

From Texts to Literature: Demotic Egyptian Papyri and the Formation of the Hebrew Bible (DEMBIB)
 – ERC Advanced Grant No. 101020304 (1 Jan 2022–31 Dec 2026)

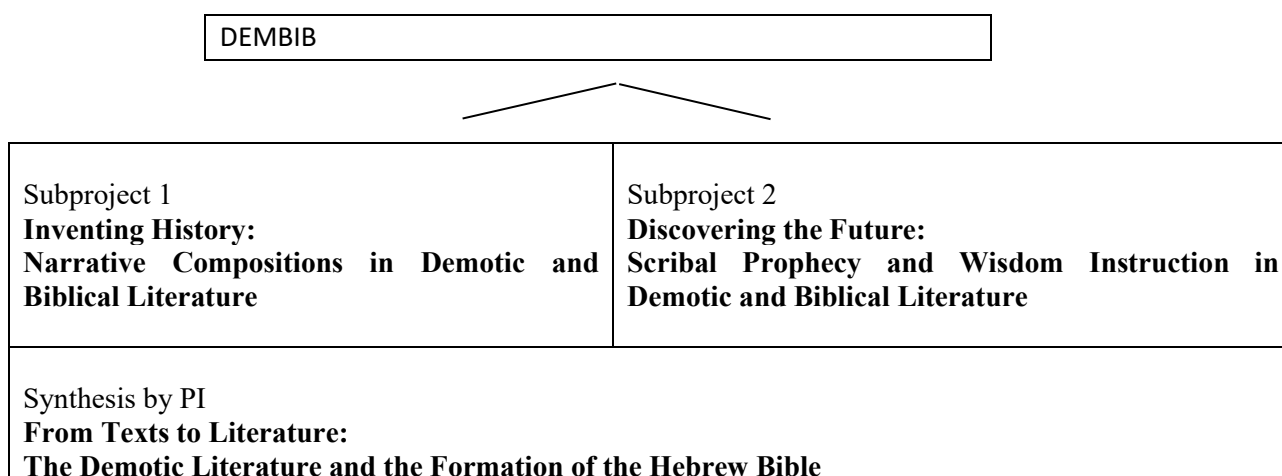
With the continuous publication of numerous papyri in Egyptian Demotic script during the last two decades, a whole new corpus of Egyptian literature has become available. The DEMBIB project seeks to correlate the newly accessible Demotic papyri with biblical literature. Like the Hebrew Bible, the Demotic literature is rooted in a scribal culture and displays significant parallels to biblical literature. The DEMBIB project aims to 1) investigate the structural parallels between Demotic literature and the Hebrew Bible; 2) identify the compositional strategies of Demotic and biblical literature; and 3) contextualize these literary characteristics in the socio-historical situation of the 6th–3rd c. BCE when a scribal elite in Egypt and “Israel” faced similar challenges, such as a changing socio-cultural environment and a marginalization of traditional temples.

The specific approach of DEMBIB lies in:

- its cross-cultural comparison of newly discovered Egyptian papyri and the Hebrew Bible with experts on both text corpora working and collaborating together
- its analysis of similar literary processes in Egyptian Demotic and biblical literature
- its understanding of the dynamics between a distinct scribal culture and its socio-historical context.

The main goal of DEMBIB is to offer a new paradigm for understanding the transformation of textual traditions into complex forms of literature in Egypt and “Israel” during the Persian and Hellenistic periods.

DEMBIB is structured in two sub-projects with a scholar of Demotic/Egyptology and a scholar of the Hebrew Bible each working together in tandem.



Given that the project DEMBIB embraces a broad scholarly field covering questions on the formation of the Hebrew Bible, the Demotic papyri themselves, the socio-political situation in Persian and Ptolemaic Egypt, and different forms of ancient Judaism, an international advisory board with specialists serves as a “sounding board” for the discussion of the project’s results:

Friedhelm Hoffmann (University of Munich [LMU])	(Egyptology / Demotic Studies)
Tawny Holm (Pennsylvania State University)	(Classics and Mediterranean Studies)

Sylvie Honigman (Tel Aviv University)	(Ancient History / Persian and Ptolemaic Egypt)
Richard Jasnow (John Hopkins University)	(Egyptology / Demotic Studies)
Reinhard Müller (University of Göttingen)	(Hebrew Bible / Second Temple Studies)
Thomas Römer (Collège de France, Paris)	(Hebrew Bible / Second Temple Studies)
Maren Schentuleit (Oxford University)	(Egyptology / Demotic Studies)
Konrad Schmid (University of Zurich)	(Hebrew Bible / Ancient Judaism)
Andrew Teeter (Harvard University)	(Dead Sea Scrolls / Ancient Judaism)

In addition to the PI (Bernd U. Schipper) and the members of the advisory board, two external advisors will participate in the project. Kim Ryholt (University of Copenhagen) and Joachim Friedrich Quack (University of Heidelberg) are world-leading authorities in Demotic studies and will join the project during its five years on a regular basis. In the Summer 2023 semester, both of them will spend a full semester in Berlin, researching in connection with the project.

Sub-project 1: Inventing History: Narrative Compositions in Demotic and Biblical Literature

Both corpora of texts, Demotic and Hebrew, witness to an interaction of learned scribes with their own national pasts. This is obvious in *historiographic* texts, but also easily detectable in *narrative* literature. This narrative literature locates its stories in the distant past, hundreds of years ago, but it tells them through the lens of, and with a (political) message for, their contemporary contexts. Sub-project 1.1 (Historiographic and Narrative Literature – Hebrew Bible) will analyze an exemplary historiographic work from the Second Temple period (such as the work of the Chronicler) and investigate its modes and methods of constructing an image of the past. In the second step, the scope of this text will be compared to historiographic works from the corpus of Demotic literature. Sub-project 1.2 (Historiographic and Narrative Literature – Demotic texts) will start with a detailed analysis of Demotic narratives (such as the stories of Petese and the Prebends of Amun) and widen the horizon by comparing these texts and their literary features with narrative texts from the Hebrew Bible. Whereas Sub-project 1.1 will focus on historiographic texts, Sub-project 1.2 will focus on so-called “novellas” in Demotic and biblical literature.

Sub-project 2: Discovering the Future: Scribal Prophecy and Wisdom Instruction in Demotic and Biblical Literature

Comparable structural phenomena between Demotic and biblical literature are also found in *prophetic texts* and *wisdom texts*. Both genres show significant developments in a scribal sphere that is increasingly interested in the (nation’s) future. In both Demotic and biblical prophetic literature, classic scribal traditions are transformed under the perspective of envisioning a distant future, while at the same time incorporating aspects of traditional wisdom. Wisdom literature itself is the subject of significant transformations in the period of interest: Both Demotic and biblical wisdom books, such as the Great Demotic Wisdom Book (Papyrus Insinger) or the book of Proverbs from the Hebrew Bible, present a fundamental critique of the foundations of sapiential thought. One of the working hypotheses of DEMBIB is that the developments in Prophetic and Wisdom texts from the Persian and Hellenistic eras can be understood as two sides of the same coin, both having been produced by scribal elites under the influence of foreign rule and increasing globalization. Sub-project 2.1 (Prophetic Literature – Hebrew Bible) investigates late scribal prophetic texts that constitute the permeable boundary between late prophecy and early apocalyptic texts (such as the book of Joel, Ezek 38f., or Isa 56–66) and investigates their theology and their interaction with and development of traditional texts and topoi. The findings will be correlated with similar developments in the prophetic text corpus from Late Period Egypt that has often been labelled “apocalyptic,” such as the Oracle of the Lamb, the Oracle

of the Potter, or the so-called “Demotic Chronicle”. Sub-project 2.2 (Wisdom Literature – Demotic Texts) will analyze a representative work of wisdom from Late Period Egypt and analyze its diachronic theological development visible in its diverse manuscripts. The results may provide an important example of redaction history based on “material evidence” and will thus be a step stone towards a better understanding of the possible developments in biblical wisdom texts such as the book of Proverbs or the general train of thought from Proverbs to Job and Ecclesiastes.

Synthesis: *From Texts to Literature*: The Demotic Literature and the Formation of the Hebrew Bible

A second project phase of the project will result in a synthesis by the Principal Investigator Bernd U. Schipper, bringing together the results of the subprojects under an overarching socio-historical question.

Milestones

2022	October 2022: First project workshop by the team and advisory board: Demotic and Hebrew Bible Narrative Literature (Collège de France, Paris), hosted by Thomas Römer
2023	Second project workshop by the team and advisory board: Demotic and Hebrew Bible Prophetic and Wisdom Texts (Oxford University), hosted by Maren Schentuleit
2024	Third project workshop by the team and advisory board: Egypt and “Israel” during the Persian and Hellenistic Period (Tel Aviv University), hosted by Sylvie Honigman
2025	International conference and fourth project workshop by the team and advisory board; completion of subproject research monographs
2026	Kick-off year five: synthesis and sixth project workshop by the team and advisory board