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## Everyday Life in Exile: Judean Deportees in Babylonian Texts

By Tero Alstola

When King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon conquered the kingdom of Judah in the early sixth century BCE, part of Judean population was deported to Babylonia. These events had a huge impact on the development of Judaism, and many books of the Hebrew Bible reflect the trauma of the exile. The Hebrew Bible offers, however, little information about the exilic life in Babylonia. A growing number of Babylonian cuneiform texts shed light on this question.



Map of the Near East, indicating the location of Jerusalem, Sippar, Babylon, and Nippur. Satellite image: NASA Worldview.

The first Judeans appear in Babylonian sources only six years after the first deportation from Judah in 597 BCE. Ration lists from Nebuchadnezzar's palace in Babylon feature groups of deportees from the peripheries of the empire. Most of them were skilled professionals, such as Elamite guards, Tyrian sailors, and Judean courtiers, who worked in the city. In addition to the professionals, the ration lists feature princes from Ashkelon and King Jehoiachin of Judah and five Judean princes.

According to 2 Kings 24 and a Babylonian chronicle, Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin captive, brought him to Babylon, and installed Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah as the vassal king in Jerusalem. The practice of holding royal hostages is well known from Assyrian sources, and this was the fate of Jehoiachin and his sons as well. Hostages were held to ensure the loyalty of their relatives who served as vassal kings, and to indoctrinate the princes to become loyal servants of the empire.

Only a few other Judeans are attested in Babylonian cities. Although some deportees were used as workforce in public building projects or were donated to temples, this was not very common. Hired labor was more important in building projects, and large temple archives suggest that the workforce of the deportees was not widely used by the Babylonian temples.

An exceptional case of a well-off Judean family in an urban context are the descendants of Arih. They lived in the city of Sippar in the second half of the sixth century, working as royal merchants and trading with the Ebabbar temple. They sold gold to the temple, and because the metal had to be imported to Babylonia from far-flung regions, it is possible that members of the family also travelled themselves. Travelling merchants are an example of people who could have provided a communication channel between the Judean communities in Judah and Babylonia.

The descendants of Arih were part of a multicultural trading community in Sippar, but they were also integrated into Babylonian society. This is reflected in the marriage of their daughter Kaššaya to a Babylonian family of a relatively high social status and in the Babylonian names they gave to Kaššaya and her brothers Bel-iddin, Bel-uballit, Nabu-ittannu, and Šamaš-iddin.



Marriage agreement between the Judean bride Kaššaya and Babylonian groom Guzanu, written in Sippar in 534 BCE (BM 68921). Image: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Most of the Judean deportees were settled in the Babylonian countryside around Nippur and integrated into the so-called land-for-service system. They got a plot of land to cultivate, and, in exchange, they had to pay taxes and perform work and military service. Under this scheme, new land was brought under systematic cultivation by dependent settlers who were closely controlled by the state, ensuring efficient extraction of taxes. Judeans were only one of the many groups of deportees who were brought to the Nippur region and settled in villages according to their place of origin. The names given to these villages, such as Ashkelon, Hamath, and Yahudu, the village of Judah, attest to this phenomenon.

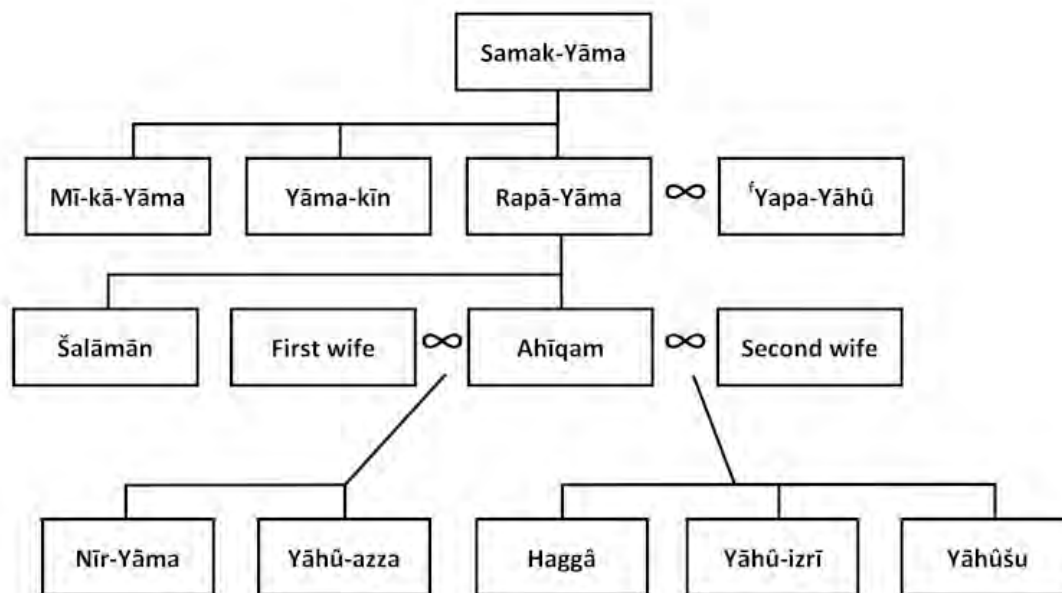


Modern irrigated date palm grove in Iran. Palm groves in the Nippur region were probably quite similar to the one depicted here. Image: Rohalamin via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

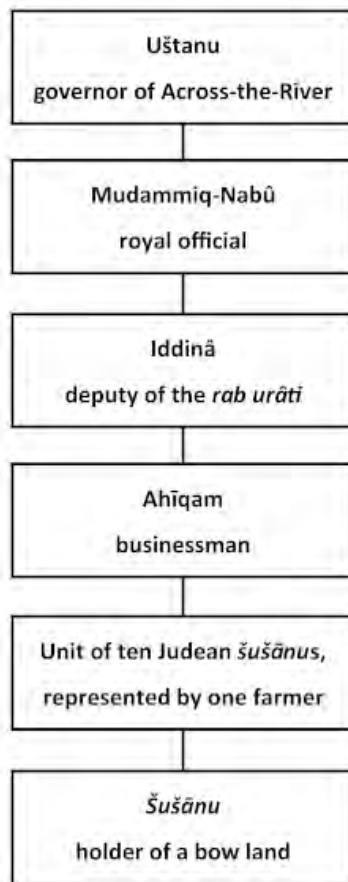
The recent publication of texts from Yahudu and its surroundings has aroused great interest as they provide a wealth of new information about the Judean existence in Babylonia. The cuneiform tablets were illicitly dug up in Iraq perhaps in the 1990s and sold to several private collectors. The archaeological context and total number of the tablets is thus unknown, but their contents reveal that they probably originate from the Nippur countryside. Less than half of the 250 known texts are published to date. The texts are legal documents such as promissory notes, leases, and receipts, relating to everyday transactions in the land-for-service sector.

Judeans were settled in Yahudu soon after the deportations, and the first preserved document from the village is dated in 572 BCE. The average Judean in Yahudu was a farmer of a relatively small plot of land. He cultivated barley and dates as primary crops, but also other vegetables for personal consumption. Annual taxes were paid in produce, but the farmers were also required to perform work and military service. The holder of the plot was ultimately responsible for fulfilling the obligations, but he could lease out the lands or hire a substitute to serve the state.

In addition to its own officials, the state used Judeans to ensure the smooth running of the land-for-service system in Yahudu. First, farmers occasionally needed credit to fulfill their obligations, and this provided opportunities for people capable of lending silver, barley, or dates. Second, some Judeans collected tax or rental payments from their countrymen in lieu of the state officials. These middlemen took care of processing and selling the produce and delivered the tax payments to the state officials in silver. Although the lenders and middlemen benefited from their activities, they were controlled by the state and were not simply private, independent businessmen.



Family tree of Ahīqam, son of Rapa-Yama. A Judean man called Ahīqam is a frequent character in the texts from Yahudu. He worked as a middleman between farmers and the state administration, collecting rental payments from the farmers. Notice the frequent usage of Judean Yahwistic names in the family and compare it to the Babylonian names borne by Kaššaya and her brothers. (Image: Tero Alstola, first published in Alstola 2020, p. 140; compare to Pearce and Wunsch 2014, p. 8. Alstola 2020 is an open access title distributed under the terms of the CC-BY-NC 4.0 License.)



Administrative hierarchy in the environs of Yahudu. The fields were ultimately under the supervision of the governor Uštanu, but the everyday administration was run by several Babylonian officials. Ahīqam, son of Rapa-Yama, worked as a middleman between the administration and Judean farmers, who were grouped in collective units of ten men. The term šušānu designated their semi-free status as state dependents. (Image: Tero Alstola, first published in Alstola 2020, p. 144. which is an open access title distributed under the terms of the CC-BY-NC 4.0 License.)

Although the last preserved text from Yahudu was written in 477 BCE, we can observe the lives of Judean farmers in the Nippur region until 413 BCE. Over 60 Judeans are attested in the archive of the Murašus, a family of Babylonian entrepreneurs in the land-for-service sector. The socioeconomic status of the Judeans in the Murašu archive does not differ much from Yahudu. They farmed state lands and were obliged to pay taxes and perform state service. However, it seems that socioeconomic differences between Judeans grew over time, and a Judean family is seen cultivating rather extensive plots of land in the Murašu texts. Both in the Yahudu texts and Murašu archive, some Judeans appear as minor officials in the land-for-service sector.



Photograph depicting the University of Pennsylvania excavations in Nippur in the 1890s. The Murašu archive was found in Nippur during the excavations in 1893. Judean farmers from the surrounding countryside visited Nippur to deal with the Babylonian Murašu family who were entrepreneurs in the land-for-service sector. (The image is published in H. V. Hilprecht (1896), *Old Babylonian Inscriptions Chiefly from Nippur II*, plate XXX. The image is in the public domain, accessed via Wikimedia Commons.)

The last cuneiform tablet referring to Judeans in Babylonia was written in the fourth century BCE, reflecting the general decline in the usage of cuneiform. We can observe continuous and stable Judean habitation in Babylonia for the full period covered by our sources. The evidence does not support a scenario of a large-scale return migration to Judah as portrayed in Ezra-Nehemiah. If some people returned, it must have been a relatively small event, not leaving any traces in the Babylonian sources.

All the Babylonian texts discussed above are legal and administrative documents that were written by Babylonian scribes. They allow a detailed study of the socioeconomic status of Judeans and an investigation of the Babylonian and Persian policies towards them. At the same time, questions related to religion, identity, and exilic experience remain mostly unanswered.

Because these are the very topics that the authors of the Hebrew Bible were interested in, there is great potential for interdisciplinary research on the Babylonian exile. Better understanding of the Judean living conditions in Babylonia can inform the reading of the biblical texts, while the Hebrew Bible reminds us about the truly traumatic experience of the exile. This serves as a caution not to read Babylonian documents as success stories of well-integrated immigrants but rather as accounts of exilic life under the yoke of two empires.

***Tero Alstola is a post-doctoral researcher in the Department of Digital Humanities at the University of Helsinki and a member of the Centre of Excellence in Ancient Near Eastern Empires.***

Further reading:

Tero Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia: A Study of Deportees in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BCE*. Leiden: Brill, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004365421>.

Yigal Bloch, "Judeans in Sippar and Susa during the First Century of the Babylonian Exile: Assimilation and Perseverance under Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Rule." *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 1 (2014): 119–172. <https://doi.org/10.1515/janeh-2014-0005>.

Laurie E. Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*. Bethesda: CDL, 2014.