hence not dangerous, but other wild animals are still good omens: more likely this is still a relic of Maccabean times when elephants played havoc with Jewish troops—the saddling may reflect some change common in the transmission of legends and in fact it should be the saddled elephants which are the bad omen. While on the subject of dreams, the Talmud also has an interesting piece of practical psychology: A man is shown in a dream only what is suggested by his own thoughts Raba said: This is proven by the fact that a man is never shown in a dream a date palm of gold, or an elephant going through the eye of a needle. '

Such a dream would not occur since the events are impossible and so never thought of while awake. Although one would not visualise an elephant acting in so unseemly a manner, the expression is applied to those guilty of intellectual gauchery and pedantic hair-splitting: Perhaps you are from Pumbeditha, he retorted, where they draw an elephant through the eye of a needle. ']

-1• Madden. "Jewish Coinage."
-1 Mace II, 9. 5-7.-- Polybius, 31.9.

-" Kid. 25b (All Talmudic quotations from Soncino Rndish edition, 1936).

1 Her. 56b. "

Ber. 55b.

1 Baba Mets. 38b.



Hechal Shlomo, Jerusalem

But for unusual quality few of the Talmudic references can rival that concerning elephants and *Sukkoth*:

"If he uses an animal as a wall of the *Sukkah* R. Meir declares it invalid and R. Judah valid What is the reason of R. Meir?—Abaye replied, "Lest it die." R. Zera replied, "Lest it escape." Concerning an elephant securely bound, all agree (that the *Sukkah* is valid) since even though it die there is still ten (hand-breadths height) in the carcass according to him who says, we fear lest it escape, we do fear Regarding an elephant which is not bound all agree (that the *Sukkah* is invalid)."

And still it is difficult to understand this Rabbinic pre-occupation with elephants. The animal was quite clearly not well known and there are some blatant inaccuracies about its characteristics:

The wolf, lion, bear, leopard, bardeles, elephant, monkey, and long-tailed ape (go with young) for three years."

However, Maimonides commenting on another passage dealing with the classification of an elephant as a beast, does not describe it (as he does some of the other animals) but merely writes that it is *yadua*—i.e. well-known.¹⁷

Were it not for the dictates of space much more could still be written on this fascinating topic: nothing has been said about the Alexandrian Purim, where the Jews were threatened with destruction by elephants¹⁸, or about the painting of elephants at the necropolis of Marissa near Lachish.¹⁷ At any rate, I hope enough has been said to show that elephants have had a part to play in Jewish history and they do serve to throw some interesting sidelights on certain specific topics. To assert that Judaeo-elephantine relations are a myth is to further perpetrate a vile calumny.

Sukk. :3a. ' Bek.

8a. •• Kil. 8.6."

Mace III, Sff.

Peters I- P. & Thiersch H., "Painted Tombs in the Necropolis at Marissa."