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TOVA GANZEL

*The Judean Community within the Persian Imperial
Framework: Insights from Biblical and Extrabiblical Sources*

Ancient Jewish Memories of Achaemenid Persia 5

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THE JUDEAN COMMUNITY WITHIN THE PERSIAN IMPERIAL FRAMEWORK: INSIGHTS FROM BIBLICAL AND EXTRABIBLICAL SOURCES*

TOVA GANZEL
Bar-Ilan University

Extrabiblical and biblical sources attest to the Judeans' familiarity and interaction with the Persian regime, yet the biblical texts also reflect internal struggles and theological tensions within the Judean community. A fuller understanding of Judean life under Achaemenid Persian rule emerges when these interactions are examined more closely. Elements of that relationship include the partial Judean return to Judah, Judean contact with Persian authorities, Temple practices, taxation, and land ownership.

Though the two distinct types of sources shed light on Judean life under Persian rule, they do so in fundamentally different ways. Biblical texts offer insight into the theological and moral worldview of their authors and audiences; cuneiform records document concrete economic and bureaucratic activities. This study approaches these sources as complementary rather than interchangeable, using them to address specific historical and social questions that align with each type's particular strengths.

Cuneiform texts provide direct evidence of such subjects as taxation systems, land leases, promissory notes, marriage agreements, and inheritance practices. These sources include the Al-Yahudu tablets, dated to the early sixth–early fifth century BCE, which provide direct evidence of such subjects as taxation systems, land leases, promissory notes, marriage agreements, and inheritance practices. These records reveal how the Judean community integrated into Babylonian society and interacted with local administrative structures; they provide administrative, legal, and economic sources that are often transactional in nature. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of studies devoted to different aspects of the Al-Yahudu tablets. Studies have dealt with various dimensions of the material. Berlejung discusses the social status of the Judeans in the Al-Yahudu community, describing a (positive) change over time.¹ Legal aspects

* This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (grant no. 723/23).

¹ Angelika Berlejung, "Social Climbing in the Babylonian Exile," in

are discussed by Abraham (marriage)² and Wunsch and Magdalene (slavery).³ Onomastics are dealt with by Pearce,⁴ Hackl examines the scribal practices in the rural hinterland of Nippur,⁵ and Levavi tackles an administrative peculiarity concerning the Judeans within the land-for-service system.⁶ The foundations built over more than one hundred years of research give us a clearer picture of the lives of the Judeans in Babylonian exile.⁷

Biblical texts, particularly Ezra-Nehemiah, reflect the ideological and moral responses of the Judean community to these same realities. Bible scholars relate the biblical texts of Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, and Ezra-Nehemiah to the Persian Era. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are prophetic works, centered around theological reflections. Ezra-Nehemiah is not a prophetic work but rather composed of historiographical narratives, combining administrative records, memoir-like sections, and theological reflections.⁸

Wandering Arameans: Arameans Outside Syria: Textual and Archaeological Perspectives, ed. Angelika Berlejung, Aren M. Maeir, and Andreas Schüle, *Altorientalistische Studien* 5 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2017), 101–24; idem, “New Life, New Skills and New Friends in Exile: The Loss and Rise of Capitals of the Judeans in Babylonia,” in *Alphabets, Texts and Artifacts in the Ancient Near East: Studies Presented to Benjamin Sass*, ed. Israel Finkelstein, Christian Robin, and Thomas Römer (Paris: Van Dieren, 2017), 12–46.

² Kathleen Abraham, “Negotiating Marriage in Multicultural Babylonia: An Example from the Judean Community in Āl-Yāhūdu,” in *Exile and Return: The Babylonian Context*, ed. Jonathan Stökl and Caroline Waerzeggers, *BZAW* 478 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 33–57.

³ Cornelia Wunsch and F. Rachel Magdalene, “Freedom and Dependency: Neo-Babylonian Manumission Documents with Oblation and Service Obligation,” in *Extraction & Control: Studies in Honor of Matthew W. Stolper*, ed. Michael Kozuh, Wouter Henkelman, Charles E. Jones, and Christopher Woods, *SAOC* 68 (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2014), 337–46.

⁴ Laurie Pearce, “Identifying Judeans and Judean Identity in the Babylonian Evidence,” in Stökl and Waerzeggers, *Exile and Return*, 7–32.

⁵ Johannes Hackl, “Babylonian Scribal Practices in Rural Contexts: A Linguistic Survey of the Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia,” in Berlejung, Maeir, and Schüle, *Wandering Arameans*, 125–40.

⁶ Yuval Levavi, “A Peculiar Taxation Practice of Judean Exiles in Rural Babylonia and Its Possible Connection to Building Activity in Late Sixth Century Judah,” in *Research on Israel and Aram: Autonomy, Independence and Related Issues: Proceedings of the First Annual RLAB Center Conference, Leipzig, June 2016*, ed. Angelika Berlejung and Aren Maeir (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 395–407.

⁷ Two publications have great significance and should be considered: Caroline Waerzeggers, “Review of *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer* by Laurie E. Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch,” *Strata* 33 (2015): 179–94; and Tero Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia: A Study of Deportees in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BCE*, *CHANE* 109 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), which includes a discussion of Judeans within cuneiform records.

⁸ Scholars suggest that biblical priestly texts were written during the

By engaging with both textual genres, we can come to a more nuanced understanding of how Judean communities navigated their duties to their imperial rulers and what Judean identity looked like within the expansive framework of Persian imperial administration. Taken together, these sources create a multifaceted picture of Judean life, each contributing a unique layer of understanding to Judean identity and agency within the Persian imperial context.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF BIBLICAL TEXTS

Understanding the socio-political and religious messages of the prophetic texts of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi requires situating them within their historical context—a time period that spanned from approximately 538 BCE to the governorship of Nehemiah in 430 BCE.⁹ While these texts reflect on the events in the Persian period, debates on their dating persist.

Haggai provides a unique chronological framework, as the book explicitly dates the prophet's activity to a four-month period in the second year of Darius I—from the first of Elul to the twenty-fourth of Kislev, 521/520 BCE (Hag 1:1; 2:10, 20). This study assumes that these dates reflect the prophet's brief but significant period of activity. Support for this timeframe appears in Ezra 5:1–2 and 6:14, where Haggai is mentioned alongside Zech-

Persian period and described the reality that preceded their composition in idealized fashion. This differs from the approach taken by non-priestly authors of the Persian period, who tended to describe their worlds using a more realistic perspective. See, for example: Konrad Schmid, "Judean Identity and Ecumenicity: The Political Theology of the Priestly Document," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Period: Negotiating Identity in an International Context*, ed. Oded Lipschits, Gary Knoppers, and Michael Oeming (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 3–26; Reinhard Achenbach, "The Pentateuch, the Prophets and the Torah in the 5th and 4th Century B.C.E.," in *Judah and Judeans in the Fourth Century B.C.E.*, ed. Rainer Albertz and Oded Lipschits (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 253–303. This article does not delve into the composition or editing process of texts that describe the period that preceded the Persian one.

⁹ This time frame roughly corresponds to the period in Mesopotamian history known as the "Long Sixth Century," a term coined by Michael Jursa to describe the era extending from the fall of Assyria and the rise of Babylonia (around 620 BCE) until the Babylonian revolt in the second year of Xerxes (484 BCE): Michael Jursa, *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC: Economic Geography, Economic Mentalities, Agriculture, the Use of Money and the Problem of Economic Growth*, AOAT 377 (Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 2010), 5. The term reflects the substantial institutional and cultural continuity between the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid periods. Religious rituals, alongside legal and administrative systems operating in the early Persian Empire, continued largely as they had under the reigns of the Neo-Babylonian kings. See Michael Jursa, "The Transition of Babylonia from the Neo-Babylonian Empire to Achaemenid Rule," in *Regime Change in the Ancient Near East and Egypt: From Sargon of Agade to the Seljuks*, ed. Harriet Crawford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 73–94.

ariah as a prophetic figure actively involved in the rebuilding of the Temple.¹⁰ These passages place Haggai's prophetic mission within the early Persian period and the broader context of Temple reconstruction. The prophet Haggai addresses a diverse population in Judah, composed of returnees from Babylonian exile and those who remained in the land. His words are directed both to the broader community and to its leadership, including figures such as Zerubbabel and Joshua the High Priest. The waves of return reported under leaders like Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel provide an essential historical and social backdrop for understanding Haggai's message.¹¹

The book of Zechariah, particularly chapters 1–8, complements and extends the concepts introduced in Haggai, offering historical and thematic insights into the Persian period. Zechariah's prophetic activity is recorded as beginning in the second year of Darius I (520 BCE) (Zech 1:1) and extending until the fourth year of Darius I (518 BCE) (Zech 7:1). These explicit dates anchor Zechariah within the same historical framework as Haggai. Like his predecessor, Zechariah addresses a population

¹⁰ Although the content of their prophecy is not noted, the mention of Haggai alongside Zechariah in the book of Ezra has been discussed in recent scholarship. See, for example, Bob Becking, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, HCOT (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 76–77; and Hannah K. Harrington, *The Books of Ezra-Nehemiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022), 167–168.

¹¹ For the book of Haggai's literary history, see the standard commentaries, e.g., Elie Assis and Rimon Kasher, *Mikra LeYisrael: Scientific Commentary on the Bible—Haggai*, ed. Shmuel Ahituv (Raanana: Am Oved, 2022), 14–18 (Hebrew); Mignon R. Jacobs, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 3–11; Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 25B (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), xxix–xliv; David L. Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1–8*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 33; and Hayim Tadmor, “‘The Appointed Time Has Not Yet Arrived’: The Historical Background of Haggai 1:2,” in *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine*, ed. Robert Chazan, William W. Hallo, and Lawrence H. Schiffman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 407–84. For additional bibliography see in the works cited above.

A later date for Malachi cannot be conclusively ruled out. For the book's era and editorial process, see Paul L. Redditt, “The Book of Malachi in Its Social Setting,” *CBQ* 56 (1994): 240–55. For an overview of the current state of research on the significance of the Persian context in addition to the historical context, refer to Michael R. Fox, “History of Research: Entrenched Trajectories and a New Direction,” in *A Message from the Great King: Reading Malachi in Light of Ancient Persian Royal Messenger Texts from the Time of Xerxes* (University Park, PA: Penn State, 2021), 3–27. Hill suggests that the reign of Darius from 515 to 458 BCE provides the appropriate Persian backdrop for Malachi. See Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 82. Fox concludes that the reign of Xerxes I, spanning from 485 to 465 BCE, is more suitable due to the framing of Malachi's prophecy and his extensive use of “the royal messenger concept” in the prophecy. See Fox, *Message from the Great King*, 20.

struggling with economic hardship, imperial expectations, and religious stagnation. His prophecies include a series of symbolic night visions (Zech 1–6) that emphasize God’s intention to restore Jerusalem, renew the Temple, and bring divine favor to the community. Chapters 7 and 8 transition into a focus on ethical responsibilities, highlighting themes of justice, integrity, and compassion as essential to the community’s covenantal obligations.¹² This study approaches Zechariah 1–8 as a Persian-period text, while remaining mindful of the possibility of editorial additions or reinterpretations in later periods.¹³

In contrast, the book of Malachi lacks explicit historical references, making its dating challenging. Jewish tradition regards Malachi as one of the last prophets, active during the early days of the Second Temple period (t. Sotah 13:3), although scholars debate the book’s placement within the Persian period. Proposals range from situating Malachi contemporaneously with Haggai and Zechariah (520–500 BCE) to locating him before Ezra, during Nehemiah’s missions, or even at the end of the Persian period and into the early Hellenistic era. Scholars argue that theological tensions and thematic layers suggest possible later editorial activity.¹⁴ This study adopts the position that Malachi primarily reflects Persian-period realities, while remaining open to the possibility of subsequent textual developments.

Treating Haggai, Zechariah (1–8), and Malachi as primarily Persian-period texts—while acknowledging their potential editorial development in subsequent periods¹⁵—means that these texts can serve as valuable, albeit complex, windows into Judean society under Persian imperial administration. Additionally,

¹² See Tova Ganzel, “The Fast of Gedaliah: Its Continued Observance and Significance in the Restoration Period,” *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 20 (2010): 51–69 (Hebrew).

¹³ For a focused analysis of Zechariah 1–8 and its Persian context, see standard commentaries, e.g., Mark J. Boda, *The Book of Zechariah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 17–23, 31–35; Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8*, xlv–xlviii. For the compositional development of the book of Zechariah, see Mark J. Boda, *Exploring Zechariah, Volume 1: The Development of Zechariah and Its Role within the Twelve* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 31–49. Further references are available in the works cited above.

¹⁴ For the text’s literary history, see standard commentaries, e.g., Carol Meyers, “Priestly Language in Malachi,” *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986): 225–37; and Karl William Weyde, *Prophecy and Teaching: Prophetic Authority, Form Problems, and the Use of Traditions in the Book of Malachi*, BZAW 288 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000). Weyde’s comprehensive study examines the origins of Malachi within earlier biblical traditions, offering valuable insight into the exegetical activity carried out by priests and Levites in the post-exilic Temple community.

¹⁵ For discussions on the connection between Haggai and Zechariah 1–8, see, for example, Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8*, xlv–xlviii. This connection has been further examined in scholarly literature, highlighting its historical and theological dimensions within the Persian context.

while debates on the historicity of the events described in Ezra-Nehemiah persist, the discussion below assumes that the narrative framework—which is replete with dates and references to Persian kings—reflects mid-fifth century BCE events, despite the likelihood of Hellenistic-period editing in the finalized text.¹⁶

While the different biblical books can potentially be dated to roughly the same period, their literary natures diverge. Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 reveal a distinct prophetic and theological orientation that shapes their portrayal of Persian imperial figures and local leaders. Joachimsen notes that while these prophetic texts reference historical figures like Darius, Zerubbabel, and Joshua, their focus is not on political or administrative realities but rather on theological and symbolic interpretations of imperial and local authority.¹⁷ In Zechariah 1–8, the focus shifts to symbolic imagery and eschatological visions. Zerubbabel’s imperial identity is largely muted, and he is presented as an authority figure for the Temple and prophetic mission. The texts prioritize theological concerns, envisioning a restored Temple and society under divine guidance, rather than providing detailed insight into administrative structures, taxation, or military arrangements. The Persian Empire, while present as a contextual backdrop, operates primarily as a symbolic framework through which theological messages are conveyed.

Nehemiah 5 can and should also be contextualized within the Persian Empire as a symbolic framework. Joachimsen’s study emphasizes the complexities of identity, loyalty, and power within an imperial context.¹⁸ In the chapter, which depicts an internal economic crisis among the Judean community, Nehemiah appeals to kinship values, the fear of God, and concerns about the community’s honor before external adversaries. Nehemiah frames his critique around both internal solidarity and the reputation of the community before

¹⁶ For the text’s literary history, see the standard commentaries, e.g., Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988); Lisbeth S. Fried, *Ezra and the Law in History and Tradition: Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2014); Sara Japhet, “The Biblical Historiography in the Persian Period,” in *The Restoration: The Persian Period*, vol. 6 of *History of the People of Israel*, ed. Hayim Tadmor and Israel Eph’al (Jerusalem: Peli & Am Oved, 1973), 176–201 (Hebrew); Sara Japhet, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2019) (Hebrew); Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra-Nehemiah: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 14 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 23–29, 149–57, 200–207; Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, *Ezra-Nehemiah: An Introduction and Study Guide; Israel’s Quest for Identity*, T&T Clark Study Guides to the Old Testament (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 39–65; H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, WBC 16 (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 40–49, 275–99, 378–85.

¹⁷ Kristin Joachimsen, “Yehudite Imaginations of King Darius and His Officials: Views from the Province beyond the River,” *Religions* 13 (2022), 262–80.

¹⁸ Kristin Joachimsen, “Cohesion, Distribution, and Hybrid Identity in Nehemiah 5,” in *The Bible and Money: Issues of Economy and Socioeconomic Ethics in the Bible*, ed. Markus Zehnder and Hallvard Hagelia (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2020), 116–29.

surrounding peoples. Notably, neither Nehemiah nor the people challenge the legitimacy of Persian authority or taxation, reflecting a nuanced positioning of Judah within the imperial structure.

Taken together with cuneiform documents, these biblical works provide insights into the lives of the Judeans under Persian rule—their interactions with the ruling classes, their identity as exiles and returnees, and the theological challenges they faced.

THE JUDEANS IN JUDAH: A PARTIAL RETURN

Babylonian cuneiform records indicate that after the rise of Persian rule, which facilitated the return to Zion, a significant number of Judeans remained in Babylonia, even as others returned to Judah. One possible explanation for this reality emerges from the sources published by Wunsch. She concludes that the lives of the deportees who chose to remain in Babylonia were significantly better than those of the returnees to Judah, more profoundly than has previously been understood. In Wunsch's description, it is clear that the exiles who remained in Babylonia retained a certain social status:

The cuneiform records attribute them *šušānu* status. It was forbidden by law to reduce such individuals to slave status, be it by sale or through debt. They were allowed to acquire, accumulate, manage, and bequeath property. . . Their free status, however, was burdened with obligations towards the king—labour service, rental and tax payments, as well as contributions to military operations. . . In a way, their situation mirrored that of the temple dependants (*širkus*) who were free but bound to their institution to which they owed their labor and burdened with duties to “gods and king” that were administered by the priests. They also could own and bequeath property; they lived in families but were required to marry within their own group.¹⁹

The depictions found in the prophecies of Haggai (1:6, 1:10–11) and Zechariah (8:9–10), alongside the narrative in Nehemiah 5, offer literary portrayals that suggest significant hardships and local challenges in Judah. While these texts do not serve as direct historical windows into life in the Persian period, they reflect the concerns and perspectives of their authors, who were themselves situated within or responding to a post-exilic reality.

The book of Malachi presents complementary themes and offers further insight into these dynamics. In line with its pro-

¹⁹ Cornelia Wunsch with contributions by James D. Moore and Laurie E. Pearce, *Judaeans by the Waters of Babylon: New Historical Evidence in Cuneiform Sources from Rural Babylonia in the Schøyen Collection*, *Babylonische Archiv* 6, Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection 43: Cuneiform Texts XV (Dresden: ISLET, 2022), 143. For further discussion on *šušānu* and their obligations, see the section on “Taxation and Land Ownership” below.

phetic and rhetorical style, Malachi delivers a forceful condemnation of those who fail to honor God: “If you will not listen, and if you will not set your heart to give honor to My name—said God of Hosts—then I will send a curse on you, and I will curse your blessings” (Mal 2:2).²⁰ This passage, while at times interpreted metaphorically as reflecting theological concerns, can also be understood to shed light on a perceived crisis of religious commitment and communal identity during the period in which it was composed.

Together, these texts articulate the difficulties and a sense of disappointment among the inhabitants of Judah, particularly their perception of a diminished divine presence, which in turn is depicted as contributing to their disobedience to God’s laws (Hag 1–2).

The prophetic books, then, reveal an underlying ambivalence among the Judeans regarding whether God had indeed returned to the Jerusalem sanctuary constructed during the formative days of the Second Temple. Prophecies in Haggai (2:3–9), Zechariah (8:2–3, 9), and Malachi (3:1) suggest lingering doubt or uncertainty about the reality of God’s presence in the Temple. It should be noted, however, that the narrative in Ezra assumes God’s return to His sanctuary (Ezra 6:12) and emphasizes the reestablishment of Temple personnel in Jerusalem (Ezra 7:7).

While they must be understood primarily as theological and literary compositions, the prophetic texts offer valuable insights into the concerns and perspectives of their authors. Their portrayal of life in Judah reflects a broader sense of conflict and challenge among the Judeans of that time period, expressed in theological questions and spiritual doubts. The return of only some Judeans may have been an outgrowth of those same challenges and doubts.

JUDEAN EXILES, JUDEAN RETURNEES, AND PERSIAN RULE

The Judean Second Temple community in Jerusalem was established and thrived under the watchful eye of Persian imperial authority. When viewed through this lens, the well-established Judeans in exiled communities in Persia shared commonalities with the Judeans residing in Jerusalem and its surroundings. Both communities were composed of descendants of the exiles and grappled with the evolving administrative structure within the Persian Empire. Moreover, the Neo-Babylonian kings and, subsequently, the Persian kings invested significant efforts in revitalizing the regions where various exiled communities were settled, including restoring local temples²¹—and the treatment of the Judeans in diverse districts of the empire mirrored that of

²⁰Translations of passages from Haggai and Malachi in this study are based on Mignon R. Jacobs, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), with my adaptations.

²¹Wunsch, *Judaeans*, 5.

their non-Judean contemporaries, whether they resided near the king or in more distant locations.

Throughout the empire, in the Judean exiled communities as in the Jerusalem Temple community at the opposite end of the empire, temples played a pivotal role as regional economic centers.²² The temple communities—including the Judeans living around the Jerusalem Temple—derived economic benefits from the cult’s organizational structure.²³ These distinct communities, Babylonian and Judean, sustained themselves around local temples, which served as a resource through which inhabitants demonstrated loyalty to the king, primarily through the payment of taxes.²⁴

Recently published texts, including documented scribal transmissions, showcase mobility among communities. Evidence within these texts reveals the context in which the exiles lived. Although many Judeans in Achaemenid Babylonia were most likely farmers, some exiled Judeans were treated favorably, obtaining recognition as officials and actively participating in local administration.²⁵ Cuneiform evidence of contact between the

²² See for example the city of Keš; *ibid.*, 6.

²³ While there is not yet evidence from the Al-Yahudu or Murashu archives of Judeans interacting with Babylonian temples, there is evidence from Sippar during the late Neo-Babylonian period. Yigal Bloch demonstrates that a Judean named “Mardukā operated with the funds of the Ebabbar temple of Shamash in Sippar. . . Amuše [Mardukā’s brother] was dealing with a powerful institution, able to bend the prices in its favor.” See Yigal Bloch, “Judeans in Sippar and Susa during the First Century of the Babylonian Exile: Assimilation and Perseverance under Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Rule,” *JANEH* 1 (2014): 119–172, here 131.

The Elephantine community can also serve to illuminate temple compounds in the Persian Empire. The Judean temple at Elephantine highlights a different sociopolitical and religious dynamic than the Jerusalem Temple portrayed in Ezra-Nehemiah. On the distinctiveness of the Elephantine material as local administrative records versus the theological and historiographical character of Ezra-Nehemiah, see Joachimsen, “Yehudite Imaginations.”

²⁴ For the Judean community in Babylonia, this did not necessarily imply worship of Babylonian gods, although it remains a possibility.

²⁵ This conclusion is drawn from the indication that it was not feasible to litigate against a Judean without evidence or when no date was marked on the documents (see BaAr 6 no. 27), and that the alphabetic scribes, potentially Judeans, served as faithful witnesses whose testimony was recognized in trials covering various matters such as property distribution, inheritance disputes, theft, and more. For an instance in which Judeans were witnesses in a legal dispute, see Laurie E. Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*, CUSAS 28 (Bethesda: CDL, 2014), no. 16. For nine instances in which Judeans were alphabetic scribes see: Yigal Bloch, *Alphabet Scribes in the Land of Cuneiform: Sēpiru Professionals in Mesopotamia in the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Periods*, *Gorgias Studies in the Ancient Near East* 11 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018), 379–93. For instances of alphabetic scribes serving as witnesses, see: Bloch, *Alphabet Scribes*, 33–37.

Judeans (identified based on their names) and Persian bureaucracy at the time includes:

- 1) A Judean who held the position of canal manager and collected taxes along with the agent of Artabara, the *Mašennu*, a high-ranking official likely to have interacted with the Persian elite (436 BCE).²⁶
- 2) A personal Judean servant of Crown Prince Artahšar (420 BCE), who collected rent for the prince on fields in Nippur.²⁷
- 3) Judeans who appeared before the king in a lawsuit (417 BCE); the king sided with them.²⁸

These three examples provide significant evidence of an understanding that is becoming more widespread in research: the Judeans were not only familiar with the Persians' cultural world but were well known to Persian officials and in regular contact.

Judeans who bore official bureaucratic titles can be found in the sources. They can be identified by their names:²⁹

²⁶ My thanks to Jan Safford for providing me with a translation of this text. The museum no. of the cuneiform tablet relating to the name Minyamin/Bēl-ab-ušur is CBS 5397. For a cuneiform hand-copy, see Hermann Vollrat Hilprecht and Albert T. Clay, *Business Documents of Murašū sons of Nippur. Dated in the Reign of Artaxerxes I (464–424)*, The Babylonian Expedition of the University of Pennsylvania (BE) 9 (Philadelphia, 1898), no. 14. For a German translation, see Joseph Kohler and Arthur Ungnad, *Hundert ausgewählte Rechtsurkunden aus der Spätzeit des babylonischen Schrifttums von Xerxes bis Mithridates II (485–493)* (Leipzig: E. Pfeiffer, 1911), 51. For a French translation, see David Sidersky, "L'onomastique hébraïque des tablettes de Nippur," *REJ* 87 (1929): 177–99, esp. 188. (No published English translation exists.) Regarding the position of *Mašennu*, Stolper notes: "It is likely, therefore, that the *mašennus* of fifth-century Nippur, like those at the sixth-century court of Nebuchadnezzar, were in some way connected with the royal households" (Matthew W. Stolper, *Entrepreneurs and Empire: The Murašū Archive, the Murašū Firm, and Persian Rule in Babylonia*, PIHANS 54 [Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut, 1985], 48). For the Judean origin of Minyamin, see Ran Zadok, *The Earliest Diaspora: Israelites and Judeans in Pre-Hellenistic Mesopotamia*, Publications of the Diaspora Research Institute 151 (Tel Aviv: Diaspora Research Institute, Tel Aviv University, 2002), 37.

²⁷ The museum no. of the tablet relating to Il-Yādini/Yadah-Yawa is CBS 5367. For a hand copy of the Akkadian, see Albert T. Clay, *Business Documents of Murašū Sons of Nippur Dated in the Reign of Darius II*, Publications of the Babylonian Section (PBS) 2/1 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1912), no. 84. For a French translation, see Guillaume Cardascia, *Les archives des Murašū: Une famille d'hommes d'affaires babyloniens à l'époque perse (455–403 av. J.-C.)* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1951), 93–94. For information on the Judean ethnicity of the individual, see Zadok, *Earliest Diaspora*, 43.

²⁸ Bloch, *Alphabet Scribes*, 306–17.

²⁹ It should be noted that a name, in isolation, does not always provide a comprehensive indication of an individual's identity or background. Therefore, while individuals identified as Judeans may appear

Dates (BCE)	Judean officials	Source
421– 417	Ḥannanī/Mīnaḥḥēm the manager of the king's poultry	PBS 2/1 nos. 25, 27, 63, 76 BE 10 no. 128
421	Matan-Yawa slave of the overseer of the queen	PBS 2/1 no. 50
421	Išrib-Yawa/Pill-Yawa: the overseer of the ḥaṭru of the šušānu of the treasury	BE 10 no. 65
420	Ili-yadini/Yadaḥ-Yawa, servant of Prince Artahšar	PBS 2/1 no. 84
417	Mīnaḥḥēm & Ḥananna the overseers/bailiffs (^u paqduṭu) of Lābāši	BE 10 no. 127

However, when Judeans had to resort to borrowing funds for construction projects, their circumstances deteriorated. Instead of maintaining a somewhat independent status under the local Persian governor's authority, they were often subjected to enslavement. Again, Nehemiah 5:5 depicts debt leading to enslavement for the Judeans: “. . . yet here we are subjecting our sons and daughters to slavery—some of our daughters are already subjected—and we are powerless, while our fields and vineyards belong to others.” Similar situations within Babylonia are documented in the cuneiform texts.

The frequent mention of Persian officials in the biblical texts expresses an engagement and familiarity with the figures within Persian rule who operated in Jerusalem's Temple. In passages that describe their intervention in the establishment of the Judean Temple, the Persian kings are depicted supervising the high officials' care for the Jerusalem temple (Ezra 1:1–2, 7–8; 3:7; 4:5–20; 5:6–17; 6:1–4; 7:8, 12, 27; 8:22; 9:9; Neh 13:6). Moreover, the biblical texts depict notable connections between Judah and the ruling authority based in Babylonia. Neh 11:24 reports, “Petahiah son of Meshezabel, of the sons of Zerah son of Judah, by the King's Side, concerning all the affairs for the people.”³⁰

in the sources with official bureaucratic titles, caution should be exercised in assuming that their names alone offer a complete understanding of their identities or affiliations. For information on the Judean status of the individuals listed, see Zadok, *Earliest Diaspora*. For Ḥannanī/Mīnaḥḥēm, see no. 68; for Matan-Yawa, servant of the overseer of the queen, see no. 77 (note that Zadok lists him as being the “servant of Queen Parysatis,” but the Akkadian can also be read as calling him the servant of the attendant [*paqdu*] of the queen; my thanks to Jan Safford for providing me with a translation); for Išrib-Yawa/Pill-Yawa see no. 122; for Ili-yadini/Yadaḥ-Yawa see no. 126. For information about the Judean status of Mīnaḥḥēm & Ḥananna, see Bloch, *Alphabet Scribes*, 345–49.

³⁰ This translation is my own.

The title “By the King’s Side” (Neh 11:24), associated with Pethahiah, implies his proximity to the king and membership in the inner circle, although his specific role remains undefined.

The cuneiform material documents interactions between Judeans and Persian officials, while biblical texts provide insights into the experiences of Judeans under Persian rule. Both sources depict Judeans holding positions within the Persian regime and a familiarity between the Judean community and the Persian regime, but the biblical narrative also emphasizes the challenges faced by Judeans in Jerusalem in this context. These differences underscore the nuanced dynamics of Judean-Persian interactions.

TEMPLE SACRIFICES

Norms mandated by Persian rulers across the empire also applied in Judah. This included sacrificial offerings, which had to align with the standards set by the temple administration.

The book of Malachi’s prophecies, as we have noted, most likely dates to the Persian period, and addresses affairs of the Temple and its sanctuaries.³¹ Malachi’s emphasis on the Temple and its sacrifices—including criticisms directed at the priests, who have failed to fulfill their mandate and displayed neglect in carrying out the required sacrificial offerings (Mal 1:6–14) and instruction of the people (Mal 2:8)—is distinctive. No other prophetic writings match the book’s rebuke concerning the use of damaged animals for sacrifice.³²

Malachi’s discourse highlights a perceived neglect in presenting appropriate offerings in the Jerusalem Temple. The se-

³¹ The examination of Malachi against the backdrop of the Neo-Babylonian texts has been presented by Ben-Dov. Ben-Dov uses findings about Neo-Babylonian cultic practices to identify instances in Malachi that suggest that the prophet’s criticism of the priests relates to paradigms of society-building. However, the current scope of findings allows us to further deepen and expand the discussion. See Jonathan Ben-Dov, “Priests and the Cult in the Book of Malachi according to Neo-Babylonian Sources,” in *Marbeh Hokhma: Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East in Loving Memory of Victor A. Hurowitz*, ed. S. Yona et al (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 73–90, here 74 (Hebrew).

³² In *A Message from the Great King*, Fox explains many details within Malachi’s literary form that allude to its Persian context. By reconstructing the meaning of the metaphors and noting significant associations with Persian royal messengers from primary sources and relevant secondary discussions, Fox concludes that Malachi’s root messenger metaphor pervades the book’s theological message. Fox defines a “root messenger metaphor” as “the source of the barrage of individual messenger metaphors that persist throughout the text” (*Message from the Great King*, 118). To some extent, the discussion here complements Fox’s conclusions. While I consider the same historical context, I do not discuss the book’s literary aspects; rather, I examine the prophet’s rebuke to the priests and the Jerusalem Temple officials against the backdrop of accepted norms in the Persian Empire and Judean communities, using the cuneiform tablets to shed light on our understanding of the Judean community and its relationship with the Persian Empire.

verity of the priests' actions, with their invalid sacrifices, is evident in the unique description of these sacrifices as flawed or unworthy. In his rebuke, the prophet emphasizes the comparison with what is accepted by the Persian governor:

A son honors [his] father, and a slave his master. So if I am father, where is my honor? And if I am master, where is my reverence? . . . priests who despise My name. And you say, "How have we despised Your name?" You offer defiled food on My altar. But you say, "How have we defiled You?" By saying, "God's table is despised. When you present a blind [animal] for sacrifice it is not bad?! When you present a lame or sick it is not bad?! Offer it to **your governor**."³³ Will he accept you? Will he show you favor?" (Mal 1:6–8)³⁴

This passage is frequently interpreted as metaphorical or literary, but, within this context, it should be read literally.³⁵ Far from an abstract castigation for wrongdoing, the prophet is asking his audience to compare their sacrifices to God with the gifts offered to their governor.

The prophecy criticizes unworthy sacrifices, relating to cases in which people have more worthy animals in their possession but bring less worthy ones to the Jerusalem Temple. It contrasts their contempt for God with the respect He is due as a great and well-known king:

You bring the stolen, the lame, and the sick, and you brought the offering. Shall I accept it from your hand? said God. Cursed be the one who deceives, who has a male in his flock and vows and sacrifices a corrupt [animal] to God. (Mal 1:13–14)

³³ The verse uses the word *pehā*. Though *pehā* was an administrative position and therefore not directly related to ritual, the Temple and its rites were located in the midst of the community in Judah, and thus the *pehā* evolved into a Temple-related position during the second phase of leadership. Note the reference to the Judean governor (*paḥat Yehuda*) in Haggai 1:1, 14; 2:2, 21.

³⁴ Note that the text does not offer a definitive answer regarding the prophet's affiliation with the priestly class or whether he was a Levite. Additionally, the specific family of priests from which he may have originated remains unspecified. See for example Julia M. O'Brien, *Priest and Levite in Malachi*, SBLDS 121 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).

³⁵ See, for example, Mignon R. Jacobs, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 182, where she discusses the divine-human relationship through the lens of other relational dynamics, and further in 182–92. Similarly, Hill (*Malachi*, 180) describes Malachi's words as a "caustic rebuke" directed at the priests and people of Judah. See also Elie Assis and Rimon Kasher (*Mikra LeYisrael: Malachi—Introduction and Commentary* [Raanana: Am Oved, 2022], 72–73 [Hebrew]), who suggest that the flawed behavior of the priests and people in offering blemished sacrifices may reflect broader doubts about divine justice, as expressed in Malachi 2:17 and 3:13–15. They note a similar sentiment in a thirteenth-century-BCE Hittite text containing instructions for temple priests.

Malachi's ire with the Judeans is underscored by the commitment of Jerusalem's residents to the officials in the Persian Empire described in the book of Ezra-Nehemiah: "They handed the royal orders to the king's satraps and the governors of the province of Beyond the River who gave support to the people and the House of God" (Ezra 8:36; another rebuke for the Jerusalem officials' disloyalty appears in Neh 8:34).³⁶

The priests' improper actions and the prophet's rebuke can be understood against the commitment the priests had to the officials of the Persian government and perhaps even to the temple community in Persia. Their actions should not be seen only as a betrayal of the God of Israel, but as an attempt to walk gingerly between their obligations and dedication to their God and to the king of Persia.³⁷

TAXATION AND LAND OWNERSHIP

Under Persian authority, land ownership was vested in the crown, labeled as the "gift of the king" or "asset of the king." While this type of land could not be sold, it was passed down from father to son, along with the associated taxes and services.³⁸ This is echoed by the descriptions in Judah: "God...has disposed the king of Persia favorably toward us, to give us sustenance to raise again the House of our God" (Ezra 9:9); there is clearly a constant expectation of taxation for the Persian king.

One Judean involved in the collection of such taxation was the slave/servant of Crown Prince Artahšar (420 BCE): Ili-Yadini/Yadaḥ-Yawa. The text notes that he "received in payment from the hands of Bel-ittannu son of Arad-Ninurta 60 kors of barley, the share of the fields belonging to Artahšar."³⁹ Cuneiform sources which mention Judeans involve payment of land taxes as well as owing/being owed dates, barley, or silver.⁴⁰

³⁶ Ezra-Nehemiah further indicates allowances or compensation for priests (Ezra 2:63; Neh 7:65; 10:37–40; 12:44, 47; 13:5, 10–13), in addition to officials' economic rights, which can be seen in Ezra 7:24 and Malachi 3:7–10.

³⁷ I sought a cuneiform text wherein a priest serving in the Babylonian temple receives a rebuke similar to that given in Malachi and did not find one. If indeed it was unacceptable to reprove temple servants for offering sacrifices in Babylonian temples, then the rebuke of the prophet in Malachi becomes even more significant, as he reproves the priests of his people, even though Babylonian priests are not reproved.

³⁸ Wunsch, *Judeans*, 81.

³⁹ For a French translation, see Cardascia, *Les archives des Murašû*, 93–94. An English translation from Akkadian was provided to me by Jan Safford.

⁴⁰ For examples of cuneiform tablets which mention Judeans and are promissory notes for barley or dates, see CUSAS 28 nos. 3, 4, 7, 10, 19, 21, 22, 23, 34, 36, 37, 41, 44, 53, 63, 65, 72, 73, 81, 84, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 92, 93, and 94. For examples of cuneiform tablets which mention Judeans and the land taxes which they owe, see CUSAS 28 nos. 14, 15, 20, 24, 25, 33, 35, 39, and 68. See the "Texts by Subject" index in Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents*, xxxvii.

Many Judeans were called *šušānus*.⁴¹ Stolper demonstrates that *šušānus* were a class of people who could not be sold as “chattel slaves” but were still not entirely free; they were expected to work the land that they were assigned and could be used in forced labor. For example, during the reign of Artaxerxes, four Judeans promise to supply Enlil-šum-iddin with 40 regular paid workers, and also with ten *šušānus* to use for construction work.⁴²

Matan-Yāma son of Amušēh, Šil[immu] son of Yāhū-laqim, Aqbi-Y[āma] son of Bana-Yāma, Yāhū-zabaddu son of Tūb-hā, said of their own will to Enlil-šum-iddin son of Murāšû thus: ‘In settlement of the accounts (which are) to your credit (and) to our debit, we will give you 40 workers for a month. Let them work on your estate, and pay them their wages. Also, we will give you 10 workers as *šušānus*. (That is) beside the 2½ workers whom you released.’

Biblical texts also relate to the taxation that Judeans were required to give the Persian rulers. The book of Nehemiah notes that the Judeans were sure to send the required taxation to the *pēḥa* but tithes to the Jerusalem Temple were scarce (Neh 13:10–12). Malachi, in fact, rebukes the people regarding the Temple tithes. His words even include a promise (unparalleled in the biblical texts) that giving tithes to the Temple in Jerusalem ensures a guaranteed reward from God:

Bring the full tithe to the storehouse, that there may be food in My House. Test me by this, said God of Hosts, if I will not open to you windows of heaven and pour out to you an abundance of blessings. And I will rebuke for you the devourer and will not ruin for you the fruit of the ground, and the vine of the field will not miscarry, said God of Hosts. (Mal 3:10–11)

The Judeans’ commitment to the Persians was accompanied by financial well-being and personal security. The prophet in Malachi responds to that reality, saying that a day will come when loyalty to God will bring with it economic prosperity and an elevated personal status, and when God will be recognized around the world. Against the backdrop of our understanding that the Judeans were liable for taxes to their Persian rulers, it is now clear that Malachi’s words, once again, are more than a metaphor: God is promising economic remuneration to the Judeans, who have neglected their own Temple in favor of Persian security.⁴³

⁴¹ Stolper, *Entrepreneurs and Empire*, 81.

⁴² See: Yigal Bloch, “From Horse Trainers to Dependent Workers: The *Šušānu* Class in the Late Babylonian Period, with a Special Focus on Al-Yāḥūdu Tablets,” *KASKAL* 14, 2017:93.

⁴³ Malachi further notes that “God has heard and noted it, and a scroll of remembrance has been written at God’s behest concerning those who revere God and esteem the holy name” (Mal 3:16). For more on the scribe-priest in biblical and cuneiform materials, see Tova Ganzel, “Ezra the Scribe-Priest against the Backdrop of Babylonian Temple

CONCLUSION

The Judean community under Achaemenid Persian rule can be understood in a nuanced manner when insights from newly published cuneiform sources are integrated with lessons learned from biblical texts. While the biblical sources, shaped by their theological and rhetorical agendas, provide valuable reflections on the spiritual and communal concerns of the Judean community, the cuneiform texts offer a different lens, documenting administrative, economic, and social realities with a more direct historical character.

The intricate relationships between Judeans and their Persian rulers, evidenced through their engagement in tax payments, land ownership, and administrative roles, underscore the multifaceted nature of Judean life under Persian dominion. These interactions reveal both commonalities with broader Persian-Babylonian administrative practices and unique challenges specific to the Judean experience, such as navigating tensions between religious obligations and imperial expectations.

Furthermore, the prophetic rebukes recorded in biblical texts serve as a literary reflection of the internal struggles and theological questions that accompanied the return to Judah. These texts, while not direct historical documentation, illuminate the cultural dimensions of the Judean experience under Persian rule.

By integrating insights from both biblical and epigraphic sources, while remaining attentive to their distinct characteristics and purposes, this study demonstrates how their combined analysis enriches our understanding of Judean agency and adaptability within the Persian imperial framework. The ability of the Judean community to navigate dual loyalties, address local challenges, and sustain their identity reflects both resilience and resourcefulness in a complex socio-political landscape.