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Assyrian and Babylonian Sources

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Abstract and Keywords

This article introduces the Assyrian and Babylonian sources relevant to the Old Testament historical books. The corpus of Assyrian sources consists mainly of royal inscriptions between the mid-ninth and mid-seventh centuries BCE, pertaining to the period narrated in 1 Kgs. 16 to 2 Kgs. 21. In general, when the same events are described, the biblical accounts appear to be in basic agreement with the Assyrian sources, even though some episodes mentioned in the Assyrian sources are not included in the biblical texts and vice versa. It is plausible that the writers of 2 Kings had source-based knowledge of past events. In both cases, the historical information must be filtered through the ideological purposes of the Assyrian scribes as well as the deuteronomistic editors. The Babylonian sources confirm the conquest of Jerusalem in 597 BCE and the forced migration of the Judeans, including King Jehoiachin and his entourage. Otherwise, there are no direct links between the Babylonian sources and the Old Testament historical books. Nevertheless, the Babylonian sources, especially those from Al-Yahudu, contain important information on the social environment and living conditions of the Judean population in a certain part of Babylonia in the sixth to fifth centuries BCE.

Keywords: Al-Yahudu texts, Assyrian empire, Assyrian royal inscriptions, Babylonian chronicles, Babylonian exile, history of Israel

THE narrative of the historical books of the Hebrew Bible runs from the period of the Early Iron Age through the Persian period, that is, roughly, from the twelfth through the fourth centuries BCE. The time-span of the pertinent Assyrian and Babylonian sources is much shorter. Sources predating the Neo-Assyrian period do not mention Israel or Judah, nor does the biblical narrative refer to Assyrian and Babylonian history prior to the ninth century BCE. It is only with the emergence of Assyria as an empire that southern Levantine polities enter the Assyrian historical records. The expansion of the Assyrian empire towards the West began with the campaigns of Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE), and the incorporation large parts of the Levant into the Assyrian provincial administration eventu-

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ally took place under Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 BCE). The area remained under Assyrian control until the end of the Assyrian empire.

Babylonian history reflected by the historical books of the Hebrew Bible is related to the invasions of Jerusalem in 597 and 586 BCE by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 BCE) and the subsequent deportation of a considerable number of Judeans to Babylonia. These events have left traces even in Babylonian sources which, unlike the Hebrew Bible, also yield some historical information concerning the life of the Judean community in Babylonia in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE.

2.1 Israel and Judah in Assyrian Records

The first non-biblical historical source recognizing the kingdom of Israel as a political entity is the inscription on the Kurkh Monolith, containing the account of Shalmaneser III (858–824 BCE) of the battle of Qarqar by the river Orontes in the year 853 BCE (RIMA 3 A.0.102.2; Grayson 1996: 13–24). Shalmaneser claims to have defeated twelve kings from Syria and Phoenicia, and among them is Ahab, king of Israel (*Aḫabbu Sir'alāia*), the second king of the Omride dynasty (ca. 873–851 BCE; cf. 1 Kgs. 16:29–22:20). The anti-Assyrian coalition of kings, of whom seven are named, was led by Hadad-ezer (*Adda-idri*) of (p. 21) Damascus and Irḫulenu of Hamath. Ahab is said to have lent 2,000 chariots and 10,000 soldiers to the military force of the alliance. The Hebrew Bible does not know this event. The only king of Damascus associated with Ahab is Ben-Hadad, whose identity vis-à-vis Hadad-ezer is debated. Some scholars have equated Hadad-ezer with Ben-Hadad (e.g., Younger 2016: 580–91), while others (e.g., Lipiński 2000: 397) argue that the problem is due to the editorial history of the narratives in 1 Kgs. 20 and 22 actually reflecting events in the late ninth century.

In his inscription concerning the campaign of his eighteenth year (841 BCE; RIMA 3 A.0.102.10; Grayson 1996: 51–56), Shalmaneser III reports to have marched as far as the mountains of Hauran, locking up Hazael, Hadad-ezer's successor, in Damascus and receiving tribute from Ba'al-manzer of Tyre, and Jehu, "son of Omri" (*Iāūa mār Ḫumrî*). Other inscriptions reporting the same event (RIMA 3 A.0.102.2 and 12; Grayson 1996: 44–48, 59–61) add even the Sidonians to the tributaries. An epigraph on Shalmaneser's Black Obelisk specifies the tribute of Jehu, son of Omri (RIMA 3 A.0.102.88; Grayson 1996: 149), the most noteworthy of the many precious items being the staff (*ḫuṭārtu*), a symbol of royal authority, the delivery of which symbolizes subjugation to the great king. Indeed, the obelisk depicts Jehu kissing the ground before the feet of the Assyrian king while paying his tribute to him. However, Jehu's tribute is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, that Jehu is called son of Omri runs contrary to 2 Kgs. 9, according to which Jehu revolted and killed Jehoram, his Omride predecessor. The designation *mār Ḫumrî* either indicates that the Assyrians saw Jehu as a descendant of the Omride dynasty, or that this was simply the Assyrian designation of the kings of the country called *Bīt Ḫumrî*.

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The next king of Israel mentioned in Assyrian records is Joash (ca. 836–796 BCE), mentioned in the inscription on the royal stela discovered at Tell el-Rimaḥ and commemorating the campaign of Adad-nirari III (810–783 BCE) to the Levant (RIMA 3 A.0.104.7; Grayson 1996: 211). According to the inscription, the king marched all the way to the Mediterranean Sea and subdued "the entire lands of Amurru and Ḫatti," receiving tribute from Mari' of Damascus and Joash of Samaria (*Iū'āsu Samerināia*), as well as from Tyre and Sidon. In another inscription referring to the same event (RIMA 3 A.0.104.8; Grayson 1996: 212–13), Adad-nirari III lists "the land of Ḫumrî" among the names of several areas he claims to have conquered. A special section is devoted to the confinement of Mari', king of Damascus, and his huge tribute to the Assyrian king, which indicates how important the conquest of Damascus was from the Assyrian perspective.

Adad-nirari's campaign to the Levant is likely to have happened in the year 796 BCE, which means that Mari', king of Damascus, must be identical with the above-mentioned Ben-Hadad. In the Hebrew Bible, 2 Kgs. 13:25 describes the confrontation between Joash and Ben-Hadad (see Younger 2016: 632–40) without mentioning Joash's tribute to the Assyrian king but relating instead how Joash defeated Ben-Hadad three times, recovering the towns his father Jehoahaz had lost to the Aramean king. Nothing of this is known from other sources, but one can plausibly think that Israel, in spite of paying the tribute to Assyria, profited from the weakened position of Damascus (Weippert 1992).

Assyrian sources between Adad-nirari III and Tiglath-pileser III do not mention Israel or Judah, nor do they refer to any events narrated in 2 Kgs. 14, notably the extension of Israel's borders by Jeroboam II to Lebo-Hamath (2 Kgs. 14:25), a place identified with Tell Qaṣr Lebwe (Akk. Lab'u) at the sources of Orontes river (Na'aman 1997: 421). If this note reflects historical circumstances, the expansion of the kingdom of Israel as far as the northern part (p. 22) of the Beqaa Valley does not seem to have provoked a counter-reaction of Assyria. This could not have been the case if Jeroboam had annexed Damascus and Hamath to his kingdom, as the problematic sentence in 2 Kgs. 14:28b seems to claim (for the problems of interpretation, see Younger 2016: 490–92). Even though Syria-Palestine was not yet annexed to the Assyrian Empire, the kings following Adad-nirari did not leave the Assyrian interests unattended in the area (Bagg 2011: 211–13). Thus, Shalmaneser IV (781–772 BCE) received tribute from Ḫadianu of Damascus (RIMA 3 A.0.105.1; Grayson 1996: 240); Aššur-dan III (771–754 BCE) marched to Ḫatarikka and Arpad (Eponym Chronicle; Millard 1994: 42); and Aššur-nirari V (753–746 BCE) concluded a treaty with Mati'-il of Arpad (SAA 2 2; Parpola and Watanabe 1988: 8–13).

It was only under Tiglath-pileser III that Assyria developed into a full-scale empire. He reorganized the provincial structure of Assyria and arranged a regular series of military campaigns, as the result of which large parts of northern and central Syria were incorporated into the Assyrian provincial system and Assyrian control was consolidated in the entire Levant (Bagg 2011: 213–26). The military and political activities of Tiglath-pileser are recorded in his several inscriptions, in which even kings of Israel and Judah are mentioned.

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According to the biblical narrative, “Pul [i.e., Tiglath-pileser], king of Assyria, marched against the country,” and Menahem, king of Israel, gave him a thousand talents of silver “so that he might help him confirm his hold on the royal power” (2 Kgs. 15:19–20). The tribute of Menahem the Samarian (*Meniḫimme Samerināia*) is mentioned in two inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser, together with the payment of several Syrian, Tabalean, Phoenician, and Arabian rulers (RINAP 1 14/15 and 35; Tadmor and Yamada 2011: 45–49, 81–87). It has often been assumed that this happened in 738 BCE when the Syrian cities of Arpad, Kullani, and Ḫatarikka (Hadrach) were annexed as Assyrian provinces, but there are some problems in the sources with regard to this dating (for different views, see Loretz and Mayer 1990). These inscriptions do not say that Tiglath-pileser invaded the area of Israel by that time. A few years later, however, he marched to the Wadi of Egypt (*naḥal Muṣri*/Wadi el-Arish), conquering the city of Gaza in 734 BCE. This campaign was prompted by an anti-Assyrian alliance initiated by Rezin (Akk. *Raḫiānu*, Aram. *Raḍyān*), the king of Damascus, and joined by many kingdoms including Tyre, Israel, Gaza, Ashkelon, and the Arabs. The war culminated in a two-year siege of Damascus, which was finally taken and annexed in 732 BCE and most of the Levant was brought under direct control of Assyria. The kingdom of Israel (*Bīt Ḫumria*) was not formally annexed to Assyria, but its area was reduced to consist of little more than the capital city of Samaria, and a considerable number of the population was deported. This is recorded both by the Hebrew Bible (2 Kgs. 15:29–30; 1 Chr. 5:26) and the inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser (RINAP 1 21/22, 44, 49; Tadmor and Yamada 2011: 61–63, 111–12, 129–33). Both sources agree that Pekah (*Paqaḫu*), king of Israel, was either killed or overthrown and replaced by Hoshea (*Awsēa’*). According to 2 Kgs. 15:30, Pekah was killed by Hoshea who conspired against him. The Assyrian sources do not mention this; instead, Tiglath-pileser claims to have himself installed Hoshea who seems to have been obliged to pay obeisance to him in the Babylonian city of Sarrabanu (RINAP 1 42, 44, 49; Tadmor and Yamada 2011: 105–107, 111–12, 129–33).

Compared to Israel, the kingdom of Judah was a much less significant actor on the political scene of the eighth century BCE. The political and military activity of Tiglath-pileser did not leave Judah untouched; however, Judah did not suffer from the Assyrian (p. 23) policy but, rather, profited from it. The first king of Judah to appear in the Assyrian records is Ahaz (*Iaū-ḫazi*)[1] mentioned in a long list of tributary kings from the year 729 BCE (RINAP 1 47; Tadmor and Yamada 2011: 116–25). Ahaz had not joined the anti-Assyrian coalition, whereby he, in spite of the harsh condemnation of his policy in the biblical narrative, saved Judah from the fate of the kingdom of Israel and many other neighbouring states. The Assyrian sources do not mention the attack of Rezin and Pekah against Judah, the so-called “Syro-Ephraimite War,” known only from 2 Kgs. 16:5 and Isa. 7:1–9. If this war took place, it may be interpreted as an act of hostility towards Ahaz who refused to join the anti-Assyrian alliance (Na’aman 2008: 62–64). Another biblical narrative without counterpart in Assyrian records is the journey of Ahaz to Damascus where he, according to 2 Kgs. 16:10, met Tiglath-pileser in person.

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No historical inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser's follower, Shalmaneser V (726–722 BCE) have been preserved, and the case of the fall of Samaria in 722 BCE is confusing because of the discrepancy about who actually conquered the city. According to the Babylonian Chronicle it was Shalmaneser who conquered Samaria (Grayson 1975: 73), whereas Sargon II in his inscriptions claims to have done it himself (Ann. 10–17; Fuchs 1994). The small cuneiform fragment discovered in Samaria may have originally belonged to a stela commemorating the conquest, but the preserved text reveals no names (Samaria 4; Horowitz, Oshima and Sanders 2018: 119). The Hebrew Bible adds to the confusion by stating that Shalmaneser besieged Samaria for three years (2 Kgs. 18:9–10), but without stating clearly which of the two kings is referred to as "king of Assyria" in 2 Kgs. 17:5–6, 24–27; 18:11. Probably the biblical writer had no exact knowledge of what exactly happened in these tumultous years. Perhaps two events are merged together here: the conquest of Samaria by Shalmaneser in 722 BCE, and the renewed capture of Samaria by Sargon in 720 BCE (Tadmor 1958; cf. Becking 1992; Younger 1999; for different views, see Na'aman 1990); or perhaps Sargon simply takes the credit of Shalmaneser's conquest for himself (Frahm 2019: 84–85).

Whatever the actual chain of events in Samaria around 722–720 BCE was, these events led to the annexation of Samaria to the Assyrian Empire as a province. There is also evidence of mass deportations of inhabitants of the former kingdom of Israel to Assyria. Both Sargon's inscriptions and the Hebrew Bible refer to deportations of Israelites, resulting in a number of Hebrew names in Neo-Assyrian documents from different parts of the empire, including Halah (*Ḫalaḫḫu*), Gozan (*Guzāna*), Dur-Katlimmu, and what may be identified as the "cities of the Medes" mentioned in 2 Kgs. 17:6; 18:11 (Becking 1992: 61–93; 2002; Younger 1998; Oded 2000); a part of this population may have been deported already by Tiglath-pileser. The majority of the deportees probably ended up as farmers, soldiers, and construction workers, such as the Samarians provided for work in Dur-šarruken (SAA 15 280; Fuchs and Parpola 2001: 176–77). Some of them, however, appear to have been well established in the Assyrian civil administration; in Gozan, for instance, the governor's official Palṭi-iau and the chief of accounts Neri-iau are accused of crimes against the king, and the same letter knows Ḫalbišu the Samarian whose title is broken away but who probably also belongs to the civil administration (SAA 16 63; Luukko and Van Buylaere 2002: 58–62). People were deported also to Samaria from other parts of the empire. The Assyrian sources do not mention people brought to Samaria from Babylonia (thus 2 Kgs. 17:24), but the annals of Sargon mention certain Arab tribes who resettled in Samaria (Fuchs 1994: 110; for further evidence of Assyrian deportations to Samaria, see Na'aman and Zadok 2000).

(p. 24) The kingdom of Judah appears seldom in the sources from the time of Sargon. It is never mentioned in the royal inscriptions of this period, save the historically unverifiable title of Sargon in the Juniper Palace Text, "subduer of the land of Judah, which lies far away" (Winckler 1889, Taf. 48, line 8; Frahm 2019: 66–67.). A letter to Sargon mentions emissaries from Egypt, Gaza, Judah, Moab, and Ammon entering Calah with their tribute (SAA 1 110; Parpola 1987: 92–93). Both the tribute and the absence of military activities indicate peaceful relations between Judah and Assyria. The royal tomb excavated at Nim-

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rud in 1988–89 revealed two female bodies together with inscribed objects belonging to Iabâ, the queen of Tiglath-pileser, and Atalia, the queen of Sargon. These women have been interpreted as Judeans (Dalley 1998; 2004), but the Hebrew origin of the names is not certain (Younger 2002).

Political circumstances in the Levant stabilized under the reign of Sargon, and even the rule of his son Sennacherib (705–681 BCE) did not bring about substantial changes. The most significant event was Sennacherib's campaign in 701 BCE, reported in his inscriptions (RINAP 3 4; Grayson and Novotny 2012: 60–69; cf. Cogan 2014). The purpose of his extensive military action was to quell a revolt of several Syrian and Palestinian rulers, including Hezekiah of Judah (*Ḫazaqi-iāu Iaudāia*). Sennacherib attacked Sidon and continued to Philistia, after which he marched to Judah. He says to have invaded forty-six fortified cities and deported no less than 200,150 people from Judah. Interestingly, the capture of Lachish, the second city of the kingdom of Judah, is not mentioned in the inscription; instead, it was depicted on the wall reliefs of Sennacherib's Southwest palace in Nineveh, giving a pictorial interpretation of an Assyrian artist—rather than an eyewitness report—of the event (Uehlinger 2007: 211–19). Archaeological evidence both in Lachish and in other sites testifies to the devastation of large areas of Judah (Young 2012: 62–66; Ussishkin 2014). Hezekiah, however, refused to capitulate and, even though he eventually had no other choice but submit to Sennacherib and pay a heavy tribute to him, Judah retained restricted independence as a vassal state of Assyria.

The conquest of the Judean cities and the tribute Hezekiah paid to Sennacherib are recorded both in Assyrian inscriptions and in the biblical narrative (2 Kgs. 18:13–16). According to 2 Kgs. 18:14, the Assyrian king demanded of Hezekiah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold, while Sennacherib reports to have received from him eight hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold together with furniture, textiles, and different kinds of equipment, and also his daughters, palace women, and male and female singers. The same amount of gold in both sources may indicate that the earliest writer of the biblical narrative had access to contemporary records. More problematic is the alleged siege of Jerusalem related in 2 Kgs. 18:17–19:36//Isa. 36–39 (cf. 2 Chr. 32:1–23), ending with a miraculous defeat of the Assyrian army caused by the angel of the Lord. Sennacherib claims to have confined Hezekiah in Jerusalem, his royal city, "like a bird in a cage," to have set up blockades against Hezekiah, and made him "dread exiting his city gate." This account is traditionally understood to refer to the siege of Jerusalem (e.g., Gallagher 1999: 133–35). Many scholars, however, interpret it as denoting a blockade which required only a minor military operation, setting up fortifications to control people's movements rather than a full-scale siege (e.g., Mayer 2003; Knauf 2003; Ussishkin 2014). Whatever the scale of the military operation was, Jerusalem was saved. While the biblical narrative laconically states that Sennacherib "left, went home, and lived at Nineveh" (2 Kgs. 19:36), the Assyrian inscription says that Hezekiah sent a mounted messenger to Sennacherib to deliver the (p. 25) tribute and to do obeisance. It is probable that Hezekiah's agreement to pay tribute gave the Assyrian king enough reason to end his military operations against Judah.

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The biblical text continues with a sentence concerning the death of Sennacherib. According to 2 Kgs. 19:37//Isa. 37:38, Sennacherib's sons Adrammelech and Sharezer killed him with the sword when he was worshipping in the house of his god Nisroch (probably the temple of Ninurta in Calah; Uehlinger 1999), and escaped into the land of Ararat. The murder of Sennacherib is mentioned in a Babylonian chronicle, according to which he was killed by his son in a rebellion (Chr. 1 iii 34–35; Grayson 1975: 81). The son is not named and no further circumstances are recorded. Esarhaddon tells how his brothers "went out of their minds and did everything that is displeasing to the gods and mankind" (RINAP 4 1; Leichty 2011: 12), but he does not directly claim that his brothers actually killed their father. This has given rise to the idea that Esarhaddon himself was involved in the murder of Sennacherib (e.g., Knapp 2015: 317–25). However, the biblical account can be confirmed by cuneiform records, according to which the murderer of Sennacherib indeed was his eldest son Arda-mullissi (Heb. *'Adrammelek*). He had been replaced as the crown prince of Assyria by his younger brother Esarhaddon and, therefore, tried to capture the throne by means of a civil war (Parpola 1980). Even Assyrian prophecies accompanying Esarhaddon's rise to power indicate that the brothers were two, and that they fled "up to the mountain" (SAA 9 1.8; 3.3; Parpola 1997: 9, 23–24; cf. Nissinen 1998: 14–30).

The Assyrian Empire was at its height under the rule of Esarhaddon (681–669 BCE) and his son Assurbanipal (668–627 BCE). The Assyrian sources from this long period have surprisingly little to report on anything regarding the kingdom of Judah. Esarhaddon was active in the West, but mostly because of political pressure in northern Syria and Tabal. He passed through southern Levant on his way to Egypt in 671 BCE, and some fragments of royal stelae found at Qaqun and Ben Shemen may be parts of a stela erected by Esarhaddon on this occasion (Horowitz and Oshima 2006: 45, 111; Cogan 2008). Judah is not mentioned in the inscriptions concerning the Egyptian campaign and was apparently not affected by it. Instead, Judah seems to have remained a loyal vassal state of Assyria throughout the reigns of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal. No incidents related to Judah are mentioned in the Assyrian sources from his time. The very sparse appearances of Judah in Assyrian sources may indicate a lack of conflicts due to the loyalty of the kings of Judah to their political overlords. This was also the period when the Assyrian cultural influence on Judah was at its height.

Both Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal mention Manasseh, king of Judah (*Menasê/Minsê šar Iaudī*) in their inscriptions. Esarhaddon lists Manasseh among twenty-two kings from the Levant and Cyprus who contributed to the extension of the Nineveh arsenal (RINAP 4 1 and 5; Leichty 2011: 23, 46). Assurbanipal mentions him on the occasion of his Egyptian campaign in the year 667 BCE as one of the kings who gave him tribute and military support. The list is virtually identical to the list of Esarhaddon, but not necessarily copied from it, since the names of the kings of Arwad, Samsimurunna, and Ammon are different (Prism C ii 27; Novotny and Jeffers 2018: 116). The long reign of Manasseh in Jerusalem covers the entire reign of Esarhaddon and almost two-thirds of the reign of Assurbanipal, but the Hebrew Bible has not much to say about these two Assyrian kings. Neither of the two are mentioned in the biblical accounts of the reign of Manasseh (2 Kgs. 21:1–18; 2

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Chr. 33:1–20), even though one could assume that the religious renewals condemned by the biblical writers were at least partly inspired by political circumstances. Amon and Josiah, the successors of Manasseh, are never mentioned in the Assyrian texts.

(p. 26) Esarhaddon is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible only as the successor of Sennacherib after his murder (2 Kgs. 19:37//Isa. 37:38, cf. Tob. 1:21–22). In addition, the Samaritans who wanted to contribute to the rebuilding of the temple say that they had been sacrificing to God "ever since the days of King Esarhaddon of Assyria who brought us here" (Ezra 4:2). The somewhat mysterious prediction of Isa. 7:8, "Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered, no longer a people," has been interpreted as a reference to this deportation, roughly corresponding to the time between the alleged date of the prophecy and the latter part of Esarhaddon's reign. There are no Assyrian records of such a deportation which, theoretically, could have happened, for instance, during Esarhaddon's campaign to the West in 676 BCE.

The only biblical reference to Assurbanipal is found in Ezra 4:7–11, listing the people and nations "whom the great and noble Osnappar deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River" as the senders of the letter to King Artaxerxes opposing the rebuilding of Jerusalem. In addition, the "king of Assyria" whose army took Manasseh captive and brought him to Babylon (2 Chr. 33:11) would logically be Assurbanipal; however, the Chronicler's account of the time of Manasseh in 2 Chr. 33:1–20 is a theological interpretation no longer based on historical records.

2.2 Judah and Judeans in Babylonian Sources

Babylonian sources pertaining to the events narrated in the historical books of the Hebrew Bible can be divided into three groups: (1) the neo-Babylonian Chronicles; (2) the palace archives of Nebuchadnezzar II; and (3) miscellaneous administrative and economic texts documenting the activity of Judean people living in Babylonia in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE (see Pearce 2016).

2.2.1 Neo-Babylonian Chronicles

Royal inscriptions similar to the Assyrian texts discussed above have not been preserved from Babylonia. Instead, the Babylonian Chronicles are the best available historiographic sources from the time of Nabû-naṣir (757–734 BCE) to the Seleucid period. Even Neo-Assyrian kings are mentioned in the earlier chronicles (e.g., in the cases of the conquest of Samaria and the murder of Sennacherib; see above pp. 23–24). Only one of the Babylonian chronicles covering the early reign of Nebuchadnezzar relates to events in Judah (Chronicle 5; Grayson 1975: 99–102). The section concerning his seventh year says that Nebuchadnezzar encamped against "the city of Judah" (*āl-Iāḫūdu*), which can only mean Jerusalem, and captured the city on the second day of the month Adar (March 16, 597 BCE). According to the chronicle, the Babylonian king seized the king of Judah (Jehoiachin), appointed a king of his own choice (Zedekiah), and took a vast tribute. Several biblical texts refer to Nebuchadnezzar's invasion of Jerusalem, the replacing of King Je-

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hoiachin by Zedekiah, and the booty that was carried to Babylonia (2 Kgs. 24:10–17; 2 Chr. 36:9–10; cf. Jer. 22:24–27). Several problems in the textual history of these passages make it difficult to reconstruct the historical events from the biblical accounts (Pakkala 2006). There is no (p. 27) doubt, however, that the biblical and Babylonian texts refer to the same event. The final defeat of Jerusalem in 586 BCE is not recorded in the Babylonian chronicles, because the last extant chronicle breaks after Nebuchadnezzar's eleventh year (594/3 BCE). Apart from biblical texts (2 Kgs. 25:1–21; 2 Chr. 36:11–21; Jer. 39:1–10), the destruction and its aftermath is identifiable in the archeaological record (Lipschits 2005: 36–126; Valkama 2010).

2.2.2 Palace Archives of Nebuchadnezzar II

The palace archives of Nebuchadnezzar II comprise ca. 350 tablets, of which only thirteen have been fully or partially published (Pedersén 2005). The available material comprises tablets from the years 601–577 BCE, recording the delivery and distribution of foods and other properties to various people living in Babylon. The best known of these tablets are the four partially published ration lists, one of which is datable to the thirteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar (591 BCE; Weidner 1939; Alstola 2020: 58–78). These texts concern the distribution of sesame oil to certain groups and individuals often of foreign origin, such as Philistia, Phoenicia, Elam, Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece, and even Judah. The most prominent of the Judeans receiving oil rations is Jehoiachin (*Ia'ūkin/Ia'kin/Iakūkinu*), king of Judah, and his five sons. Moreover, a group of eight Judeans is mentioned in the ration lists, and the palace archive knows Judean courtiers (*ša rēš šarri*) and three persons with Yahwistic names (Qana-Yama, Samak-Yama, and Šalam-Yama; see Pedersén 2005: 269).

The number of people of foreign origin in the palace archive of Babylon is probably due to the forced migrations in the early sixth century. Among the deportees there were different kinds of professionals employed by the royal palace, including Judean ones. Members of foreign royalty were held hostage in Babylon, not only from Judah but also from Ashkelon and, possibly, Lydia. The foreign nobles seem to have lived under the aegis of the Babylonian king, not in a hard confinement but enjoying a limited freedom. These circumstances are probably reflected by 2 Kgs. 25:27–30, which tells about the release of Jehoiachin from imprisonment by Amel-Marduk (Evil-merodach), Nebuchadnezzar's successor. The biblical passage says that in the thirty-seventh year of Jehoiachin's exile (ca. 561 BCE) the Babylonian king "spoke kindly to him, and gave him a seat above the other seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon," giving him a regular allowance for the rest of his life. This narrative presupposes, however, that before this, the Judean king was indeed in confinement wearing prison clothes, which is difficult to reconcile with the Babylonian records. The narrative is not merely a historical note but has literary affinities with, for instance, the Joseph story in Genesis (Chan 2013). Contrasting Jehoiachin's imprisonment with his amnesty is probably written to inspire the audience's confidence in a better future, perhaps also in the continuation of Jehoiachin's dynastic line (Pakkala 2006: 452).

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2.2.3 Administrative and Economic Texts

Hundreds of miscellaneous administrative and economic texts from Babylonia informing on the Judeans in Babylonia and/or with relevance to biblical texts have become scholarly knowledge only recently. The earliest of these tablets derives from Sippar, dating to 595 BCE (Jursa 2008). It records the delivery of 1.5 minas of gold belonging to Nabû-šarrussu-ukin, the chief eunuch (*rab ša-rēši*), to the temple of Esagila in Babylon. There are good grounds (p. 28) to identify this person with the chief eunuch (*rab-sārîs*) Nebo-sarsekim who, according to one of the narratives related to the final destruction of Jerusalem, belonged to the high command of the Babylonian army when Jerusalem was taken (Jer. 39:3).

Other texts pertain especially to the Judean population in Babylonia, identifiable by their Yahwistic names (Zadok 2002; 2014). A group of six tablets originates from Sippar and dates to the second half of the sixth century BCE (Bloch 2014; Alstola 2017b). People who feature in these texts include descendants of Ariḫ, a family of Judean royal merchants who were well-integrated members of the local business community. Two of the tablets are marriage agreements demonstrating that one of Ariḫ's granddaughters married into a Babylonian family.

The Murašû archive was excavated in Nippur already in 1893 and partially published between 1898 and 1912, but the publication of the entire archive, comprising some 730 texts, took another century (Stolper 1985; Donbaz and Stolper 1997). All the documents in this archive focus on the business of the Murašû in Nippur and its environs in the second half of the fifth century BCE. The Murašû were agricultural entrepreneurs who acted as middlemen between landowners and subsistence farmers. They had been granted land owned by royal aristocracy and high officials and were obliged to pay taxes and perform military and corvée services in exchange. The archive consists of economic and legal texts documenting credit granting and agricultural management. People taking part in such transactions often worked for the land-for-service sector, and many of them seem to belong to communities of foreigners settled in the Nippur countryside. A fair number of Judeans appear in these documents, typically belonging to the class of subsistence farmers cultivating modest plots of land, but some of them had even larger holdings indicating a higher socioeconomic position (Alstola 2020: 164–222).

The most recent corpus consists of more than 200 Babylonian tablets, 113 of which have been published thus far (Joannès and Lemaire 1996; 1999; Abraham 2005/6; 2007; Pearce and Wunsch 2015; for the rest, see Wunsch forthcoming). The texts derive originally from places called Al-Yahudu, Bit-Našar, and Bit-Abi-Râm situated in the countryside near the city of Nippur between the Tigris river and the southern marshlands. The place name Al-Yahudu, "Judahtown," denotes the origin of its inhabitants; Bit-Našar was to be found in its vicinity. The texts date from the period between 572 and 477 BCE and, even though their original findspot is unknown, are likely to have belonged to a single corpus.

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Like the tablets belonging to the Murašû archive, the texts from Al-Yahudu and surroundings bear witness to the contribution of Judeans to the land-for-service system. The documents include a considerable number of Judean names identifiable by the Yahwistic theophorical element (Pearce and Wunsch 2015: 10–29). The Judeans appear predominantly as subsistence farmers whose economical transactions are mostly tax payments and credit operations related to agriculture. Most Judeans do not occupy higher-level positions of the society, since they were not free to alienate their landholdings; a few of them, however, are attested as officials such as tax-summoners (*dēkû*). Two individuals of Judean descent stand out because of their long-term economical activity and independent businesses in the region: Aḫiqam, a rent farmer who owned a brewing enterprise in Babylon, and Aḫiqar, who granted credit to landholders to help them to pay their taxes (Alstola 2020: 102–63).

Of the administrative tablets discussed above, only the palace archive and the Murašû archive have a provenanced findspot. The tablets mentioning the descendants of Ariḫ originate from early, badly documented excavations in Sippar, and the entire corpus of tablets from the environs of Al-Yahudu is unprovenanced. This notwithstanding, they are (p. 29) doubtless genuine artifacts that document important aspects of the life of the descendants of the Judean deportees over several generations from neo-Babylonian to Achaemenid times. The Judeans belong roughly to three social groups: the royal elite in the earliest documents, the merchants doing business in different parts of Babylonia, and the subsistence farmers in Al-Yahudu and surroundings. Generally, the Judeans appear as not very wealthy but not extremely poor either. They seem to be integrated into the economic institutions of the Babylonian society, yet forming communities composed of largely their fellow Judeans (Wunsch 2013; Pearce 2014).

2.3 The Significance of the Assyrian and Babylonian Sources

The Assyrian sources relevant to the history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah cover the period between the mid-ninth and mid-seventh centuries BCE, thus pertaining to the period narrated in 1 Kgs. 16 to 2 Kgs. 21. The Assyrian source material consists overwhelmingly of royal inscriptions mentioning military events related to kings of Israel (Ahab, Jehu, Joash, Menahem, Pekah, Hoshea) and Judah (Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh). The Assyrian and biblical accounts of these events agree in the basic structure of the unfolding of historical events, even though some episodes mentioned in the Assyrian sources are not known from the biblical texts and vice versa. Both ways, the historical information is embedded in a thoroughly ideological narrative. In the Assyrian royal inscriptions, the implied speaker is the king who gives an account of his own deeds—not primarily to his own citizens but to his gods, representing the Assyrian royal theology. In the Hebrew Bible, the historical narrative in 2 Kings belongs to a multi-layered composition, representing (post-)deuteronomistic theologies and written with the main purpose of explaining the reason of the destruction of Jerusalem. Hence, the presentation of the achievements of

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Assyrian and Israelite or Judean kings is heavily dependent on the genre and purpose of writing, which in the case of Assyria tends to emphasize the king's military and political merits, while the Hebrew Bible judges each king mainly with regard to the orthodoxy of their worship. The agreements between the Assyrian and biblical narratives make it probable, however, that the writers of 2 Kings had source-based knowledge of past events, and the recurring references to the annals of the kings of Israel and Judah (e.g., 1 Kgs. 14:19, 29) probably refer to such sources (Grabbe 2017: 21–28).

The significance of the Babylonian administrative tablets lies somewhat paradoxically in things about which the biblical texts have little to say. Apart from confirming the conquest of Jerusalem in 597 BCE and the forced migration of the Judeans including King Jehoiachin and his entourage, the Babylonian texts have virtually no direct connections to any events and persons mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. Instead, they increase our knowledge of circumstances not discernible from the biblical texts—namely, the social environment and living conditions of the Judean population in a certain part of Babylonia in the sixth to fifth centuries BCE. The persistence of the use of Yahwistic names indicates the will of the community to maintain their Judean identity, but the sources do not yield much information on the religion of the Judeans, neither do they include any hints at the return of some members of the Judean community to their homeland. (p. 30)

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Notes:

(1.) An inscription of Tiglath-pileser (RINAP 1 13/31; Tadmor and Yamada 2011: 42–44, 76) mentions a king called *Azrī-Iāu*. This person was formerly, but mistakently, identified with Azariah/Uzziah, king of Judah, the grandfather of Ahaz. The assumption was based on an incorrect join of a fragmentary tablet to the inscription, producing the reading “Azriyau of Yaudi”; however, such a text has never actually existed. The name mentioned in the inscription may refer to the king of Ḫatarikka (thus Na’aman 1995).

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