

## I

## The Religious Landscape of the Near East at the Turn of the Era

### THE MESOPOTAMIA-PALESTINE NEXUS AND THE JEWISH DIASPORA

‘Peace be with you, Rabbi Judah b. Bathyra, for you are in Nisibis, and yet your net is spread in Jerusalem!’<sup>1</sup> Judah ben-Bathyra (I) lived in the first century AD in Nisibis, a major centre in the land of Adiabene, which both Classical and Jewish writers identified with Assyria.<sup>2</sup> He apparently visited Jerusalem several times. Thanks to his work collecting and transferring funds for the Jerusalem temple from the Jewish diaspora in northern Mesopotamia,<sup>3</sup> he was well known to the highest level of Jewish society in Palestine.<sup>4</sup>

The vignette from the Babylonian Talmud (Bavli) casts light on the lively connections between the Jews of Palestine and their kin in northern Mesopotamia in the period in which the New Testament was being written. Indeed, the Adiabeniens supported the Palestinian Jews in the AD 66–70 war with Rome.<sup>5</sup> The Jewish communities of Southern Mesopotamia (Babylonia) enjoyed equally intensive contact with Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> The account in Acts 2:8–9, 11 of the pilgrims who had arrived there for the Shavuot festival corroborates this: ‘How is it that

<sup>1</sup> bPes 3b.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Pliny, *Natural History*, Book VI chapter 13 (<https://ia800703.us.archive.org/3/items/plinysnaturalhisooplinrich/plinysnaturalhisooplinrich.pdf>; accessed 13/4/19). *Genesis Rabbah* 37:4 identifies Nisibis with Akkad (Gen 10:10).

<sup>3</sup> Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 67, 242 n. 29. <sup>4</sup> Neusner, *History I*, 48, 50, 62.

<sup>5</sup> Neusner, ‘Conversion’, 62–64.

<sup>6</sup> Mann, ‘Studies’, 333; Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 59, 62–67, 242.

we hear, each of us in the dialect of our birthplace – Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and those dwelling in Mesopotamia – . . . we hear them relating in our languages the mighty works of God.’ Neusner estimates a Jewish population of between 600,000 and one million in Babylonia in the third century AD.<sup>7</sup> The number of Jews in Mesopotamia in the first century AD is unknown. Josephus’ estimate of one million seems inflated.<sup>8</sup> Undoubtedly, the population swelled significantly in the wake of the displacement caused by the Palestinian Jews’ disastrous rebellions against the Romans in AD 66–70 and 132–35, possibly including considerable numbers of Jewish Christians.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the facts that the royal family of Adiabene converted to Judaism in the first half of the first century AD and that, in the period from AD 20 to 35, a region of Babylonia was under Jewish administration indicate that these communities were populous and held considerable sway even before AD 70.<sup>10</sup> Herod the Great’s appointment of a Babylonian as high priest in Jerusalem highlights the significance of the Babylonian Jewish diaspora in Palestinian affairs.<sup>11</sup>

Acts 2 states that these first-century Mesopotamian Jews were conversant in the language(s) of the territories in which they lived. What were the languages? One was Aramaic, which was widely spoken in the period throughout Mesopotamia,<sup>12</sup> as it was in Syro-Palestine.<sup>13</sup> Even in many religious texts, contemporary Jewish scribes followed the compilers of Ezra-Nehemiah, Jeremiah and Daniel, and employed Aramaic as well as Hebrew.<sup>14</sup> While the use of *Koinē* Greek was widespread – particularly in urban areas – in the Fertile Crescent, Aramaic retained its importance.<sup>15</sup> Jesus’ discourse was primarily in Aramaic.<sup>16</sup> There was no insuperable obstacle to communication in writing and, notwithstanding dialect differences,<sup>17</sup> speech between Mesopotamian and Palestinian Jews and,

<sup>7</sup> ‘Rabbis’, 446.      <sup>8</sup> Zadok, ‘Judeans’, 118.

<sup>9</sup> Khan, ‘Languages’, 9; Greenfield, ‘Miscellany’, 85.

<sup>10</sup> Boiy, *Babylon*, 192; Schiffman, *Text*, 82.      <sup>11</sup> Neusner, *History I*, 37.

<sup>12</sup> Würthwein, *Text*, 80–81.

<sup>13</sup> Brooke, ‘Traditions’, 204. A recent monograph that investigates the impact of Hellenism on the first Gospel drastically minimizes the prevalence of Aramaic in first-century AD Palestine (Kinney, *Dimensions*, 125–26). Only selective use of sources can yield such a conclusion. For a balanced examination of the question, see Ong, *Multilingual*, particularly 149, 193.

<sup>14</sup> Macintosh, ‘Languages’, 139–42; Sanders, *Adapa*, 151–52.

<sup>15</sup> Lane Fox, *Pagans*, 32–33; Gesche, *Schulunterricht*, 30.      <sup>16</sup> Jeremias, *Parables*, 25–26.

<sup>17</sup> Gzella, ‘Aramaic’, 122, 126–27.

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furthermore, between them and other Aramaic speakers in the contemporary ancient Near East.<sup>18</sup>

The shared language facilitated the dissemination of the tenets and accomplishments of Mesopotamian culture to diverse Aramaic-speaking communities from the Iranian highlands to Egypt.<sup>19</sup> Among them was the Jewish community. In fact, from the Neo-Babylonian era onwards the Jews were excellently placed to participate in the transmission since they were prominent in the occupation ‘alphabet scribe’, which was to write in Aramaic.<sup>20</sup> Evidence from Qumran indicates that Mesopotamian scholarly compositions reached the sectarians in Aramaic versions.<sup>21</sup> Aramaic fragments of the Enochic *Book of Giants* contain the names of Gilgameš and Humbaba, as well as more oblique references to the Gilgameš epic.<sup>22</sup> Enoch’s visit to the realm of the dead (1 En 17:1–8) may also reflect *Gilgameš*.<sup>23</sup>

As late as the third century AD in the city of Assur, situated not far from the Adiabenean capital Arbela, inscriptions in Aramaic attest to the continuation there of the cults of the king of the ancient Assyrian pantheon, Aššur, with his consort Šerua, and other Mesopotamian gods.<sup>24</sup> The names of some of their adherents, inscribed in the second and early third centuries AD, have Aššur as a theophoric component.<sup>25</sup> The name Aššurbēl is attested in second-century AD Hatra, a neighbouring kingdom.<sup>26</sup> According to Stephanie Dalley, in Arbela itself, Egašankalamma, the temple of Ištar, the Mesopotamian goddess of battle, sexual love and, particularly at Arbela, prophecy (‘queen of the divine decrees’),<sup>27</sup> functioned into the first centuries of the new

<sup>18</sup> Folmer, ‘Aramaic’, 130; Khan, ‘Languages’, 19–21; Sanders, *Adapa*, 153–96.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 185–87; Greenfield and Sokoloff, ‘Astrological’, 202; Folmer, ‘Aramaic’, 129–30.

<sup>20</sup> Zadok, ‘Judeans’, 116; Sanders, *Adapa*, 181–83.

<sup>21</sup> Mladen Popović, ‘Networks of Scholars: The Transmission of Astronomical and Astrological Learning between Babylonians, Greeks and Jews’, in *Ancient Jewish Sciences and the History of Knowledge in Second Temple Literature*, Jonathan Ben-Dov and Seth L. Sanders (eds.) (2014, <http://dlib.nyu.edu/awdl/isaw/ancient-jewish-sciences/>; accessed 7/6/18); Sanders, *Adapa*, 20–21, 158, 188.

<sup>22</sup> Milik, *Enoch*, 29–30, 311, 313; Dalley, ‘Variation’, 168–69.

<sup>23</sup> Bauckham, ‘Descent’, 154.

<sup>24</sup> Andrae, *Assur*, 251; Dirven, ‘Exaltation’, 100. The temple of Aššur was finally destroyed in approximately AD 240 (Radner, ‘City’, 5). Cult was being paid to Aššur in the southern Babylonian city of Uruk in Seleucid times (*ibid.*, 20).

<sup>25</sup> Radner, ‘Period’, 77. On the possible survival of Assyrian archives and customs in Arbela, see Dezső and Vér, ‘Ἀβύρος’, 100.

<sup>26</sup> Caquot, ‘Inscriptions (1953)’, 239–40.

<sup>27</sup> Cole and Machinist, *Letters*, xvii; Krebernik, ‘Šarrat-Arba’iP’.

millennium.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, a Syriac tradition relates that a priest of Ištar in the city who converted to Christianity was put to death in AD 355.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the sanctuaries of Bēl (Marduk) in Babylon and of his son Nabû in neighbouring Borsippa aroused rabbinic condemnation.<sup>30</sup> The Bavli in a discourse on the Tower of Babel records Rav Joseph's dictum that 'Babylon and Borsippa are evil omens for the Torah' (bSan 109a). The Bavli includes their two great sanctuaries among its five 'established pagan temples' (bAboda Zara 11b). It defines 'established' as 'they are established permanently; regularly all the year round worship is taking place in them'.<sup>31</sup>

Marduk and Nabû, who over time syncretized aspects and symbols of Marduk's identity,<sup>32</sup> retained their appeal into the first centuries of the Christian era in Syria as in Babylonia.<sup>33</sup> In Hadrian's reign, a temple to Bēl was built in Syrian Apamea (a Seleucid foundation), while in Palmyra, the Nabû Temple contained a relief sculpted in Late Antiquity portraying three generations of its priests. Palmyra, too, boasted a temple to Bēl.<sup>34</sup> An inscription in Greek and Palmyrene Aramaic of AD 24 commemorates a donation to the temple by a Palmyrene resident of Babylon.<sup>35</sup> Over 450 years after the birth of Christ, the Syrian Neo-Platonist Damascius was knowledgeably discussing the genealogy of Babylonian gods including Anu, Enlil, Ea as well as Marduk, and demonstrating a familiarity with *Enūma eliš*.<sup>36</sup> Around AD 500 a form of *Enūma eliš* was apparently recited in the Syrian city of Edessa on the eighth day of Nisan in the context of worshipping Marduk and Nabû.<sup>37</sup> In Assur Nabû was venerated into the third century AD.<sup>38</sup>

The cults of Ištar/Nanaya and other ancient Babylonian deities such as Šamaš, Nergal and Tammuz also remained features of the religious landscape in Mesopotamia, Syria and beyond well into the first millennium AD.<sup>39</sup> Mandaean magical texts recognize Nergal, Ištar and Šamaš, as well as Marduk and Nabû as the spirits operating in the planets. Each retains

<sup>28</sup> 'Variation', 171 and *passim*.      <sup>29</sup> Dalley, 'Babylon', 31.

<sup>30</sup> Oshima, 'Marduk', 351, 356.

<sup>31</sup> [http://halakhah.com/zarah/zarah\\_11.html#PARTb](http://halakhah.com/zarah/zarah_11.html#PARTb); (accessed 3/1/20).

<sup>32</sup> Pomponio, *Culto*, 220–22.

<sup>33</sup> Dirven, 'Exaltation'; Cureton, *Documents*, 14, 22; Ford, 'Kidinnu', 273 n. 12.

<sup>34</sup> Millar, 'Problem', 127–29; Raja, 'Representations', 129.

<sup>35</sup> Teixidor, 'Babylonie', 380.      <sup>36</sup> Heidel, *Genesis*, 75–76; Komoróczy, 'Berosos', 133.

<sup>37</sup> Frahm, 'Counter-Texts', 21.      <sup>38</sup> Michel, 'Nabû', 554.

<sup>39</sup> Montgomery, *Texts*, 47, 217, 238–41; Drewnowska-Rymarz, *Nanāja*, 158–67; Campion, 'Survival', 84; Kutscher, 'Cult', 42–44. On the identity of Ištar and Nanaya, see Drewnowska-Rymarz, *Nanāja*, 27, 40, 155–57; Reiner, 'Hymn', 233–34; George, *House*, 157:1195.

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something of the attributes of their Babylonian precursor. Thus, Nirigh (Nergal, Mars) rules over war, Nbo (Nabû, Mercury) is ruler over knowledge, skill and wisdom.<sup>40</sup> Ancient Jewish and Mandaean incantations invoke these divinities.<sup>41</sup> As late as the second half of the first millennium AD, the Sabaeans in Harran recalled the Tammuz cult in their religious practices.<sup>42</sup> All these gods had long been venerated over a vast territory stretching from the eastern Persian Gulf deep into Anatolia, Palestine and Egypt.<sup>43</sup> The cults of Marduk and Nabû had been adopted into the western Elamite pantheon.<sup>44</sup> The patron god of Tarsus was associated with Marduk; aspects of his iconography bore unmistakable Assyrian features into the first Christian centuries. The cult of the goddess Išhara, closely identified with Ištar, was prominent in Tarsus in the second and first millennia BC.<sup>45</sup>

When the New Testament was being written, Jewish communities had long lived and worked in this vast territory and their exposure to these cults was intense.<sup>46</sup> Typically, in Late Antiquity the Jews reimagined these divinities as demons rather than denying their existence altogether.<sup>47</sup> Thus, Nergal appears in a late-antique Jewish magic text as Nerig in a list of malevolent supernatural forces.<sup>48</sup>

Over millennia, Syria, in particular, was a vector for transmitting ideas and customs, among them Mesopotamian, into Palestine,<sup>49</sup> paralleling the way Aramaic in the first millennium BC functioned as a vector of

<sup>40</sup> Aldihisi, 'Story', 48, 61, 493–94; Drower, *Mandaeans*, 240, 252, 318.

<sup>41</sup> Bohak, *Magic*, 253; Müller-Kessler and Kessler, 'Texten'; Greenfield, 'Miscellany', 82.

<sup>42</sup> *MMEW*, 162.

<sup>43</sup> Taracha, *Religions*, 35, 80–81, 86–89, 106–10, 120–28; Horowitz, Oshima and Sanders, *Cuneiform*, 46–47, 64–66, 97–98, 108–09, 153; Kämmerer, *Induktion*, 75–80; Kiperwasser and Shapira, 'Encounters', 297–98; Caquot, 'Inscriptions (1952)'; Caquot, 'Inscriptions (1953)', 244–46. In the fourteenth century BC, the Mitannian king Tušratta corresponded with Amenhotep III concerning Ištar of Nineveh (Parpola, *Prophecies*, xlvi).

<sup>44</sup> Gaspa, 'Theology', 133. In 187 BC, Antiochus III died attacking a temple of Bēl in Elam (Collins, 'Apocalyptic', 28).

<sup>45</sup> Dalley, 'Sennacherib', 74–75. Berossus reports that Sennacherib rebuilt Tarsus on the model of Babylon.

<sup>46</sup> Ferguson, *Heritage*, 17–18; Neusner, *History I*, 13–15, 44; Lane Fox, *Pagans*, 33–34; Ford, 'Kidinnu', 273–74.

<sup>47</sup> Kiperwasser and Shapira, 'Encounters', 293; Montgomery, *Texts*, 70–71.

<sup>48</sup> Shaked, 'Poetic', 184.

<sup>49</sup> Winter, 'Art'; Schwartz, *Imperialism*, 211, 247, 253; Soldi, 'Arameans', 113–18. In fact, both biblical and rabbinic sources locate Israel's origins in the nexus of Mesopotamia, Syria (Aram) and Palestine. At the offering of the first fruits the Israelites were enjoined to declare, 'a wandering (or "refugee") Aramaean was my father' (Deut 26:5; Millard, 'Aramean'). In a discourse on the Mishnaic tractate on the first fruits, the Jerusalem

numerous Akkadian words into Hebrew.<sup>50</sup> These lexical items chiefly reflect the cultural sphere.<sup>51</sup>

Even the Greeks, whose culture and language had by the turn of the era acquired some of the prestige formerly attached to Akkadian, were far from impervious to Babylon's lustre.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Euhemerus associates Zeus himself with that city,<sup>53</sup> and the cult of Serapis, which the Ptolemies vigorously sponsored, was alleged to derive from Babylon.<sup>54</sup>

Mesopotamia's most captivating quality was the eminence of its scholarship, which derived from the perception that it possessed divinely imparted knowledge and practices of timeless importance. This perception reflects the perspective of Berossus, a Babylonian priest of Marduk who penned the three-volume *Babyloniaca* in Greek and may owe something to his works.<sup>55</sup> To some degree, the status of its scholarship compensated Mesopotamia for its loss of political power. Diodorus waspishly contrasts Babylonian scholars' life-long dedication to study with the Greeks' 'confused wandering'.<sup>56</sup>

The scholarship that he admired was enriched by the abiding legacy of Assyrian erudition.<sup>57</sup> While the debt Assyria owed Babylonian (and Sumerian) culture was immense,<sup>58</sup> the transfer was far from one way. Rocío Da Riva observes that: 'intellectual and religious aspects of Assyrian origin survived and were reshaped and adapted to the Babylonian cultural and political context. These elements were later transmitted to Persia, from where they entered the stream of historical tradition with the Macedonians and survived in many elements of the political rationale in the regimes of the Ancient World.'<sup>59</sup> Omen texts found in a Seleucid-period private library in southern-Babylonian Uruk offer a modest but instructive glimpse of this. They are written in Neo-Assyrian ductus and possess an Assurbanipal colophon.<sup>60</sup> Salvatore Gaspa is unequivocal concerning Assyria's impact on Achaemenid Persia in shaping 'the organization and administration of the Persian

Talmud (yBikkurim 1.4 [64a]) reinterprets Abraham's original name Ab-ram, 'exalted father', as 'father of Aram'.

<sup>50</sup> Keel, 'Reflections', 239–40; Mankowski, *Loanwords*, 10–11, 167–70.

<sup>51</sup> Kaufman, *Influences*, 170.

<sup>52</sup> Even in thirteenth-century AD Byzantium, Babylon's reputation for learning was still remembered (Herrin, *Byzantium*, 277).

<sup>53</sup> Ferguson, *Heritage*, 60. <sup>54</sup> Lane Fox, *Alexander*, 467; Ferguson, *Heritage*, 134.

<sup>55</sup> Burstein, *Babyloniaca*, 4–9. <sup>56</sup> Diodorus, 449 II:29.6.

<sup>57</sup> Clancier, *Bibliothèques*, 260–62. <sup>58</sup> Mirelman, 'Magic', 357.

<sup>59</sup> 'Assyrians', 120. <sup>60</sup> Beaulieu, 'Afterlife'.

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empire, the imperial court life, the forms of visual and written communication'.<sup>61</sup> This influence was particularly felt in conceptions of kingship. Gaspa contends that much of this Assyrian impact on the formation of the Persian empire was directly transmitted, rather than refracted through Babylonian derivations. Nebuchadnezzar settled many of the Judean exiles in the border territory of Babylonia and Assyria,<sup>62</sup> thus exposing them to both cultures.

Long before the third century, Christianity was well established in Adiabene and Hatra.<sup>63</sup> Abercius, who visited the area in the second half of the second century, reports that Christians were present in the 'plain of Syria and Nisibis', and implies that they were ubiquitous.<sup>64</sup> The meagre evidence may indicate that these Christians were Greek-speakers; the medium used by their co-religionists in Babylonia, however, was Aramaic. Christian communities, principally comprising Jews, were present there by the end of the first century.<sup>65</sup> An early Syriac text announces, 'Satan fled from the disciples to the land of Babylon: and the story of the crucifixion had gone before him to the Chaldaeans.'<sup>66</sup> These data support the observation that Rome's eastern frontier was porous with respect to ideas and human traffic.<sup>67</sup> Merchants, itinerant craftsmen and soldiers in particular disseminated beliefs and tales over long distances.<sup>68</sup> Among the tales were Babylonian myths, which enjoyed a revival of interest in the Hellenistic period, at least among the literati.<sup>69</sup> Dalley affirms that, as well as myths, 'almost every other type of text known in Babylonia before the sixth century is now attested also from the Seleucid to the early Parthian period'.<sup>70</sup> The appearance of fish-*apkallu* motifs in Hellenistic seals that are modelled on late Assyrian types further attests to this revival.<sup>71</sup>

In the Seleucid and Roman/Parthian periods, then, not only were many of the ancient traditions of Sumero-Akkadian culture known and studied, but there was no appreciable hindrance, either linguistic or political, to

<sup>61</sup> 'Theology', 125, 132.      <sup>62</sup> Spolsky, *Languages*, 28–29.

<sup>63</sup> Radner, 'City', 20. She surmises that Assur itself may have been home to a Christian community as early as the first century AD.

<sup>64</sup> Lane Fox, *Pagans*, 276–77.      <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 276, 564; Saldarini, *Community*, 24.

<sup>66</sup> Cureton, *Documents*, 112 VII:11–14.

<sup>67</sup> Lane Fox, *Pagans*, 277–78; Cureton, *Documents*, 16; Kalmin, *Babylonia*, 4–5.

<sup>68</sup> Dalley, *Myths*, xviii; Graf, 'Myth', 49–50; Woolf, 'Divinity', 248–49, 255; Carly Silver, 'Dura-Europos: Crossroad of Cultures', in *Archaeology* August, 2010 ([https://archive.archaeology.org/online/features/dura\\_europos/](https://archive.archaeology.org/online/features/dura_europos/); accessed 23/3/2018).

<sup>69</sup> Komoróczy, 'Berosos', 152; Collins, *Seers*, 66.      <sup>70</sup> 'Variation', 166.

<sup>71</sup> Wallenfels, 'Apkallu-Sealings', 320; Wallenfels, *Impressions*, figs. 5–11, 41–16.

their circulation between Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean.<sup>72</sup> Given this custom of transmission, it is unremarkable that Babylonia became a hub from which Jewish theological innovations also spread throughout the diaspora, although the number of known Tannaim there was apparently modest.<sup>73</sup>

Viewed more broadly, the mobility of ideas in the region simply reflected the fact that, from the earliest archaeological records, major trading and migration routes ran through Mesopotamia.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, Israel's first recorded sin in the Promised Land – Achan's transgression – sprang from lust for a Mesopotamian product found at Jericho, 'one fine mantle from Shinar' (Josh 7:10–26). Mesopotamia was both creator and receiver of fine commodities: products, knowledge and ideas that shaped the ancient world.<sup>75</sup> It is no wonder that the climactic scene in the Bible concerning Babylon, perhaps amplifying Isaiah 47:15,<sup>76</sup> describes the merchants and sea-traders of the earth, as well as kings, bitterly mourning her desolation (Rev 18:9–19). Rabbi Judah's net reaching to Jerusalem is simply an expression of Mesopotamia's enduring reach into the Levant and far beyond.

#### MESOPOTAMIAN LEARNING AND ITS AFTERLIFE

Augmenting the effect of Aramaic as a channel of transmission, some Judeans, exilic and post-exilic, knew Akkadian.<sup>77</sup> Among scribes this included a facility in cuneiform.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, evidence from research on the Covenant Code (Exod 21:1–22:16)<sup>79</sup> and the Book of Judges (see below) indicates that as early as the Neo-Assyrian period some biblical writers possessed a mastery of cuneiform sources. The account of Daniel and his three companions taken to Babylon and compelled to master 'the writing (*sēfer*) and the language of the Chaldeans' (Dan 1:4) may reflect a tradition that some exiled Judean literati in Mesopotamia became expert in cuneiform literature.<sup>80</sup> Donald Wiseman posits that this story indicates a

<sup>72</sup> Teixidor, 'Babylonie', 380. <sup>73</sup> Flusser, *Judaism*, 111 n. 128, 133.

<sup>74</sup> Mellaart, 'Relations'; Horowitz, Oshima and Sanders, *Cuneiform*, 12–13.

<sup>75</sup> Gurney, *Hittites*, 196; Pongratz-Leisten, 'Agency', 174–75.

<sup>76</sup> Franke, *Isaiah*, 143–44.

<sup>77</sup> Ong, *Multilingual*, 142–43; Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 29; Winitzer, 'Assyriology', 187–88, 203–04.

<sup>78</sup> Astour, 'Prophecy', 579; Stökl, 'Schoolboy'.

<sup>79</sup> Wright, *Inventing*; Sanders, *Adapa*, 179–81.

<sup>80</sup> DCH VI:192; BATC, 365; Finkel, 'Remarks', 314–15.



policy of Nebuchadnezzar II's court to train high-ranking hostages from subject nations in Babylonian learning.<sup>81</sup> Nebuchadnezzar was a serial user of Neo-Assyrian administrative structures and processes,<sup>82</sup> and Neo-Assyrian kings extensively applied this policy. Their goal was to inculcate an appreciation of and loyalty to the hegemonic culture and its ruler.<sup>83</sup> Wiseman proposes that Zerubbabel, whom we will consider in detail, was possibly a recipient of such an education.<sup>84</sup> The proposal has merit: Babylonian and biblical sources agree that Jehoiachin, Zerubbabel's grandfather, received royal attention and support.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, ration-list data confirm that this provision extended to other noble Judeans.<sup>86</sup>

Competence in cuneiform would have given such individuals access to a fund of Mesopotamian scholarship, concomitantly enhancing their value and, therefore, status in their communities, and perhaps further afield.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, Daniel 5:11 makes the claim for Daniel that Nebuchadnezzar appointed him his chief astrologer. F. Lelli considers that this text may imply the widespread study of astrology by Jews during and after the exile.<sup>88</sup>

Opportunities to learn Akkadian existed and perhaps beckoned. In the exilic period, Babylonian culture was dominant and made little allowance for other traditions. Paul-Alain Beaulieu asserts that in Babylonia, despite its multi-ethnic character and the ubiquity of Aramaic, 'Babylonian civilization in its traditional form [remained] the ideal and common denominator of society, and above all the only culture that enjoyed official support from the monarchy and the civic institutions that regulated the life of Babylonian cities'.<sup>89</sup>

The Judean community was subject to Babylonian law, which was recorded in cuneiform. An Akkadian marriage contract drafted by a scribe with the West-Semitic name Adad-šamā in the northern Babylonian town of Āl-Yahudu, 'city of Judah', a settlement known from sixth- and fifth-century BC records, is written in cuneiform. It is dated to the early Persian period (Cyrus' reign). The majority of witnesses to the contract possess names with the theophoric element -yah.<sup>90</sup> The document, like others from Āl-Yahudu, is otherwise indistinguishable from

<sup>81</sup> *Nebuchadnezzar*, 81, 84–86. Note, however, Waerzeggers, 'Contact', 133.

<sup>82</sup> Da Riva, 'Prism'. <sup>83</sup> Parpola, 'Letter', 33–34. <sup>84</sup> *Nebuchadnezzar*, 81.

<sup>85</sup> Jer 52:31–34; 2 Kgs 25:27–30; Gray, *Kings*, 773–75.

<sup>86</sup> Stökl, 'Schoolboy', 52; Nissinen, 'Context', 88–89.

<sup>87</sup> Scurlock and Al-Rawi, 'Weakness', 372–74; Lambert, *Background*, 13–14.

<sup>88</sup> 'Stars', 813. <sup>89</sup> 'Babylon', 6, 10–11. <sup>90</sup> Abraham, 'Brides', 212–17.

local Babylonian documents. The Judeans maintained records of their financial, administrative and legal transactions on tablets in Akkadian.<sup>91</sup>

Scholars incline to the view that Āl-Yahudu was located near Nippur.<sup>92</sup> Nippur was a celebrated centre of cuneiform (and astronomical) scholarship into the late first millennium BC.<sup>93</sup> Its principal temple, which was dedicated to Enlil, was still functioning in 160 BC.<sup>94</sup> Evidence suggests that consequent to the Assyrian devastation of Israel and swathes of Judah, Israelite and Judean deportees were settled in the environs of Nippur.<sup>95</sup> Later, Judeans – Ezekiel among them – taken by the Babylonians may have joined them there.<sup>96</sup> Others went to Babylon and Borsippa.<sup>97</sup> Borsippa, the city of Nabû, patron deity of scribes, rivalled Nippur's renown as a seat of learning.<sup>98</sup>

Although information on transmission is patchy, especially in the Parthian era when the area was 'just out of the range of Greek and Roman historians',<sup>99</sup> I shall consider evidence that Jews living in Mesopotamia absorbed and disseminated knowledge derived directly or indirectly from cuneiform sources. While many Babylonian texts of a theological and '(pre)philosophical' nature carried a prohibition against distribution to the 'uninitiated',<sup>100</sup> the opposite obtained with other major cuneiform compositions, such as *Enūma eliš* and the Erra epic. Readers/hearers were enjoined to propagate their contents.<sup>101</sup> The latter composition may have left its mark on 1 Enoch.<sup>102</sup>

Furthermore, Jewish priests seem somehow to have accessed Babylonian sacred knowledge classified as restricted to its scribal community. Expositors present substantial evidence from Ezekiel that indicates its author possessed specialist knowledge of Assyro-Babylonian cult.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 206. There were two groups of cuneiform specialists in this period: the élite scribes in Babylonia – those who held positions in royal service and especially the temples – who were generally the scions of distinguished Babylonian families, and the many less privileged people who had facility in cuneiform. Adad-šamā belonged to the second category. If the Daniel tradition has any historical basis, however, there were exceptions to this rigid dichotomy (Frahm, 'Traditionalism', 330).

<sup>92</sup> Abraham, 'Brides', 198; Beaulieu, 'Babylon', 7.

<sup>93</sup> Frahm, 'Traditionalism', 323–24; Cole, *Nippur*, 176; *LAS* II:268.

<sup>94</sup> van der Spek, 'Hellenistic', 426. <sup>95</sup> Oded, 'Kings', 41; Machinist, 'Imperialism', 255.

<sup>96</sup> Zadok, 'Judeans', 113, 117; Alstola, 'Judeans', 149–52.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 204. Note *Genesis Rabbah* 38:11.

<sup>98</sup> Frame and George, 'Libraries', 265; Waerzeggers, 'Contact', 139–41.

<sup>99</sup> Lane Fox, *Pagans*, 278. <sup>100</sup> Rochberg, *Path*, 219.

<sup>101</sup> Michalowski, 'Presence', 394–95. <sup>102</sup> Bhayro, *Shemihazah*, 244–45.

<sup>103</sup> Vanderhooft, 'Ezekiel', 103–04, 113–14; Kingsley, 'Ezekiel', 341–44; Hurowitz, 'Materials', 8 n. 17, 12 n. 27; Stökl, 'Schoolboy'.