

# The Jews of Babylon

Jerusalem exhibit documents exilic community after the First Temple

By LAWRENCE H. SCHIFFMAN

Those of us fascinated by the ability of archaeology to bring to life ancient Jewish history and to remind us of our historical continuity are now present-

## REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

ed, for the first time, with direct evidence of the Jewish community established in Babylonia right before and after the destruction of the First Temple. While these finds were partly known to scholars for some years now, the first public presentation of these documents took place on Feb. 1 with the opening at the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem of a full-scale exhibit and a scholarly conference devoted to these important texts. The large crowds at the opening, and filling the museum each day, as well as the large attendance of scholars and lay people at the conference, signal the tremendous importance of these tablets that have just been published and that are now being exhibited at the museum.

We now have more than 100 published clay tablets, written in the Babylonian language in cuneiform script, testifying to the economic



(L-r): Newly-published tablets from Yahudu in Babylonia; close-up of a Yahudu Babylonia cuneiform tablet; and the exhibit at the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem.

life and the religious continuity of Jews exiled to Babylonia. We can expect in a short time the publication of about 90 more such tablets held in other collections. What's more, many of these documents come from a Jewish settlement, Yahudu, Judeatown, located somewhere in the area south and south-east of Baghdad.

The eighth century B.C.E. had seen a series of three exiles in which inhabitants of the northern kingdom of Israel were brought to Assyria in northern Mesopotamia, and spread east to Medea (today's northern Iran) and even further east. The conquest of the Assyrian Empire by Nabopolassar of Babylon (Nebuchadnezzar's father) in the late seventh century B.C.E. opened

the way for the Babylonians to demand tribute from Judea. Hoping for help from Egypt, Judea twice rebelled against its Babylonian overlords, first under King Yehoiachin (Yechonyah in Est. 2:6) who was then deposed and exiled to Babylonia and then, 11 years later, under Zedekiah, whose refusal to remain a vassal of Babylonia led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and to a further large-scale exile to Babylonia. Both the Bible (2 Kings 25:28-30) and the Babylonian Chronicle indicate that Yehoiachin and his sons ate from rations provided by the Babylonian government for such exiled rulers of conquered territories. The prophet Ezekiel was taken in the first deportation to Babylonia, along with various mem-

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bers of the elite and artisan classes. Throughout this period, Jeremiah cautioned against reliance on Egypt, counseling the paying of tribute to Babylonia to maintain Jewish independence and freedom.

The newly published texts testify extensively to the presence of this Babylonian exilic community and to its various economic and agricultural activities. This becomes even more important when we remember that these Judeans lived in the very same area in which much later, from the third through seventh centuries and later, the Jewish community flourished, eventually leading to the completion of the Babylonian Talmud.

**W**hat is really in these tablets? What do they tell us about the life of our ancient forebears?

The texts in the now-published David Sofer collection are dated, using the names of the various rulers, between 572 and 477 B.C.E. They come from soon after the destruction of the Temple, through the fall of the Babylonian empire and its conquest by Cyrus the Great of Persia, and up into the Persian period. As such, this collection spans the years of the return to Judea and the restarting of Temple worship in Jerusalem.

The most important thing about these tablets is most probably the names that occur in them. Here we have Jews undertaking business and

personal transactions with other Jews as well as with Babylonians and exiles from other places, in areas with significant populations of Judean exiles. We see how quickly Jews acclimated to the economic and legal conditions of Babylonia, engaging in a variety of business and agricultural activities, while maintaining their identity. The maintenance of names bearing traditional Jewish divine elements indicates Jewish identity and, where we are able to trace generations, Jewish continuity as well. The 103 published texts mention more than 75 such personal names that refer to approximately 120 individuals. Further, where relationships can be established from multiple texts, we learn that some Jews bore Babylonian names.

Some of these names are known from the Bible and in many cases, even if not previously known, seem typical of the types of names that we encounter, especially in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Speaking of Nehemiah, for example, the name Nachim-Yama in our text is indeed the very same name as Nechemyah. Nadav-Yama is Nadavyah, and so it is with many of these names. Yahu-azar is Yoezer. There is even a Haggai and a Zakar-Yama — that is, Zechariah — not to mention a Yarim-Yama, Yirmiyahu. This is not to say that the well-known person-ages with these names are mentioned

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# Babylon

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in these texts; rather, that these were common names held by other Judeans as well. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who was thrilled to find out that there was a seal impression with his last name from the biblical period, will no doubt be happy to find out that Natan-Yama is the Babylonian realization of Netanyahu. You can probably already figure out that sometimes the sound of the Hebrew *vav*, originally pronounced like a “w” (as in Iraqi Hebrew and in Arabic), was realized as “m” in the Babylonian language.

Previous to the publication of this discovery, we were in possession of the archives of the Murashu banking house from Nippur, in Babylonia, stretching for about 50 years beginning in 450 B.C.E. In these docu-

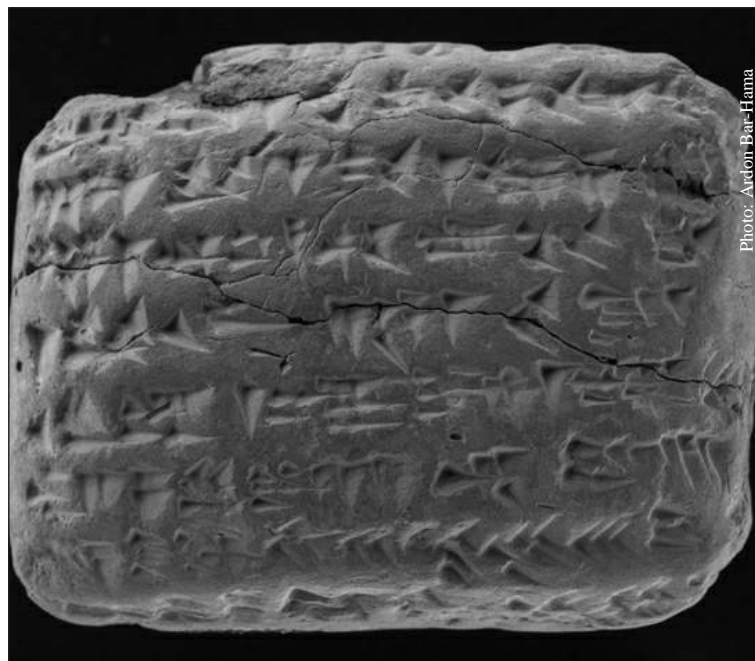


Photo: Avdon Bar-Hama

(Left): The earliest known text documenting the exiled Judeans of Babylonia, who can be recognized by their personal names; it was written in Al-Yahudu (City of Judah), referred to in this text as Al-Yahudaia (City of the Judeans) less than 15 years after the exile of 587 BCE. Clay; Southern Iraq; 20 Nissan 572 B.C.E.; Year 33 of Nebuchadnezzar; Cindy and David Sofer Collection; Al-Yahudu no. 001.

(Right): The Babylonian Talmud was composed by Jews in Babylon between 3rd and 5th centuries C.E. This particular volume and the rest of the set were printed in Germany immediately following the end of the Second World War. Paper; Heidelberg, Germany; 1948; Gross Family Collection, B.2367.



community in Babylonia from the exile through the end of the biblical period.

These newly-published tablets clearly show that the exiles took the advice sent by Jeremiah to the first

community remained in Babylonia despite the opportunity to return to Eretz Yisrael. Clearly, as we can see from the new tablets, their economic integration and success was a big part of that decision to

for payment of loans, a marriage deed, sale documents pertaining to animals, house rental, complex arrangements for assembling a team of animals for plowing, partnership contracts and court decisions.

Many of these documents stem from the financial arrangements that were made when the exiles were settled in areas of Babylonia by their Babylonian conquerors. Land was parceled out — and this was certainly the case in Yahudu — to farmers who would in turn pay percentages of their crops to the government in return for use of the land. In a sense, most of the Jewish inhabitants of these small villages were engaged in a land-for-service arrangement in which shares of their crops served as their rent. This arrangement was known to have been used widely in ancient Babylonia. Those with agricultural skills and business acumen were able to turn the situation to their advantage and to succeed financially, despite the difficulties of the experience of exile. This is certainly one of the definite conclusions that emerge from the study of this material.

Unfortunately, beyond their names, these texts contain little information about the religious beliefs and practices of these Jewish exiles. This is because they are economic documents written by Babylonian scribes who functioned essentially as the lawyers of that period. Here is an example of one of the texts, dating to 23 Tevet, 550 B.C.E.: “[13] kor of barley are owed to Gamul son of Bi-hame [most probably a non-Jew] by Shelemiah son of Nadavyah. In the month of Sivan he (Shelemiah) will deliver the barley in its principal amount in the city of Adabilu. Delaiah son of Ilishu guarantees for delivery of the barley” (adapted from translation by L. Pierce and C. Wunsch). This Shelemiah even signed his name in ancient Hebrew

script on the side of the tablet.

The Jews making the various arrangements, either among themselves or with non-Jews, needed to fulfill the requirements of the local legal system in order to be legally protected in their various endeavors. So the documents generally fulfill the same legal procedures that one finds in non-Jewish legal documents from Babylonia in the same period. We should also note that these documents concern the rural population, but we would expect that some Jews, such as the families from which Ezra and Nehemiah emerged, probably lived in larger population centers.

Readers of these tablets who are familiar with the occupations and economic circumstances that are in evidence in the Babylonian Talmud will feel that they are essentially in the same world, in which water depends on an elaborate canal system, barley and beer are the staple foods, plow animals are at a premium, and complex transactions are constantly being effected. What these texts really show us is how the Babylonian Jewish community established itself quickly and successfully in the immediate aftermath of the exile from Eretz Yisrael, and how it was this community that eventually developed into the Jewish community from which the most important statement of our tradition emerged — the Babylonian Talmud.

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ments, Jews feature prominently as witnesses to a variety of legal transactions. The Yahudu tablets, when taken together with the previously known Murashu tablets, allow us to trace the continuity of the Jewish

wave exiled with Yehoiachin to build houses and settle (Jeremiah 29:5,28) since they would be in exile for at least 70 years. But they also show, as we already knew from the Bible, that much of the

remain. To show the variety of Jewish economic activity, here is a list of the types of documents preserved: promissory notes regarding commodities, receipts for payment, slave sales, lease of land, receipts

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