

Judeans in Babylonia

also known as “Judean Exiles”

Data source: Own research and secondary literature
By Laurie Pearce, University of California Berkeley

** Data Source entry, prepared based on data sourced from an external project.*

Entry tags: Judeans and Israelites, Religious Group

The term ‘Judean’ refers to people with origins in the southern kingdom of Judah, which, along with the northern Israelite kingdom, occupied a strategic position between the imperial powers of Mesopotamia (Assyria, and later, Babylonia) and Egypt. Assyrian king Sennacherib (704-681 BCE) vanquished the northern kingdom, and deported the vast majority of Israel’s population throughout locales in Mesopotamia and North Syria. Although he also deported a significant portion of the Judean population, as illustrated in wall reliefs depicting the siege of Lachish and recorded in 2 Kgs 18:14-16, Sennacherib maintained Judah as a political identity, albeit as a vastly reduced vassal state. The scattered redistribution of deportee populations across the landscape complicates the identification and study of Israelites and Judeans in Assyrian sources, as the few distinctively Israelite or Judean names stand in geographic and social isolation from others of the same background; it is thus difficult to trace their history and/or social and economic location. The documentary situation is different with the population of Judah, deported to Babylonia in several waves: in 597 BCE, following Nebuchadnezzar’s capture of Jerusalem, which resulted in the deportation of the 18-year-old king Jehoiachin and his family (2Kgs 24:12-16); in 587 BCE, after destruction of the Jerusalem Temple; and in 582 BCE. Unlike their Assyrian predecessors, Babylonian kings (primarily Nebuchadnezzar) resettled their deportees as largely intact groups and resettled them in single locales, in many cases, in new settlements named for their places of origin. Some deported Judeans were settled in a town called Yahudu (“Judah”). Cuneiform administrative texts (promissory notes, receipts, business ventures, lists, etc.) from Yahudu and nearby locales, preserve personal names containing the name of YHWH in their construction, marking those individuals’ Judean background. The Yahudu texts date from 572-477 BCE, and predate the archives of the entrepreneurial Murašû family (454-405 BCE), which also include evidence of participation of Judeans in the land-for-sector economy, a system by which the crown granted lands to individuals in exchange for performance of military service and/or payment of taxes. Judeans identified as royal merchants appear in a small number of business documents, as well as in a few documents attesting to their service in or proximate to the royal court. As all of the cuneiform sources recording a Judean presence in Babylonia belong to the economic and administrative sector, direct information that they provide on the religious experience of this deportee population is limited.



Date Range: 598 BCE - 447 BCE

Region: Judeans in Babylonia

Region tags: Southern Mesopotamia, Babylonia

Judean populations in Babylonia in the long sixth century BCE (c. 648 - 480 BCE)

Status of Participants:

✓ Elite ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Sources

Print sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Pearce, Laurie, and Cornelia Wunsch. 2014. *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*. CUSAS 28. Bethesda: CDL Press.
- Source 2: Alstola, Tero. 2020. *Judeans in Babylonia: A Study of Deportees in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BCE*. CHANE 109. Leiden: Brill. <https://brill.com/search?q1=alstola>

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

- Source 1: Pearce, Laurie E. 2016. "Cuneiform Sources for Judeans in Babylonia in the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Periods: An Overview." *Religion Compass* 10/9: 230-243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3/122>.
- Source 2: Wunsch, Cornelia. 2013. "Glimpses on the Lives of Deportees in Rural Babylonia." In *Arameans, Chaldeans, and Arabs in Babylonia and Palestine in the First Millennium B.C.*, edited by Angelika Berlejung and Michael P. Streck, 247-260. LAOS 3. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Online sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: <https://zenodo.org/record/3600219#.YFjXLRKjLg>
- Source 1 Description: Prosopographical database of Yahudu and its surroundings. Created by Tero Alstola.
- Source 2 URL: <https://zenodo.org/record/3354075#.YFjWU7RKjLg>
- Source 2 Description: Prosopographical Database of Judeans in Babylonia (outside Yahudu and the Murašû Archive). Created by Tero Alstola.
- Source 3 URL: <https://zenodo.org/record/3351260#.YFjWELRKjLg>
- Source 3 Description: Prosopographical Database of Judeans in the Murašû Archive. Created by Tero Alstola.

Notes: Forthcoming digital project on the Oracc platform (oracc.org): ForBab: Foreigners in Babylonia in the First Millennium BCE. Corpora of texts referencing populations deported to Babylonia in and beyond the early 6th century BCE, including texts referencing the Judeans.

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Relevant online primary textual corpora (original languages and/or translations):

- Source 1 URL: <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/forbab/> (forthcoming, as of January 2022)
- Source 1 Description: ForBab: Foreigners in Babylonia in the First Millennium BCE. Project will present online text editions and background material on foreign populations, including Judeans, Carians, Neirabeans, in first millennium Babylonia. Will incorporate legacy project CTIJ (<https://oraccmuseum.upenn.edu/ctij>; see Source 2).
- Source 2 URL: <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/ctij/>
- Source 2 Description: CTIJ: Cuneiform Texts Mentioning Israelites, Judeans, and other Related Groups. Collaboration between Tel Aviv University and University of Leuven. As of Spring 2022, texts of this legacy project are accessible at original URL: <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/ctij/>

Specific to this answer:

Date Range: 620 BCE - 447 BCE

Status of Participants: ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

General Variables

Membership/Group Interactions

Are other religious groups in cultural contact with target religion:

– Yes

Notes: Contacts between Judeans and members of other religious groups occurred in social and economic transactions. The exclusively administrative and archival sources provide no indication of Judean religious practice and/or beliefs (beyond the affinity for the deity, YHWH). However, the religious identification and practices of non-Judean interlocutors bears no consequence on the transaction. Interactions with members of other religious groups may be detected when actors bear personal names that preserve the names of deities specific to other populations, e.g. Egyptian deities such as Horus and Isis; Nusku and Sahr, forms of the name of the moon god (Babylonian, Sîn) as worshipped in North Syria, particularly the region around Aleppo.

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Does the religious group have a general process/system for assigning religious affiliation:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: The documentation doesn't address this topic specifically. To the extent that the linguistic background of personal names may support identification as a member of particular social or religious group, names containing the name of YHWH as a constitutive element flag persons whose families self-identified as members of a YHWH-worshipping group. However, onomastic data can not be used to securely determine the existence of a system of assigning religious affiliation.

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Does the religious group actively proselytize and recruit new members:

– Field doesn't know

Does the religion have official political support

– Field doesn't know

Notes: It is not possible to determine from the documentation, which gives no indication of YHWH worship in Babylonia, let alone whether the political powers supported or detracted from the YHWH cult. Documentation from Elephantine (Egypt) suggests that YHWH worship could have existed in Babylonia, potentially with tacit, if not substantive, support from the political powers.

Is there a conception of apostasy in the religious group:

– Field doesn't know

Size and Structure

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (estimated population, numerical):

– Field doesn't know

Notes: The Bible tallies Judeans deported to Babylonia: 2 Kgs 24:12 records "mighty men of valor, 10,000 captives and all the craftsmen and the smiths"; Jeremiah (52:28-30) reports the numbers of exiles relocated in three waves: 3,023 exiles, 832, and 745, respectively. However, there is no extra-biblical textual evidence to support these numbers. The Babylonians did not tally the numbers of their prisoners, captives, and deportees. The Babylonian archaeological record offers no support, as many Judeans were relocated to small settlements which have yet to be identified, and material evidence is unlikely to support identification of Judeans as a unique segment of the population landscape.

Specific to this answer:

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Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (% of sample region population, numerical):

– Field doesn't know

Scripture

Does the religious group have scriptures:

Scripture is a generic term used to designate revered texts that are considered particularly authoritative and sacred relative to other texts. Strictly speaking, it refers to written texts, but there are also "oral scriptures" (e.g. the Vedas of India).

– Yes

Notes: This is a qualified "yes"! No cuneiform sources associated with Judeans in Babylonia belong to the category of scripture. However, a number of books and passages in the Hebrew Bible were written during this period, termed, by scholars and students of Judaism, the (early) Second Temple period.

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)



Are they written:

– Field doesn't know



Are they oral:

– Field doesn't know



Is there a story (or a set of stories) associated with the origin of scripture:

– Field doesn't know

Architecture, Geography

Is monumental religious architecture present:

– No

Are there different types of religious monumental architecture:

– No

Is iconography present:

– No

Beliefs

Burial and Afterlife

Is a spirit-body distinction present:

Answer “no” only if personhood (or consciousness) is extinguished with death of the physical body. Answering yes does not necessarily imply the existence of Cartesian mind/body dualism, merely that some element of personhood (or consciousness) survives the death of the body.

– Field doesn't know

Belief in afterlife:

– Field doesn't know

Reincarnation in this world:

– Field doesn't know

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses:

– Field doesn't know

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

– Field doesn't know

Are grave goods present:

– Field doesn't know

Are formal burials present:

– Field doesn't know

Supernatural Beings

Are supernatural beings present:

– Yes

Notes: The administrative texts that reference the Judeans in Babylonia do not deal with matters of the practice of the cult or belief. However, personal names containing cuneiform renderings of the divine name Yahweh attest to an on-going reverence for the Judean god. In addition to the divine element, Yahwistic (and indeed a great many ancient Semitic) names include an attribute or description of the deity. In the case of the known Yahwistic names, these descriptive elements provide small clues to the Judean perception of their god's powers, as in names that can be translated as "Yahweh heals", "Yahweh is gracious", "Yahweh is my help".

Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present:

This refers to surveillance by supernatural beings of humans' behaviour and/or thought particularly as it relates to social norms or potential norm violations.

– Field doesn't know

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment:

– Field doesn't know

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards:

– Field doesn't know

Messianism/Eschatology

Are messianic beliefs present:

– Field doesn't know

Norms and Moral Realism

Are general social norms prescribed by the religious group:

– Field doesn't know

Is there a conventional vs. moral distinction in the religious group:

– Field doesn't know

Practices

Membership Costs and Practices

Does membership in this religious group require celibacy (full sexual abstinence):

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require constraints on sexual activity (partial sexual abstinence):

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require castration:

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require fasting:

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require forgone food opportunities (taboos on desired foods):

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require permanent scarring or painful bodily alterations:

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require painful physical positions or transitory painful wounds:

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of adults:

"Adults" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition of a human who is 18-years-old or older and who is legally responsible for his/her actions, then please specify that difference in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of children:

"Children" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular

Western definition, please specify that different in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require self-sacrifice (suicide):

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of property/valuable items:

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of time (e.g., attendance at meetings or services, regular prayer, etc.):

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require physical risk taking:

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require accepting ethical precepts:

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require marginalization by out-group members:

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require participation in small-scale rituals (private, household):

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require participation in large-scale rituals:

i.e. involving two or more households; includes large-scale "ceremonies" and "festivals."

– Field doesn't know

Are extra-ritual in-group markers present:

E.g. special changes to appearance such as circumcision, tattoos, scarification, etc.

– Field doesn't know

Does the group employ fictive kinship terminology:

– Field doesn't know

Society and Institutions

Levels of Social Complexity

The society to which the religious group belongs is best characterized as (please choose one):

– Other [specify in comments]

Notes: As presented in the cuneiform documentation, the Judeans in Babylonia are to be considered subjects of an imperial society. They participated in mercantile activities and as members of the land-for-service sector. Although neither occupational/social group was of high social standing, Judeans participated as equals to others of the same status. In addition, these activities brought some Judeans into contact with members of the highest social strata.

Welfare

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized famine relief:

– Field doesn't know

Is famine relief available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized poverty relief:

– Field doesn't know

Is poverty relief available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized care for the elderly and infirm:

– Field doesn't know

Is institutionalized care for the elderly and infirm available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Education

Does the religious group provide formal education to its adherents:

– Field doesn't know

Is formal education available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group:

– Field doesn't know

Bureaucracy

Do the group's adherents interact with a formal bureaucracy within their group:

– Field doesn't know

Do the group's adherents interact with other institutional bureaucracies:

– Yes

Notes: All of the cuneiform records of Judeans in Babylonia document interactions with institutional bureaucracies associated with the land-for-service sector of the economy, mercantile communities, and, with respect to members of the royal household, the administration of rations to elite deportees.

Public Works

Does the religious group in question provide public food storage:

– Field doesn't know

Is public food storage provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Does the religious group in question provide water management (irrigation, flood control):

– Yes

Notes: Judeans could obtain rights from the royal administration to access and control land and water resources. In some instances, the Judeans may have been entrepreneurial, leasing and subletting properties governed by such rights.

Is water management provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: Judeans who held bow lands benefited from the infrastructure that supported the digging and maintenance of canals necessary for agriculture.

Does the religious group in question provide transportation infrastructure:

– Field doesn't know

Is transportation infrastructure provided for the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Taxation

Does the religious group in question levy taxes or tithes:

– Field doesn't know

Are taxes levied on the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: Judeans who held bow lands were responsible for the payment of the associated tax obligations. However, these taxes were not levied on Judeans as a group, rather upon individuals whose economic connection to the administrative system obligated them to do.

Enforcement

Does the religious group in question provide an institutionalized police force:

– Field doesn't know

Do the group's adherents interact with an institutionalized police force provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized judges:

– Field doesn't know

Do the group's adherents interact with an institutionalized judicial system provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: A marriage document between a Judean bride and a Babylonian groom includes standard Babylonian clauses stipulating penalties to be imposed on both parties in the case of divorce. From the late reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Judeans are also attested as parties in court cases.

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Does the religious group in question enforce institutionalized punishment:

– Field doesn't know

Are the group's adherents subject to institutionalized punishment enforced by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: It is impossible to give a full picture of the degree to which this was so. However, the document related to the marriage of a Judean bride to a Babylonian groom includes the "death by iron dagger" clause, a punishment to be inflicted on an adulterous wife. Both it and the "divorce clause" which levied heavy monetary fines against a husband who abandons his wife for another woman, were punishments directed at non-elite individuals. It is not clear who carried out the iron dagger punishment, but the phrase suggests Judeans in Babylonia were subject to the punishments meted out to others of comparable social standing who similarly violated Babylonian law.

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include execution:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include exile:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include corporal punishments:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include ostracism:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include seizure of property:

– Field doesn't know

Does the religious group in question have a formal legal code:

– Field doesn't know

Are the group's adherents subject to a formal legal code provided by institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: Beyond the examples referenced in the section "Do the group's adherents interact with an institutionalized judicial system?", evidence of Judean involvement in legal cases is limited, and preserved sections of the Neo-Babylonian law code address matters related only to individuals with free social standing. Thus it is impossible to determine the scope of the Babylonian legal system's application to Judeans (and other deportee groups).

Warfare

Does religious group in question possess an institutionalized military:

– No

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Do the group's adherents participate in an institutionalized military provided by institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: Judeans associated with bow fiefs in the land-for-service sector of the economy were expected to fulfill military service obligations attached to those lands, either by their own participation or by providing a substitute, as was the practice.

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Are the group's adherents protected by or subject to an institutionalized military provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Written Language

Does the religious group in question possess its own distinct written language:

– No

Notes: Although by the start of the 6th century BCE, Aramaic had replaced Hebrew in written records in Judah, the use of spoken Hebrew may have continued in smaller communities there. Highly trained scribes were surely among the members of the Judean royal circle held captive in Babylon; they would have continued to write documents associated with their cultural (religious) tradition in the Hebrew language. However, during this period, a dramatic shift occurred, in which Aramaic letter forms fully replaced those of the corresponding Hebrew. Paleo-Hebrew letter forms re-emerge in the Hellenistic period, on seals and coins, where their use carried ideological messages related to the historicity of the population now identified as Jewish.

Is a non-religion-specific written language available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: At the time of the exile of the Judeans to Babylonia, Aramaic was already in widespread use and becoming the administrative language of empire. Aramaic script had already replaced Hebrew script in Judah. It is reasonable to assume that literate Judeans, who would have been hearing Aramaic spoken around them, could have utilized written Aramaic in contexts that demanded its use. While Aramaic notations on documents in the Murašû archive reference Judeans, no attestations of Aramaic written by Judeans can be confirmed. The question of whether cuneiform scribes or alphabetic [Aramaic] scribes produced the Aramaic dockets on the cuneiform tablets remains open.

Is a non-religion-specific written language used by the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Scribes responsible for documents in which Judeans are attested bear exclusively Babylonian names. There is no evidence that securely attests to Judeans producing the surviving Aramaic documents. It is unlikely that Judeans were trained in the cuneiform script.

Calendar

Does the religious group in question possess a formal calendar:

– Yes

Notes: While there is no cuneiform evidence preserved for Judean activity according to their cultic calendar, it is reasonable to assume that, on analogy with the Elephantine evidence for cultic observance, that Judeans in Babylonia continued with the observance of ritual ordained at specific times.

Is a formal calendar provided for the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: Judeans in Babylonia conducted business in accordance with Babylonian practice; all dated transactions bear dates in the Babylonian calendar.

Food Production

Does the religious group in question provide food for themselves:

– Yes

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)



Please characterize the forms/level of food production [choose all that apply]:

– Small-scale agriculture / horticultural gardens or orchards

– Large-scale agriculture (e.g., monocropping, organized irrigation systems)

Notes: Insofar as the documentation records, Judeans engaged in agriculture in Babylonia were participants in the land-for-service sector of the economy. They either received plots of land or worked on the plots of land others received in exchange for the performance of military duty, service obligations, and/or the payment of taxes. Included in service was the maintenance of irrigation canals, necessary to maintain the land's productivity. Along with members of various other subordinate groups, Judeans engaged in the leasing of rights to access sections of canals. Taxes associated with these plots of land were paid as the estimated yield of agricultural production of dates and barley. Scattered references indicate farmers could and did raise vegetable and fruit crops among the plantings dedicated to institutional demands; such crops were for personal and familial consumption.

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Is food provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)



Please characterize the forms/levels of food production [choose all that apply]:

– Other [specify in comments]

Notes: Judeans (as well as members of other deportee populations) resident in Babylon were given rations of grain and oil. All the recipients of these rations belonged either to the royal families of their places of origin, or to their respective larger royal households. Notably, the cuneiform ration lists from Babylon document the rations provided to Jehoiachin, the Judean king deported in the wake of Nebuchadnezzar's assault against Jerusalem, and to five of his sons.

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Bibliography

General References

Reference: Laurie Pearce E.. Identifying Judeans and Judean Identity in the Babylonian Evidence. (Jonathan Stökl , Caroline Waerzeggers undefined, Ed.), Exile and Return: The Babylonian Context. De Gruyter. isbn: 978-3-11-041928-3.