

Babylonian Ration Tablets

Excavating the “Northern Palace,” the royal residence of king Nebuchadnezzar, Robert Koldewey (1899-1917) discovered Akkadian cuneiform tablets dated to 594-569 B.C. The tablets were a record of food rations, of grain and oil, given out to captives extradited from conquered lands.

Because they listed the names of surviving conquered kings, officials, and craftsmen living in Babylonia and receiving a ration of grain and oil, the tablets became known as the Babylonian Ration Tablets.

Among these tablets, four would list rations for “Ya’u-kīnu, king of the land of Yahudu” and the names of his five princes, which would be Jehoiachin, king of Judah, and his royal family.

When Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Assyrians and Egyptians in 605 B.C., Judah submitted and became a vassal state. During this first peaceful deportation, a limited number (i.e. Daniel and some nobles and leading youths) were taken to Babylon. However, in response to the rebellion of Jehoakim and Jehoiachin in 597 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judah, and in a second deportation, some 10,000 captives were taken which included Jehoiachin and Ezekiel (2 Ki 24:8-16; 2 Chron 36:5-10). In one particular passage, the Bible refers to Jehoiachin’s preferential treatment over other imprisoned kings and food ration:

Now it came about in the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, that Evil-merodach king of Babylon, in the year that he became king, released Jehoiachin king of Judah from prison; and he spoke kindly to him and set his throne above the throne of the kings who were with him in Babylon. Jehoiachin changed his prison clothes and had his meals in the king’s presence regularly all the days of his life; and for his allowance, a regular allowance was given him by the king, a portion for each day, all the days of his life. (2 Ki 25:27-30; Jer 52:31-34)

For early captives like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, life in Babylon was not as prisoners (Dan 2:49). Recovered Babylonian cuneiform records of business transactions in both urban and rural settings provide evidence that Jews were successfully integrating into Assyrian society.

