



**Aren M. Wilson-Wright**

***Jeremiah's Egypt: Prophetic Reflections on the Saite Period***

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How well do certain portions of the biblical text correspond to actual historical realities? Careful critical examination of the historical reliability of various passages found within this corpus can provide an important source of information not just for biblical scholarship but also for historians of ancient Judaism and the ancient Near East seeking additional anchors and evidence for the analysis of events, social contexts, and cultural realities. This new book by Aren M. Wilson-Wright, which takes on the immensely difficult and precarious task of studying the Egyptian references in the book of Jeremiah, is a welcome contribution to the field. The breadth of sources used in Wilson-Wright's study is impressive, and her navigation of the notoriously thorny landscape of the textual criticism of this biblical source is admirable and mostly even-handed. The main feature of the book is the thesis that the period of Saite rule over Judah was a cataclysmic event. The little kingdom was a vassal of the Saite kings, and it is Wilson-Wright's stated goal to "interpret the book of Jeremiah in light of this historical background" (1). This thesis is developed across five chapters, preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion.

The crux of the book (chs. 2–6) attempts to trace, define, analyze, and date the "experiences of Judahites living under Saite rule" (5). The first step seeks to provide a historical analysis of Judah in the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE, starting with Neco I, who Wilson-Wright

considers “the founder of the Saite Dynasty” (10).<sup>1</sup> The question of the chronology of Saite control over Judah is, of course, central to Wilson-Wright’s thesis. At its upper limit she claims that 620 BCE is “the earliest date for which we have evidence of Egyptian involvement in Judah” (12). This evidence, however, is solely based on a scarab bearing the Horus name *uah-ib-Ra* (Wahibre) found at Meşad Hashavyahu and this artifact’s relationship to the Naukratis scarab factory, the dating of which has not yet been sufficiently settled.<sup>2</sup> While there can be no doubt that Saite control was exercised on Judah starting at some point during the final decades of the seventh century BCE, the existence of scarabs can be viewed as proof of contact but can hardly constitute proof of administration; *P-s-m-t-k* scarabs from roughly the same time frame were also found in Sardinia and even in Gibraltar, which certainly were never under Saite rule. In spite of several attempts, it has so far proven impossible to determine the date of the beginning Saite rule over Judah, which could just as reasonably be around 610 BCE or maybe even later.

As with the archeological data, the treatment of ancient textual sources in this book often suffers from simplistic critical analysis. For example, the battle of Carchemish is rightly seen by Wilson-Wright as a decisive historical anchor within the Jeremian corpus, but she puts far too much confidence in the significantly later, fragmentarily preserved, and problematic *Babyloniaca* by Berossus and the supposed participation of Judahite soldiers in this battle mentioned in it (19–20). As she herself notes, this detail is found nowhere but in Berossus, yet she offers no critical examination of the reliability of this third-century BCE source with a complex transmission history and that survived only in quotes within much later works. As scholars of Berossus have noted, he is especially untrustworthy in his treatment of Nebuchadnezzar. He was also clearly familiar with Jewish sources, at least as per his quotes in Josephus and the church fathers, which can easily explain the mention of Jews here. There may indeed have been Judahite contingent of soldiers in the Egyptian army at Carchemish at the time, but there is simply zero evidence of this—even in Jeremiah, which Wilson-Wright suggests might have included an “eyewitness account” of the battle (20 n. 30, 97 n. 95).

In chapter 3, Wilson-Wright looks at the social landscape of the Judahites under Saite rule and makes an important distinction between members of the elite and the nonelites (37–38), before turning to trace the history of the communities of the “Judahite diaspora” in Egypt. She claims that most of the Egyptian diaspora was composed of nonelites—based on 2 Kgs 25:11–12—and claims that “after the fall of Jerusalem, only non-elite individuals would have been left in Judah and able to migrate to Egypt,” though she rightly point out that according to Jer 43:5–12 some of the

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1. Scholars usually consider the first pharaoh of the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty to be Psamtik I. See most recently, Alexander Schütze, “Saite Egypt,” in *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East Volume V: The Age of Persia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 1–C49P429.

2. The Horus name *uah-ib-Ra* was also famously that of Apries. On the chronology of the site of Naukratis, see Virginia Webb, “Faience Finds from Naukratis and Their Implications for the Chronology of the Site,” *British Museum Studies in Ancient Egypt and Sudan* 24 (2019): 65.

Judahite elite may have joined communities there (60). The communities founded by these migrants are notoriously hard to trace. Looking for clues in the book of Jeremiah, Wilson-Wright argues convincingly that the place names Migdol, Daphnae, and Memphis in Jer 44:1 are later additions (50–52) and that this verse once contained only “the land of Patros” (Upper Egypt) as a more specific location within “the land of Egypt.” By far the best documented such community in “the land of Patros,” and Egypt in general, settled at Elephantine. Wilson-Wright provides a useful and well-argued analysis concluding that this community was founded during the final decades of the Saite period (56). The discussion of the Babylonian diaspora at the end of this chapter relies, alas, solely on the biblical narrative (where she takes both Jehoiachin’s exile and the 586 exile together), which leads to the warped and ahistorical assertion that it “consisted primarily of elite individuals with ties to the Jerusalem court” (60). However, the historical picture is significantly more nuanced, and it is unfortunate that Wilson-Wright did not take the time to engage with the works of scholars of the Judean exile in Babylonia, which are abundant.

Chapter 4 delves into the textual criticism of Jer 2:14–19, 25:15–29, and 46:2–26 with an attempt to date the composition of these texts. According to Wilson-Wright, these passages “express dissatisfaction with Egyptian rule.” However, the analysis suffers from confirmation bias—a feature that taints many of her attempts at dating the texts with which she works. A couple of examples will demonstrate this. The *kfir* (“young lion”) in Jer 2:15, is understood to probably “symbolize Assyria, as they often do in other prophetic works (e.g., Amos 3:12; Isa 5:29; Nah 2:12–13; Jer 4:7),” yet the references she points to refer to a mature lion, an *ryh* (with or without a parallelism with a young lion); they never include a *kfir* alone. Several scholars have insightfully suggested that the use of the “young lion” here is most likely indicative of Babylon rather than Assyria. In addition, she claims that Shihor and the Euphrates mentioned in Jer 2:18 refer to places where Judahite mercenaries fought and died in the service of the Saite kings, yet both of these assertions rest on treacherous ground. As mentioned, the presence of Judahite soldiers at Carchemish is dubious given that it is only recorded at a late date, second or third hand, and by a questionable source. Moreover, there is simply no record of Judahite soldiers present at Migdol (where Wilson-Wright, rightly in my view, places Shihor). The sole archaeological reference provided that “may attest to the presence of Judahite soldiers” there makes no such claim and limits itself to suggesting that finds from the site “may ... indicate some direct contacts with Judean centers.” The only reference to a Yahwist serving in a military capacity in Migdol dates to the mid-fifth century BCE, in the height of the Achaemenid period, not the Saite.

Confirmation bias continues when Wilson-Wright tackles the “cup of wrath” oracle (Jer 25:15–29) and suggests that its earliest reconstructible form “dates to 604 BCE and provides a map of the Saite empire on the eve of the Babylonian conquest of the Levant” (114). Her suggested restoration of this *earliest* form (84) includes “the kings of Elam and all the kings of Media; {all the kings of the east} and all the kings of the north, near and far” (vv. 25–26) as part of a full list that, she claims, forms “a coherent, geographically arranged whole.” Yet considering “the kings of the North, near

and far,” together with Elam, and Media to be part of a “map of the Saite empire” (114) is, frankly, ludicrous. Wilson-Wright ignores the geographical impossibility of her claim, choosing instead to focus solely on the parallel mention of Elam and Media together in Isa 21:2, which she claims “forms part of an early seventh-century BCE oracle against Sennacherib” (87)—a debatable dating. She furthermore chooses to ignore the “*remnant of Ashdod*” (v. 20), which almost certainly points to the aftermath of Nebuchadnezzar’s campaign in 604–601 BCE rather than to a 605 BCE Saite “snapshot.” Finally, there is also no evidence that Edom, Moab, and Ammon were ever under Saite rule, a fact that Wilson-Wright concedes but then claims can be “reasonably” inferred. That being said, her identification of the “cup of wrath” itself with Babylon by comparing Jer 25:15–16 to Jer 51:7 (88) is well argued and convincing.

While Wilson-Wright rightly concurs with most commentators that the first oracle against Egypt (Jer 46:2–26) is to be dated to 605 BCE, shortly after the battle of Carchemish (97), as mentioned, she reads far too much into the purported involvement of Judahite soldiers in this event (97–98), going so far as to suggest that this may have been an eye-witness account (97 n. 95). It defies logic that the author of this passage would mention all other mercenary ethnic groups and not his own had they actually participated in this battle, and the fact that he does not is strong evidence that no Judahite soldiers participated in it. Wilson-Wright also joins a number of scholars who—for good reason—read Jer 46:13 as predicting a successful Babylonian invasion of Egypt (98–99), which failed to materialize. It has been suggested that the failure of this prophecy prompted a later redactor to add information from a later conquest. The question is to identify the source of this later addition. The successful conquest of Egypt did occur under Achaemenid king Cambyses II in 526 BCE. The text of these added redactional layers fits that context both here and in Jer 43 remarkably well. For example, the mention of אַבְיֵרֵי הָעִיִּיִּים, the bulls of the Egyptians, has no connection to Nebuchadnezzar, but the slaughter of the sacred “Apis bull” forms an infamous and dramatic component of the myth surrounding Cambyses’s conquest of Egypt, as does the narrative of this monarch’s excessive violence toward Egyptian temples at Memphis and elsewhere. Confusion between Nebuchadnezzar and Cambyses is found in several later sources such as the Coptic *Cambyses Romance*, and strange identifications of Nebuchadnezzar are also known from the book of *Judith*, where he is portrayed as the “king of Assyria” (Jdt 1:11–12). Unfortunately, Wilson-Wright does not engage with any of these critical issues. Her assertion that the cult of the Apis bull in Memphis “was especially popular during the Saite period” (100–101) is simply unsupported and, again, seems to be the result of confirmation bias. The cult of the Apis bull was popular from the First Dynasty to the late Roman times, and there is no indication that this was more specially observed in the Saite period.

Next, Wilson-Wright looks at Judahite communities in Egypt proper, who remained under Saite rule up to the Achaemenid conquest. She claims that “Jeremiah 43:8–13 constitutes the sole textual evidence, biblical or otherwise, for a Judahite community at Daphnae” (115). However, this passage can hardly constitute evidence, and the archeological references she mentions regarding

various finds of Palestinian (but not necessarily Judahite) style and origin (which is not surprising, given that Daphnae is on the eastern border of the Nile Delta) are markedly more cautious and reserved about this possibility—which is far from certain. Moreover, in the discussion of the “Queen of Heaven,” Wilson-Wright claims that “only two other texts preserve an exact parallel to the title Queen of Heaven (מלכת השמים) found in Jer 7 and 44: the Hermopolis papyri and Papyrus Amherst 63, both of which associate the Queen of Heaven with Upper Egypt” (142). While it is true that the Hermopolis papyri contain a reference to the Queen of Heaven connected to Upper Egypt, specifically Syene, its context is purely Aramean and is not connected to Judahites in any way. In addition, Papyrus Amherst 63 is unprovenanced, dated by most scholars to the fourth century BCE, and does not mention Upper Egypt or Egypt at all—at least not unambiguously. Given this background, the assertion that because of these references to the “Queen of Heaven” the author of these passages “must have been in contact with the Upper Egyptian community or at least they knew someone who was” (145) is to be added to a string of assertions stemming from confirmation bias.

In the penultimate chapter, Wilson-Wright focuses on Jer 51:38–39. She claims not only to be able to date this pair of verses but also to discern where they were composed. She asserts that they reflect “a potential change in attitude toward Babylon,” claiming that “although Nebuchadnezzar II had liberated Judah from Saite control in 604 BCE, he overstepped his bounds by continuing to invade the Egyptian heartland—an act that threatened the Judahite diaspora communities living in the eastern Nile Delta” (151). The connection to the eastern Delta derives from her previous analysis of Shihor, which, as shown above, rests on the weakest of evidence. The analysis of the verses themselves makes the bold suggestion that the “combination of leonine imagery and alcohol as a metaphor for punishment” resembles the plot of the Egyptian Destruction of Humanity myth (153). However, one cannot disassociate these verses from their immediate context. They belong to a complete unit that encompasses verses 36–40. Read in context, it is clear that it is Babylon that gets annihilated: it is those who drink the alcohol that are brought to destruction, whereas in the Destruction of Humanity myth it is the destroyer who drinks the alcohol and reverts from its plans of destruction. There is simply no parallel between these texts apart from the mention of lions and alcohol. The chapter ends with a discussion of Egyptian names found among the Yahwists at Elephantine, which “hint at further cases of intermarriage since individuals in the ancient Near East often received a name in their mother’s native language” (167). This Wilson-Wright seeks to support with a reference to an article by Porten. Beyond the fact that everyone’s native language at Elephantine was Aramaic and not Hebrew, Porten’s article claims no such thing. Finally, Wilson-Wright rightly notes that these “contacts led some Judahites to adopt aspects of Egyptian religious practice” (168), but this process of *interpretatio* goes far beyond what is mentioned here and merits much deeper engagement at various junctures in the book.

In conclusion, Wilson-Wright's book, in spite of the plethora of serious methodological problems affecting the presentation of its thesis, still manages to bring together a number of important sources and new perspectives for approaching the Egypt-related passages in the book of Jeremiah and therefore constitutes an important voice and fruitful addition to Jeremiah scholarship.