

By the rivers of Babylon: New perspectives on Second Temple Judaism from Cuneiform texts

“BABYLON” investigates the extent of the similarities between Babylonian and post-exilic forms of cultic and social organization and explores the question how Babylonian models could have influenced the restoration effort in Jerusalem.

Duration 2009 - 2015

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In the history of Judaism, the Babylonian exile constitutes a major watershed. The social, institutional and cultic organization of the Second Temple differed markedly from the forms that had existed in the kingdom of Judah before the diaspora. These divergences are seen in almost every facet of religious life: in the composition of the temple community, the organization of the sacrificial cult, the social structure of the priesthood and its attendant role in the greater society at large, the system of governance, and the ideational world affecting its adherents' theological and literary output. These areas of change can be more generally considered as functions of three forms of community organization: temple, society and intellectual universe. At all three levels, the central position was occupied by the Jerusalem priests, returning from the Babylonian exile.



Yet despite the exilic origins of the Judean priesthood, the extensive scholarship on the subject largely ignores recent advances in the study of Neo-Babylonian cultic and social forms, based on the rapid disclosure of the period's extensive cuneiform record. This data offers a remarkably fertile ground for comparative research into the changed outlook of the post-exilic temple community of Jerusalem, and an opportunity to situate the Judean priesthood more firmly in their socio-historical context.

Approach

Researchers

Project publications

Past events

The project proposal is written from the perspective of the principal investigator (PI) as an Assyriologist specializing in Neo-Babylonian temple cult and its rich archival documentation. The PI's monograph *The Ezida temple of Borsippa* shows that the parallels between Babylonian and Second Temple forms of cultic and social organization were substantially more far-reaching than presently recognised in Biblical scholarship. For instance, the Babylonian priesthood was highly specialized and integrated into a rigid hierarchy, similar to the post-exilic priesthood of Jerusalem. Rank was expressed in terms of purity and access to cultic space, reflecting an underlying concept of graded 'holiness' parallel to Ezekiel's temple vision.

A complex system of symbols displayed status in the form of dress, remuneration, rotation, communal labour, land ownership and storeroom space. Proven descent from an accepted patrilineage was required to enter the priesthood and ideological writings are known that contain origin myths of such lineages comparable to certain priestly writings in the Hebrew Bible. The changing fortune of individual priestly families is amply documented in Babylonia, providing useful comparative material to offset the various disputations between priestly clans that erupted in the restoration period in Jerusalem. The post-exilic 'house of the fathers' is exactly paralleled in contemporary Babylonian society where it enjoyed the same rights and imposed the same principles of solidarity on its members, with this difference that the Babylonian model can be studied in more detail and on the basis of less biased textual sources.

Although more examples can be quoted, the aim of this overview is purely to highlight the rich potential of the cuneiform sources to shed light on certain processes observed in Second Temple Judaism. Of course, this is certainly not the first study to adopt this perspective, but given the extraordinary advances at both sides of the academic divide in recent years, it is useful to create an extra platform to engage in a structural, interdisciplinary dialogue. The project will also organize a workshop and a conference to invite critical assessment and wider scholarly participation.

The project's aim is to engage in a comparative study between the Second Temple of Jerusalem and the Babylonian temple cult as evidenced by the recently disclosed cuneiform records. The project is comparative in nature, though in its final stage we will also address the question of possible, direct or indirect, influence of Babylonian models on Judean practices, e.g. by Persian implementation.

Structure

The project consists of three sub-projects and a final synthesis to be written in the final year of the project (2013-14). The preliminary titles of the sub-projects are: P1 "A social history of the Babylonian priesthood", P2 "The temple community of post-exilic Jerusalem", P3 "Archives of Babylonian priests", P4 "A comparative study of the Second Temple of Jerusalem and the Babylonian temple cult". There are plans to expand the project with a further, fifth sub-project that will take a social networks approach to life in exile (P5).

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