Tribute Bearers, the Apadana Relief, Persepolis

*Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer* (CUSAS 28), by Laurie E. Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch.

In their new book, Pearce and Wunsch publish 103 tablets from Babylonia, dating from roughly the years 572-477 BCE, but mostly from the 6th century BCE. These texts have been known for quite some time, but are here published with a transcription, English translation, notes and comments. They have been met with understandable excitement, and have been the subject of a number of conferences, one just a few weeks ago. Aside from the tablets in this book, there have only been a couple of previous publications of similar tablets – though not from al-yahudu - and more texts will be published by Pearce and Wunsch in a companion volume in the near future. A Hebrew translation of many of these texts intended for a more popular audience has been published by Wayne Horowitz, Yehoshua Greenberg and Peter Zielberg of Hebrew University, and the tablets are currently the prize objects in the new Bible Lands Museum exhibition "By the Rivers of Babylon."

The lion’s share of the book is about 150 pages which contain a copy, transliteration, translation, some notes, and, at times, comments, on each of the 103 tablets. The book also has quite useful appendices: there is an almost 50 page prosopographical index, as well as lists of named kings, named scribes, and theophoric names. There is a separate list of Yahwistic names from al-yahudu, Murashu and the Bible. Finally, there is a list of geographic sites, and a glossary of selected terms. The volume concludes with crystal clear plates of all the tablets. The volume is
heavy, on laminated paper. While it has all the trappings of a library volume, it is under 70 dollars.

These texts have received some attention in the press for tantalizing references to a river Chebar (Ezekiel 1:1) and for names like Yašub-Ṣidiqu, potentially a reference to a return from exile (and quite reminiscent of Isaiah 10:21). But these texts, viewed as a whole, can also tell us much about this community of Judeans in Babylonia.

The documents seem to be divisible into three archives: those from a place named al-yahudu, or Judahtown, those from bit Našar, and documents from or relating to a specific official. The identification of a place called Judahtown in Babylonia only a few years after the destruction of the First Temple is quite exciting. Indeed, "city of Judah" is a name for Jerusalem in 2 Chronicles 25:28, and al-yahudu is also how the Babylonians referred to Jerusalem. Judahtown, then, seems to have been the Jerusalem of Babylonia.

The existence of a Judahtown illustrates a major difference between Neo-Assyrian and Babylonian policy of deportation. The Assyrians seem to have deported and scattered conquered peoples, whereas the Babylonians kept the conquered group together and installed them in underutilized or underdeveloped locations in which they were then motivated to develop, as it was their new abode, and would also pay taxes and provide other state needs, such as military service.

Given their dates, these tablets precede the evidence from the well-known Murashu archive – which dates from as early as 450 BCE - by well over a century, and therefore provide evidence for the period between the Babylonian exile until Murashu for which we have few other sources. Moreover, while the Judeans in the Murashu archive were in the periphery, as witnesses or financially weaker parties in transactions, in the al-yahudu texts the Judeans are front and center.

The content of the tablets are mostly sales or other kinds of business transactions, and they therefore provide an interesting glimpse into daily life. As the authors say, “Far from portraying a deported, old but impoverished, Judean elite, these documents provide glimpses into the lives of ordinary people in a rural setting: they till the land and build houses, pay taxes, and render services to the king” (p. 3). This quote could almost be a paraphrase of Jeremiah 29:5-6.

The texts from al-yahudu give us information about one extended family for three generations, the first of whom was probably brought over in the exile. This family acquires much wealth, owns slaves, and by the third generation, begin partnering with others and becoming a kind of corporation, thus showing us the process of creation of a business partnership like we find in the Murashu archive (see chart on p. 8).

Significantly, as the name of the volume indicates, these tablets are not just of Judeans, but of other West Semitic exiles as well. This helps to correct a tendency to view ancient Jewish history as sui generis. Like later Jewish diasporas, which have parallels in other diaspora groups (Gideon Bohak, “Ethnic Continuity in the Jewish Diaspora in Antiquity,” pp. 175-192), the Judeans in Babylonia were surrounded by other West Semitic exiles who seem to share a similar background story with the Judean exiles. Indeed, some of these West Semitic groups also seem
to have returned to their lands from Babylonia in the Persian period, which might be paralleled with the narratives of return found in Ezra-Nehemiah (p. 5 and fn. 8 there).

The authors provide a useful short discussion about the “admixture of cultural backgrounds” based on onomastic evidence, and show how these tablets contain a blend of Babylonian, Egyptian, Western Semitic and Yawhistic Theophoric names (P 6). As the study of names is one of the central ways of teasing out meaning from these tablets, the authors dedicate 60 pages of analysis to all the names that appear in them. Given how important theophoric names are for distinguishing Judeans from other West Semitic peoples, this is quite helpful. The study of names once again highlights the truly remarkable plethora of groups that figure, whether centrally or peripherally, in these texts, as well as the long list of deities from various pantheons that appear in the theophoric names. Indeed, the tablets have both an Abdi-Ishtar and Abdi-Yahu! The authors also note some interesting examples of acculturation that can be seen by name combinations of Yawhistic elements with typically neo-Babylonian name features (p. 28-29).

Of course, this volume is dedicated primarily to producing editions of texts, with helpful brief introduction, discussion, and useful appendices, all meant to aid the study of the tablets. It is the great achievement of this volume that it enables other scholars to integrate this new and exciting evidence into fuller accounts of the early Second Temple period.

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