Reconstructing the "Remnant": Judean Identity under Babylonian and Persian Rule

Tova Ganzel

The Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Volume 88, Number 2, April 2026, pp. 236-257 (Article)

Published by The Catholic University of America Press

Reconstructing the "Remnant": Judean Identity under Babylonian and Persian Rule

TOVA GANZEL
tova.ganzel@biu.ac.il
Ramat-Gan, Israel

Abstract: The concept of the "remnant" (שְׁאֵרִית, *šĕʾērît*) emerged as a central social designation in the wake of Jerusalem's destruction in 586 B.C.E. and continued to serve as a reflection of Judean identity throughout the early Second Temple period. In this article, I explore the evolution of this term as it was applied to Judean/Yahwistic communities in various locations—survivors in the land, exiles, and returnees under Persian rule. I argue that the remnant was not a static category but a flexible theological and communal construct, shaped by shifting historical realities and imperial contexts. The Persian Empire's administrative and ideological frameworks facilitated the persistence and transformation of the remnant across geographic and political boundaries, allowing each of these communities to reimagine itself as both a restored center and a dispersed yet faithful people. This is demonstrated through biblical texts, archaeological surveys, and imperial administrative records.

Key Words: remnant • post-Destruction Judah • Persian period • Ezra-Nehemiah • biblical theology • Second Temple

In the biblical literature relating to the exilic and early postexilic periods, the term "remnant" (שְׁאֵרִית, *šĕʾērît*) carries profound theological and sociological significance.[1] It designates the survivors or remaining community of Israel. In

This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (grant no. 723/23). Biblical translations are my own, prepared in consultation with standard modern English translations.

[1] In what follows, I use the term "theological" not in a systematic-dogmatic sense; rather, it refers to ways in which biblical texts interpret historical survival and communal continuity as expressions of God's purposeful action.

conventional usage, שארית means "the remainder" or "that which is left," but in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. the term was loaded with ideological meaning as different Judean groups struggled to come to grips with their fate after the Babylonian exile.[2]

The concept of a remnant appears frequently in prophetic and historical texts, describing those left in Judah after the deportations (e.g., 2 Kgs 25:22; Jer 40:11); the Judean exiles in Babylonia (e.g., Jer 29:10–14); and the community of returnees who come to rebuild the temple (e.g., Ezra 9:8, 14; Neh 1:3).[3] Scholars have noted that the term functioned as a vocabulary of self-definition for the restoration community, reflecting debates over who constituted the "true Israel" in the aftermath of national catastrophe.[4] The fluid and sometimes contradictory use of "remnant" in various biblical sources points to an underlying uncertainty about the position of religious authority and the center of Judean identity:[5] Was it in the devastated homeland, among the exiles in foreign lands, or in the emerging community reassembling in Judah?

Sara Japhet's formulation is a helpful one: "the concept of the Remnant constituted one form of Israel's response to situations of severe crisis that threatened

[2] Throughout this article I use the term "Judeans" primarily as a sociopolitical designation for members of the former kingdom of Judah and their descendants, whether in the land or in the diaspora. At times, especially when stressing shared cultic allegiance beyond territorial boundaries, it is helpful to speak more broadly of "Yahwists."

[3] See, e.g., Ezra 9:8, where the returned exiles thank God "who has granted us a surviving remnant (להשאיר לנו פליטה) and given us a stake in His holy place"; cf. Ezra 9:14 (לאין שארית ופליטה, "without remnant or survivor"); Neh 1:3 (ויאמרו לי הנשארים אשר נשארו מן השבי, "and they said to me, 'the survivors who escaped captivity . . .'"), On the semantic range of שארית as survivors of catastrophe or a remainder preserved by God, see Ronald E. Clements, "שאר Šĕʾār, שארית Šĕʾērît," in *Theologiacl Lexicon of the Old Testament* [*TLOT*] (ed. Ernst Jenni et al.; trans. Mark E. Biddle; 3 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997) 14:272–86.

[4] Sara Japhet, "The Concept of the 'Remnant' in the Restoration Period: On the Vocabulary of Self-Definition," in *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Highlands of Judah: Collected Studies on the Restoration Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006) 432–49. Japhet discusses how terms like *gôlâ* ("exile community") and *šĕʾērît* ("remnant") were employed by the postexilic community to define themselves vis-à-vis other groups, arguing that the concept of the remnant functioned as a temporary theological framework, bridging the crisis of exile until the community could envision a full national and religious restoration. See also Dalit Rom-Shiloni, who argues that "remnant" language was ideologically charged, initially referring to those left in Judah but later reappropriated to describe the returned exiles as the true Israelite remnant (*Exclusive Inclusivity: Identity Conflicts between the Exiles and the People Who Remained in Judah [6th–5th Centuries BCE]* [LHBOTS 543; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013] 82–98).

[5] Recent scholarship has also approached the remnant as a conceptual category that resonates beyond historical context. Brian Britt interprets the biblical remnant through the philosophical notion of the "trace," highlighting its paradoxical intertwining of presence and absence across past, present, and future ("The Remnant and the Trace in Biblical Tradition," *JR* 104 [2014] 125–44).

its national existence," but ultimately "its role for the contemporary community was concluded. Israel was looking forward to a full national, political, and religious restoration." The term carried religious weight and reflected a shift in the communal self-definition that took place.[6] While Japhet concludes that by the end of the restoration period the concept of the remnant had largely lost its contemporary sociological role, I assert that the term continued to function—explicitly and implicitly—in shaping communal self-understanding in the early Second Temple period. In other words, rather than viewing remnant as part of the past, I suggest that it was reconfigured under Persian rule.

The notion of a remnant proved adaptable. Initially it might have connoted a pitiable fraction "left over" from destruction, but it eventually came to signify a chosen center through which national restoration would be realized. This redefinition was deeply influenced by the dynamics of Persian imperial policy. Rather than a static label, the remnant emerged as a dynamic category shaped by shifting realities, with survivors in Judah, exiles in Babylonia, and returnees navigating imperial structures.

In this article, I examine how the notion of a "remnant" evolved during the Persian period, tracing its development across biblical texts and material evidence. By integrating prophetic visions, archaeological data from Jerusalem and its surroundings, and cuneiform records from the diaspora, I explore how diverse Judean communities redefined identity, continuity, and covenant under foreign rule. Biblical texts and their use of the term provide a window into the world of the displaced and returning Judeans. In Judah, Persian support for the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple is portrayed in Ezra, even though extrabiblical corroboration remains limited and uneven.[7] Persian kings are portrayed in Ezra as supporting the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple, yet political power, according to the biblical text, was kept in check, with no revival of a Davidic monarchy, only Persian governors. Meanwhile, many—if not most—Judeans remained in Babylonia by choice, building new lives there under imperial protection. The identity of the Judean community was thus stretched across imperial space, forcing a negotiation of loyalties and self-concept: Who was the "true Israel," and what did it mean to live in covenant with the God of Israel in a world with multiple Jewish centers?

[6] Japhet, "Concept of the 'Remnant,'" 449.

[7] Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (trans. Peter T. Daniels; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002) 466–71. Briant emphasizes that the Achaemenid administration generally pursued flexible, region-specific strategies in governing subject peoples, often allowing a degree of local autonomy in religious affairs if imperial interests (particularly stability and tax collection) were maintained. In the case of Judah, this meant supporting the reestablishment of the temple cult (a policy initiated by Cyrus's edict; see Ezra 1:1–4 and 2 Chr 36:22–23, which echo the decree) while integrating Judah into the imperial provincial system under Persian governors rather than allowing the reemergence of an independent monarchy.

I. Post-Destruction Judah

The noun שארית anchors much of the theological reflection on survival and restoration, while the verbal root שאר ("to remain") further enriches this motif by highlighting the active and ongoing process of being spared.[8] In Isa 4:3, for instance, the future community is described as "those who remain [הנשאר] in Jerusalem," signaling not only survival but also active participation in a divinely ordained future. Conversely, Jeremiah presents a stark reversal of expectation: "None of the remnant of Judah who have gone to reside in the land of Egypt shall escape or survive" (Jer 44:14). These verbal nuances capture the dynamic tension between hope and threat that defines the theology of the remnant, deepening its resonance across genres and historical contexts.[9]

The concept of the remnant (שארית) predates the Babylonian exile, appearing in preexilic prophetic literature. Amos 5:15 evokes the "remnant of Joseph" as a moral hope for survival, grounded in justice and divine favor. Isaiah 10:20–22 speaks of "the remnant of Israel" (שאר ישראל) and "the survivors of the house of Jacob" (פליטה בית־יעקב) in explicitly moral terms: they "shall lean upon the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth." Here the remnant is envisaged as a purified future community, not yet tied to a specific, historically identifiable group. Micah 2:12 similarly anticipates a gathered flock—"all of you, O Jacob . . . the remnant of Israel"—as a community poised for restoration in an eschatological vision.[10] These early articulations, rooted in the aftermath of the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom, with שארית referring to the survivors of Israel's earlier exile, provided resources for later writers.[11] Yet, in the wake of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E., with a fractured Judean population in multiple dispersed communities, the term acquired a new concreteness. No longer referring to an abstract or symbolic group, in the biblical text the term remnant now denoted historically specific communities. Some remained in the land under Babylonian administration, initially centered at Mizpah under Gedaliah's governorship (2 Kgs 25:22); some had already been exiled to Babylonia, including the

[8] Hans Wildberger, "שאר Šʾr to remain," *TLOT* 3:1284–92. Wildberger notes the connections between שאר and related roots (פלט, יתר).

[9] On the significance of verbal forms of שאר alongside the noun שארית, see Clements, "שאר Šĕʾār, שארית Šĕʾērît"; Wildberger, "שאר Šʾr."

[10] As Britt has noted, Micah's remnant collapses linear temporality, linking covenant, judgment, and restoration across shifting frames, in contrast to postexilic texts such as Ezra and Nehemiah, where the remnant is more static and historical ("Remnant and the Trace," 133–36).

[11] See Clements, who discusses the status of the שארית following the destruction of the temple and concludes that the question of its theological and communal significance remains unresolved ("שאר Šĕʾār, שארית Šĕʾērît," 278–79).

royal family and elite (597 B.C.E.); another group fled to Egypt following the collapse of local governance (Jer 43:5–7).[12]

While the community at Mizpah briefly signaled continuity in the land, its dissolution through assassination and flight raised profound questions: Where did legitimate continuity reside—in those who remained in the land, or among the exiles? This ambiguity is reflected in the Deuteronomistic History's closing focus on Jehoiachin's elevation in Babylon (2 Kgs 25:27–30), as well as in Jeremiah's conflicted vision of scattered remnants in Judah, Egypt, and Babylonia. This ambiguity shaped the later theological reframing of exile as divine preservation, a view that would come to define prophetic and postexilic understandings of the remnant.

II. Prophetic Perspectives on the Remnant

Prophetic books that relate to the exilic period use the term שארית, though they reference different groups in doing so.[13] Below I explore three different meanings of the remnant—in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, in Haggai-Zechariah, and in Ezra-Nehemiah—in order to trace how the term moves from an abstract eschatological hope to a contested designation of specific communities.

In earlier prophetic books, the term "remnant" referred to a group that would survive divine judgment (e.g., Isa 10:20–22; Mic 2:12). Yet in those preexilic contexts, the term typically functioned as a symbolic motif—referring either to the survivors of future calamity or to an ideal purified group. Texts such as Isaiah 10 and Micah 2 present the remnant primarily as an idealized future group, envisioned in abstract terms as purified and faithful. In the exilic period, by contrast, "remnant" becomes a contested label for several concrete communities—in Judah, Egypt, and Babylonia—each of which claims to embody that earlier ideal. The struggle is no longer over whether a remnant will survive, but over which historically situated group can rightly call itself that remnant. With the shift of the center of covenantal hope to the exiles, the prophets reframed survival in geographical and spiritual terms, laying the conceptual groundwork for understanding the

[12] Avraham Faust concludes that Judah's population was drastically reduced following the destruction in 586 B.C.E., and that those who remained inhabited a landscape of decline, poverty, and ruin. His findings support the image of a marginalized agrarian remnant, consistent with the biblical account of "the poorest people of the land" being left behind to tend the vineyards and fields (2 Kgs 25:12) (*Judah in the Neo-Babylonian Period: The Archaeology of Desolation* [ABS 18; Atlanta: Socieity of Biblical Literature, 2012] 199–203).

[13] David M. Morgan, "Remnant," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets* (ed. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville; Black Dictionaries on the Bible; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012) 658–65. Morgan surveys prophetic uses of the term across historical settings, linking it to related roots and emphasizing how shifting crises led Israel and Judah to define themselves as a remnant.

returning community under Persian authorization as the legitimate continuation of Israel's story.

For the purposes of this discussion, I follow the broadly accepted dating that situates the events described in Jeremiah and Ezekiel around the destruction and its aftermath (late seventh–early sixth century B.C.E.), Haggai and Zechariah in the early Persian period (late sixth century), and Ezra-Nehemiah in the late sixth–mid-fifth century. Precise dating remains debated, but these relative horizons shape how the remnant motif is redeployed, regardless of whether the books were edited later on.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel: Moving the Remnant to Babylonia

Jeremiah's[14] use of the term שארית ("remnant") reflects a shifting view shaped by the events that followed Judah's fall. Significantly, the earliest reflection on the concept of a remnant during the period surrounding the temple's destruction, both in the years leading up to it and in its immediate aftermath, begins with Jehoiachin's exile. At this point, the forced displacement of Jerusalem's elite was already raising crucial questions about survival, continuity, and divine purpose. Jeremiah's engagement with the fate of Jehoiachin's exiles situates the later developments within its theology of the remnant. Initially, the book refers to the Judeans who remained in the land under Gedaliah's leadership as a potential seed of renewal—so long as they submit to divine instruction.[15] In parallel, Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylonia (chap. 29) encourages them to settle in for a prolonged exile and seek the welfare of their host society, implying that restoration will not be immediate.

The promise of return in Jeremiah is personal: "I will visit you . . . I will bring you back to this place" (Jer 29:10). The use of the first-person divine voice underscores the intimate covenantal relationship, reframing exile not as eternal divine abandonment but as a stage within a larger redemptive arc. This personal tone likely functioned as a ballast for exilic identity, shaping the exiles' experience of displacement within a continuing covenantal relationship. Yet Jeremiah also envisions a more comprehensive gathering: "I will gather the remnant of my flock out

[14] The reference to Jeremiah, as with all references to prophetic books, is to the biblical book and not the titular prophet.

[15] The significance of Jehoiachin's amnesty is noted in both the biblical text and Babylonian records. Babylonian ration documents from Nebuchadnezzar's reign mention "Jehoiachin king of Judah" receiving provisions in Babylon, confirming his survival and some royal treatment in exile (see Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.* [Studies in Biblical Literature 3; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004] 60–70). The biblical notice of Jehoiachin dining at the king's table (2 Kgs 25:29) symbolizes the continuity of the Davidic line in exile, hinting that the restoration of Judah might come through the exiled monarchy rather than the devastated remnant in the land.

of all the countries where I have driven them" (Jer 23:3), suggesting hope for both refugees and exiles.

Following the collapse of the Mizpah community, however, the book's tone darkens. The prophet repeatedly addresses the survivors, whom he calls the "remnant of Judah," as they contemplate flight to Egypt (Jer 42:15, 19), warning them that only by remaining in the land will they be spared further judgment. Their disobedience and self-exile mark a turning point: "None of the remnant of Judah who went to live in Egypt shall escape or survive" (Jer 44:14, 27). Only a few fugitives, the prophet avers, will return (Jer 44:28), signaling a theological reorientation: divine favor rests no longer with those who stayed in the land, but rather with the exiled community in Babylonia.

This shift is anticipated in Jeremiah 24, in the vision of the two baskets of figs, which most scholars situate before the destruction in 586 B.C.E.. There, the early exiles of 597 B.C.E. are designated the "good figs," destined for eventual restoration, while those who remain in the land or later flee to Egypt are represented by the "bad figs."[16] In other words, the prophet's later condemnation of the "remnant of Judah" who go down to Egypt in Jeremiah 40–44 does not represent a second reversal but a narrative already articulated in chap. 24: true continuity is aligned with the early exiles, not with those who stayed behind or self-exiled to Egypt.

While Jeremiah's outlook shifts the remnant from those in Judah and in Egypt to the exiles in Babylonia, Ezekiel—written entirely from within the Babylonian diaspora—presents a decisive realignment. Early visions portray near-total devastation in Jerusalem, prompting Ezekiel's repeated cries: "Will you make a full end of the remnant of Israel?" (Ezek 9:8; 11:13). These laments reflect anxiety over the survival of any portion of Israel. Yet God's response in the text reorients the hope not to those left in Judah, but to the exiles. Though Jerusalem's inhabitants claim exclusive right to the land, God declares that even God will be a small sanctuary to the exiles and will restore them to the land (Ezek 11:15–17). In this reversal, the Book of Ezekiel affirms that the true remnant (שארית) resides not in the land but among those scattered.

This vision closely parallels Jeremiah's vision of the figs: both Jeremiah and Ezekiel, even prior to 586 B.C.E., respond to the dislocation marked by Jehoiachin's exile—not the temple's destruction—by reconfiguring the locus of divine favor. In Ezekiel, in fact, the prophet begins to prophesy in the aftermath of Jehoiachin's exile, underscoring the pivotal role of this event in reshaping prophetic theology. Rather than treating exile as a peripheral episode, both prophetic books present it as a defining moment for the future of Israel's remnant. This theme recurs through-

[16] For a discussion of Jeremiah's "good figs/bad figs" vision and its implications for the concept of the remnant, see Rom-Shiloni, *Exclusive Inclusivity*, 228–41.

out Ezekiel's prophecies: "I will spare some of you from the sword among the nations" (Ezek 6:8). The remnant is explicitly defined as those who survived in exile, not as those who remained in Judah. Ezekiel's culminating visions—the resurrection of dry bones (chap. 37) and the idealized rebuilt temple (chaps. 40–48)—envision a renewed Israel composed of reunited exiles. Those who stayed behind cease to exist in the restoration program.[17]

Together, Jeremiah and Ezekiel mark a turning point. Jeremiah initially maintained hope for the שארית יהודה ("remnant of Judah") but, after their flight to Egypt, redirects attention to the exiles. Ezekiel, by contrast, consistently centers divine favor on the diaspora. Both converge on a radical claim: the locus of covenantal continuity has shifted from Zion to Babylonia.[18] This reframing of covenantal geography—identifying the exiles as the true remnant—challenged traditional assumptions and laid the base for the ideological claims of the returnees under Persian rule.

Haggai and Zechariah: The Remnant's Return to Judah

Cyrus's edict (538 B.C.E.) opened the door for a segment of the Judean diaspora to reconstitute itself in the land; the biblical text reports on a small-scale return under Sheshbazzar and later Zerubbabel (Ezra 1–2). Despite harsh conditions, limited resources, local opposition, and widespread discouragement, the returnees began rebuilding the altar and laying the foundations for a new temple (Ezra 3). In this modest setting, prophetic discourse reactivated the language of שארית.

Haggai explicitly identifies the returnees as "the remnant of the people" (שארית העם, 1:12), linking them to the ongoing covenantal story.[19] The formulation in Hag 1:12 is significant: "Then Zerubbabel and all the remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God." Here, שארית העם is not a vague abstraction but a concrete community that responds—or fails to respond—to prophetic exhortation. Moreover, in Hag 2:3 the prophet explicitly juxtaposes those "who saw this house in its former glory" with the present builders, creating a temporal

[17] The Hebrew phrasing in Ezek 9:8 (כל־שארית ישראל, "all the remnant of Israel") and 11:13 (שארית ישראל, "the remnant of Israel")—underscores the prophet's fear that Israel's entire remainder might perish. See Daniel I. Block, who notes that Ezekiel, despite its strong judgment oracles, holds on to a theology of a remnant that God will preserve (*The Book of Ezekiel* [2 vols.; NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997–1998] 1:309, 338–40).

[18] Peter R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration: A Study of Hebrew Thought of the Sixth Century B.C.* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968). Ackroyd stresses that Jeremiah 40–44 places the future with the Babylonian exiles rather than with the remnant in the land. Clements ("שאר Šĕʾār, שארית Šĕʾērît") similarly concludes that Jeremiah and Ezekiel identify the exiles as the true remnant.

[19] Sara Japhet, "Concept of the Remnant,"436–49. Japhet argues that Haggai and Zechariah apply "remnant" to the people of the land, while Ezra uses it exclusively for the returnees from Babylonia, thus combining earlier and exilic conceptions.

bridge in which the remnant embodies both continuity with and rupture from the preexilic past.

The designation of the community in these terms reflects a deliberate theological framing: by applying the remnant motif to the postexilic generation, Haggai situates their rebuilding efforts within the broader narrative of divine commitment to the survivors. The phrase both validates their identity and charges them with responsibility, unambiguously assigning the community in Judah the task of restoring the temple.

The emotional contrast between the older returnees who remembered Solomon's temple and the younger celebrants (Hag 2:3) underscores their continuity with the preexilic past, while the divine promise of future glory (Hag 2:9) affirms their role in Israel's renewal. This appropriation of שארית language signals a significant shift: remnant identity is now defined not merely by survival but by active participation in cultic restoration. Haggai's oracles emphasize the necessity of completing the temple to restore purity (Hag 2:14), suggesting that proper sacrificial offering depends on the efforts of this group. Zechariah, though more restrained in employing the שארית motif, similarly envisions a sanctified "people" who will inherit the promises (Zech 8:12–13). As Dalit Rom-Shiloni observes, by this period—the late prophetic literature—the term שארית had acquired both political and theological resonance, and Haggai's usage reflects a conscious reclamation of this language, marking boundaries between communities in Judah, Babylonia, and Egypt.[20]

Ezra-Nehemiah: The Remnant as Boundary Marker

Rom-Shiloni highlights how contested designations of "the people" and "those who returned" function as tools of inclusion and exclusion. Building on her insights, I focus here on how the remnant motif is redeployed in Ezra-Nehemiah in conversation with earlier prophetic articulations, and how this redeployment interacts with the imperial and archaeological contexts of Persian-period Judah. In this context, the returned exiles emerged in the biblical text as the legitimate heirs of the prophetic vision: small, struggling, yet divinely affirmed. They came to define the core of Second Temple Judaism, while the dispersed Judean communities remained outside the restored cultic center.

Ezra-Nehemiah, with narratives relating to a period that spans from the late sixth to the mid-fifth century B.C.E., presents the returnees to Judah as a divinely preserved remnant. This self-definition justifies strict boundaries vis-à-vis other groups—foreigners, Samaritans, and non-exiled Judeans alike. The rhetoric of "remnant" (e.g., Ezra 9:8, 14) expresses both gratitude for divine grace and anxiety

[20] Rom-Shiloni, *Exclusive Inclusivity*, 48–81.

over its fragility: any moral or cultic lapse, especially intermarriage, is perceived to be a threat to restoration. Ezra's reform plan, shaped by this theology, aims to preserve a "holy seed" (Ezra 9:2) through exclusionary practices.[21]

The Book of Nehemiah reinforces this idea. From the diaspora perspective, the Jerusalem population is understood to be the "remnant who survived the captivity" (Neh 1:3)—a term that implies vulnerability and the need for support. The mission to rebuild the walls and institute covenantal reforms reflects a view of this community as the chosen nucleus of Israel's future. The exclusion of Samaritans from the rebuilding effort (Ezra 4:3), despite their professed allegiance to the God of Israel, exemplifies how Persian authorization and shared exilic experience became criteria for membership in the restored "remnant."[22]

Yet this remnant, for all its self-assurance, remained small, embattled, and dependent on imperial favor.[23] While the texts project an ideal of covenant renewal centered in Jerusalem, they also betray the limits of that vision: no broad national reunification occurs, and significant Judean populations remain outside the province.[24] In this respect, Ezra-Nehemiah reflects not the triumphant reconstitution of

[21] The phrase "holy seed" (זרע הקדש) in Ezra 9:2 echoes Isa 6:13, which refers to the remnant left after God's judgment on Judah; in Ezra, it indicates that "the city as a whole is now holy." See Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (SBLMS 36; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 114. Bob Becking interprets Ezra's rejection of the "foreign women" as an act of identity construction tied to the remnant ideology ("On the Identity of the 'Foreign' Women in Ezra 9–10," in *Exile and Restoration Revisited: Essays on the Babylonian and Persian Periods in Memory of Peter R. Ackroyd* [ed. Gary N. Knoppers, Lester L. Grabbe, and Dierdre N. Fulton; LSTS 73; London: T&T Clark, 2009] 31–49).

[22] Dalit Rom-Shiloni shows that Ezekiel constructs a separatist, self-legitimating exilic identity for the Jehoiachin deportees in contrast to the homeland population ("Ezekiel as the Voice of the Exiles and Constructor of Exilic Ideology," *HUCA* 76 [2005] 1–45). For the distinct political and geographic character of the postexilic temple community, see David Janzen, who argues that the קהל (*qāhāl*, "assembly") of the בני הגולה (*bĕnê haggôlâ*, "the exiles") functioned as an independent, Babylonian-patterned temple assembly with limited integration into the Persian provincial system ("Politics, Settlement, and Temple Community in Persian-Period Yehud," *CBQ* 64 [2002] 490–510). For a contrasting voice, see Marshall Cunningham, who reads Neh 9:5–37 as preserving an alternative historical narrative that complicates a singular, exile-centered line of continuity ("Decentering Exile: Methodology and Alternate Versions of Judean History in Nehemiah 9:5–37," *VT* 74 [2024] 531–60).

[23] On the demographic situation, see Gary N. Knoppers, *Jews and Samaritans: The Origins and History of Their Early Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 2–3, 108–9. During the Persian period, the province of Samaria was larger, more populous, and wealthier than Judah. Archaeological surveys indicate substantial growth in northern Samaria, in contrast to the modest recovery of Judah. This demographic reality may have complicated Judahite claims to exclusive status as the "remnant" of Israel.

[24] For an analysis of Persian-period Jerusalem's material and psychological landscape, see Yigal Levin, "Persian-Period Jerusalem in the Shadow of Destruction," in *Writing and Re-writing History by Destruction: Proceedings of the Annual Minerva Center RIAB Conference, Leipzig, 2018, Research on Israel and Aram in Biblical Times III* (ed. Angelika Berlejung, Aren M. Maeir,

Israel but a localized attempt—framed by temple and Torah—to articulate and safeguard a particular vision of communal identity under imperial auspices.[25]

III. Archaeological Perspectives: Jerusalem, Ramat Raḥel, and Tel Mikhmoret

Ezra-Nehemiah's understanding of the remnant as beleaguered and struggling is supported by the archaeological findings. Older assumptions viewed Judah as completely devastated following the Babylonian conquest of 586 B.C.E., but scholarship has challenged this view. The long-standing debate between the "desolation" and "continuity" schools revolves around the extent of demographic and cultural collapse. Archaeological evidence suggests that, while Jerusalem suffered severe destruction, rural regions, particularly in Benjamin and parts of the Judean hills, retained significant populations.[26]

Archaeological data from sixth- and fifth-century Judah largely confirm the biblical portrait of a modest and fragile reconstitution in the homeland.[27] Three sites—the City of David/Temple Mount, Ramat Raḥel, and Tel Mikhmoret—are particularly instructive for understanding the demographic, administrative, and cultural contours of Judah under Babylonian and Persian rule.

In Jerusalem, destruction layers from 586 B.C.E. attest to the city's violent fall, with burn debris and collapsed structures identified in the City of David and Temple Mount areas. In the subsequent Neo-Babylonian period, evidence of urban activity is minimal—there is sparse pottery, a few domestic remains, and no indication of major rebuilding. The city appears to have been largely abandoned, aligning with biblical descriptions of desolation and the administrative shift to Mizpah;

and Takayoshi Oshima; Orientalische Religionen in der Antike 45; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022) 122–40.

[25] See Levin, who points out that Ezra-Nehemiah deliberately avoids reference to the still-visible ruins, presenting instead an idealized narrative of restoration ("Persian-Period Jerusalem," 130).

[26] The archaeological data surveyed here illuminate the demographic scale, settlement patterns, and economic conditions in which communities described in biblical texts as the "remnant" lived. These findings can corroborate or nuance the material presuppositions of the texts, while the category "remnant" itself remains a literary construct that archaeology cannot confirm as a theological claim. Within this framework, scholarly assessments of the archaeological record diverge: some stress extensive devastation, while others point to marked regional continuity outside Jerusalem. For an overview, see Faust, *Judah in the Neo-Babylonian Period*.

[27] Oded Lipschits, "Jerusalem between Two Periods of Greatness: The Size and Status of the City in the Babylonian, Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods," in *Judah in the Biblical Period: Historical, Archaeological, and Biblical Studies: Selected Essays* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024) 385–96.

this stands in contrast to the Benjamin region and the northern Judean hills, where no evidence of deportation has been found.[28]

Signs of revival appear only gradually in the Persian period. Excavations at the Givati Parking Lot have uncovered Persian-era pottery and administrative bullae overlying earlier structures, pointing to a modest resettlement on parts of the ruined cityscape. The scale remained limited, and substantial urban infrastructure reappears only later in the fifth century, when fortifications were once again constructed—likely enclosing a reduced area relative to the preexilic city.[29]

Most estimates suggest that, by the late Persian period, Jerusalem housed just a few thousand inhabitants, concentrated on the eastern hill and possibly parts of the western hill.[30] The material culture of Persian-period Jerusalem—characterized by utilitarian pottery, the absence of luxury imports, and reliance on external materials—underscores the city’s modest socioeconomic standing.[31] This aligns with prophetic laments over economic hardship (Hag 1:6) and the community’s dependence on Persian authorization and resources (e.g., Neh 2:8). Far from being a renewed capital of a reconstituted Israel, Jerusalem in this period functioned more as a struggling religious outpost within an imperial framework, highlighting the unfulfilled hopes for restored centrality.[32]

[28] Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem: Judah under Babylonian Rule* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2005) 258–71. Lipschits analyzes the paucity of finds in Jerusalem from the sixth century B.C.E. and concludes that the city was largely abandoned, with the possible exception of a small settlement on the Ophel.

[29] Yiftah Shalev concludes that our understanding of the early Persian-period settlement in Jerusalem is drawn almost solely from the perspective of negative evidence, pointing to the notable absence of substantial remains as indicative of the city’s limited activity. The ceramic finds support a picture of urban decline or stagnation during the first half of the fifth century B.C.E.(“The Early Persian Period Pottery,” in *The Summit of the City of David: Excavations 2005–2008. Final Reports, Volume 1* [ed. Eilat Mazar; Jerusalem: Shoham Academic Research and Publication, 2015] 212–15).

[30] For recent archaeological evidence pointing to limited yet significant activity in Persian-period Jerusalem, see Yiftah Shalev, Nitsan Shalom, Efrat Bocher, and Yuval Gadot, “New Evidence on the Location and Nature of Iron Age, Persian and Early Hellenistic Period Jerusalem,” *Tel Aviv* 47 (2020) 149–72. The authors report on early Persian-period remains from the western slope of the City of David ridge, including the reuse of rooms in a destroyed Iron Age structure and new modest architectural features. While these finds do not indicate full urban reconstruction, they demonstrate planned, small-scale resettlement and challenge reconstructions based solely on the absence of monumental architecture.

[31] Levin, “Persian-Period Jerusalem,” 122–40; Dvory Namdar, Oded Lipschits, Liora Freud, and Yuval Gadot, “Organic Content of Persian *YHWD*-Stamped Storage Jars,” in *Ramat Raḥel VI: The Renewed Excavations by the Tel Aviv-Heidelberg Expedition (2005–2010); The Babylonian-Persian Pit* (ed. Oded Lipschits, Liora Freud, Manfred Oeming, and Yuval Gadot; University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2021) 121–30.

[32] See Levin, who emphasizes both the limited extent of Jerusalem during the Persian period

In contrast to Jerusalem's faltering recovery, Ramat Raḥel, located approximately four kilometers south of the city, flourished as an administrative center throughout the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. Originally a royal Judean estate, the site underwent significant redevelopment under Babylonian and especially Persian rule. Excavations led by Oded Lipschits have revealed a monumental complex, including a palace, gardens with advanced water systems, and extensive storage facilities.[33] Persian-period strata (Layer III) yielded Judah stamp impressions and a mixed assemblage of local and imperial-style pottery, indicating sustained governmental use and integration into Achaemenid administrative networks.[34] The comprehensive findings at Ramat Raḥel confirm its role as the primary administrative center in the region during the Persian period, rather than merely a rural estate. The prominence of Ramat Raḥel suggests that imperial authorities deliberately bypassed Jerusalem in favor of a more strategic and controllable location for regional governance, and from there they oversaw tax collection, agricultural storage, and population management. Some scholars have proposed that early Persian governors such as Sheshbazzar or even Nehemiah may have operated from this site, at least during the initial stages of reorganization.[35]

For the Judean remnant in Jerusalem, Ramat Raḥel's prominence likely symbolized the diminished autonomy of Judah. The seat of power—possibly marked with imperial insignia—stood visibly above the city, serving as a tangible reminder of Persian oversight. The site is never mentioned in biblical texts. How did the Judeans relate to it? Did its existence inform the sense of vulnerability voiced in Nehemiah, where the survivors in the province are described as being "in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been

and the visible remnants of destruction, especially on the western hill ("Persian-Period Jerusalem," 122–31).

[33] For archaeological evidence of Ramat Raḥel as a center of imperial administration and display, see Dafna Langgut, Yuval Gadot, Naomi Porat, and Oded Lipschits, "Fossil Pollen Reveals the Secrets of the Royal Persian Garden at Ramat Raḥel, Jerusalem," *Palynology* 37 (2013) 115–29. The authors reconstruct an elaborate royal garden dated to the fifth–fourth centuries B.C.E., featuring exotic imported trees (e.g., citron, cedar, walnut) that reflect imperial investment and symbolic presence. The location, scale, and aesthetic sophistication of the site support its identification as a Persian administrative and ceremonial hub in the region.

[34] Oded Lipschits, *Age of Empires: The History and Administration of Judah in the 8th–2nd Centuries BCE in Light of the Storage-Jar Stamp Impressions* (Mosaics: Studies on Ancient Israel 2; University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2021) 198–99. Lipschits concludes that the *yhwd* stamp impressions were in use during the Persian period and demonstrate the full continuity of the administration and economy at least until the mid-fifth century B.C.E., indicating that the city and temple were not crucial to the administration at the time and that the main development of the *yhwd* impressions likely occurred later.

[35] Oded Lipschits, Yuval Gadot, and Liora Freud, *Ramat-Raḥel III: Final Publication of Aharoni's Excavations at Ramat-Raḥel (1954, 1959–1962)*, Monograph Series of the Sonia and Marco Nadler Institute of Archaeology 35 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016).

destroyed by fire" (Neh 1:3)? The term חרפה (*ḥerpâ*, "shame") suggests not only physical desolation but also the social humiliation of Jerusalem's reduced status. The dissonance between a flourishing administrative center and a struggling sacred capital encapsulates the wider tension between imperial infrastructure and local aspirations for restoration.

Moving beyond the Jerusalem region, the coastal site of Tel Mikhmoret offers a counterpoint to the modest inland settlement of Judah. Located in the Sharon plain north of Joppa, Tel Mikhmoret flourished in the Persian period as a Phoenician outpost integrated into Achaemenid maritime networks. Excavations have revealed fortifications, harbors nearby, and material culture linking the site to long-distance trade: Persian-period pottery, coins, and, notably, a cuneiform legal tablet dated to 525 B.C.E. Written in Akkadian by Babylonian scribes, the tablet records a slave sale and includes Babylonian names and Syro-Palestinian weight measures, marking it as the only known Neo-Babylonian legal document discovered in the Southern Levant.[36]

The discovery of the cuneiform tablet at Tel Mikhmoret underscores the integration of coastal sites into imperial networks, contrasting with the absence of similar administrative documents from inland Judah. Its presence suggests that Babylonians—likely merchants or imperial agents—were stationed at such coastal hubs under Persian authorization. While Judah struggled economically, imperial resources flowed to strategic port towns. The disparity is telling: the cuneiform records appear at Mikhmoret but are absent in central Judah, where administration shifted to Aramaic.[37] Judah's remnant community, largely rural and agrarian, remained disconnected from the commercial circuits shaping the broader imperial economy. Tel Mikhmoret was abandoned by the mid-fourth century B.C.E., likely following the Sidonian revolt against Persia. In contrast, the Judean remnant, though materially impoverished, endured.

More broadly, archaeological surveys of Persian-period Judah reveal a dispersed pattern of unwalled villages and small farmsteads, with minimal evidence of industry or wealth. The notable absence of figurines in this period, often interpreted as a sign of consolidated Yahwistic monotheism, may reflect the theological identity of the remnant community: a purified people rebuilding sacred life without idols.[38]

[36] See Ira Spar, Samuel M. Paley, and Robert R. Stieglitz, "A Cuneiform Contract Fragment from Tel Mikhmoret," *IEJ* 68 (2018) 182–91. The authors publish and analyze the Neo-Babylonian cuneiform slave-sale contract, and note that the use of both Babylonian and Judean weight measures, along with Babylonian personal names and legal formulae, suggests that the tablet was produced locally by Babylonian scribes operating within a coastal trade environment under Persian rule.

[37] Cf. Levin, who notes the contrast between inland sites like Jerusalem and the more economically integrated coastal centers such as Tel Mikhmoret ("Persian-Period Jerusalem," 130).

[38] Archaeological evidence from Persian-period Judah points to an almost complete absence

In this light, the physical traces of Persian-period Judah—modest houses, storage jars, seal impressions—illuminate the material conditions under which the community that biblical texts call the "remnant" negotiated its identity. Meanwhile, sites like Mikhmoret remind us that Judah was not isolated but deeply entangled in an imperial world that both marginalized and sustained it. Evidence of imported ceramics and administrative interactions at inland sites such as Ramat Raḥel and Mizpah, as well as biblical references to materials sourced from the coast (Ezra 3:7), underscore that Judeans were aware of the relative prosperity of the coastal regions. Such awareness likely sharpened their perception of Jerusalem's modest condition, deepening the sense of contrast and perhaps even local frustration.

IV. Toward a Portable Identity: The Remnant under Persian Rule

Under Persian rule, deportations occurred less frequently than they had under the Assyrian or Babylonian regimes,[39] but population movement under Achaemenid rule continued and contributed to the empire's ethnic complexity. Settlements such as Ḫazatu (named after Gaza), Išqallūnu (after Ashkelon), and Palašti (Philistia) reflect the continued presence of Philistine and other West Semitic groups exiled by Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian rulers.[40] The Murašû archive and other cuneiform sources also document Carians, Phrygians, Urarteans, and Melitenians residing in Mesopotamia during the Persian period.[41] These groups, like the Judeans, retained ethnic markers in place-names and occasionally in social classification. While some of these communities originated during the Neo-Assyrian

of cultic paraphernalia, notably incense burners and figurines. The distinctive cubic incense altars, widespread elsewhere, are virtually absent from Judah and Samaria, appearing primarily in sites with non-Judean or mixed populations. This pattern supports the interpretation of a deliberate cultic centralization and ethnic-religious distinction in postexilic Judah, with a focus on the Jerusalem temple and separation from surrounding practices. See Nili Zanton, "Cultic Changes in Judah: The Cubic Incense Altars as a Test Case" [Hebrew], *Judea and Samaria Research Studies* 23 (2014) 61–75.

[39] For continued forced population movement under Persian rule, albeit on a smaller scale, see Miroslav Izdimirski, "Deportations of *Kurtaš* Workers in the Achaemenid Empire according to Classical Literary Tradition," *Živa Antika* 68 (2018) 51–64. See also Josef Wiesehöfer, "Deportations," in *A Companion to the Achaemenid Persian Empire* (ed. Bruno Jacobs and Robert Rollinger; Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World; Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2021) 871–78.

[40] See Ran Zadok, "Phoenicians, Philistines, and Moabites in Mesopotamia," *BASOR* 230 (1978) 57–65. See also Cornelia Wunsch, *Judaeans by the Waters of Babylon: New Historical Evidence in Cuneiform Sources from Rural Babylonia in the Schøyen Collection*, Babylonische Archive 6 (Dresden: ISLET, 2022), esp. 1–20; Tero Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia: A Study of Deportees in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BCE* (CHANE 109; Leiden: Brill, 2019), 1 n. 1.

[41] For Carians, see Caroline Waerzeggers, "The Carians of Borsippa," *Iraq* 68 (2006) 1–22. For Phygians, Urarteans, and Melitenians, see Zadok, "Phoenicians, Philistines, and Moabites," 60.

period, others were likely established in the Neo-Babylonian or early Achaemenid eras. The Judeans, then, were part of a broader imperial phenomenon, in which diverse displaced populations experienced processes of forced migration, partial resettlement, and the ongoing negotiation of communal identity.[42]

From the imperial perspective, such decentralization was acceptable, even advantageous. The Persian administration favored stable and loyal subject populations regardless of geographic concentration. Judeans, like other religious groups in the empire, could be trusted intermediaries and economic contributors. The figure of Nehemiah—a Jewish official granted resources and authority to fortify Jerusalem—demonstrates how the empire could empower local leaders for regional stability while maintaining overarching control through governors and satraps. Ezra-Nehemiah itself reflects this dual orientation: while emphasizing the restoration of Jerusalem's walls and cultic center, it also acknowledges the material and moral support provided by diaspora communities (Ezra 1:6; Neh 1:3).

The return to Judah, permitted under Cyrus, may have reflected ideological rhetoric or internal imperial strategy. However, it was neither universal nor unconditional, as the delayed rebuilding of the temple (Hag 1:2–11) illustrates. Caution is necessary in interpreting Persian policies, as the available evidence suggests that administrative and religious oversight varied greatly across regions. Scholars such as Pierre Briant and Elsbeth R. M. Dusinberre emphasize that Achaemenid governance combined centralized authority with local autonomy in flexible and region-specific ways.[43] Consequently, the treatment of one group or temple should not be generalized across the empire.[44] Judeans are not the only community to show evidence of a return to their previous land.

The case of Neirab provides a compelling example of return migration under Persian rule. Cuneiform tablets discovered in the Syrian city of Neirab in the 1920s initially puzzled scholars, as they documented Babylonian legal and administrative affairs yet were found in a Syrian cemetery. The scholarly consensus now follows Israel Eph'al's interpretation that these documents originated from a Babylonian settlement of Neirabeans near Nippur. Some members of this deportee community later returned to their ancestral Syrian homeland during the early Persian period,

[42] See Laurie E. Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer* (CUSAS 28; Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2014) 237–48. On the broader imperial policy of resettlement, see Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 466–71.

[43] Elspeth R. M. Dusinberre, *Empire, Authority, and Autonomy in Achaemenid Anatolia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[44] This pattern of administrative flexibility is reflected in the Babylonian context as well, where temple administration under Persian rule integrated foreign laborers and even foreign cults in specific local settings. See, e.g., Ran Zadok, "Neo- and Late-Babylonian Notes," in *Alphabets, Texts and Artifacts in the Ancient Near East: Studies Presented to Benjamin Sass* (ed. Israel Finkelstein, Christian Robin, and Thomas Römer; Ägypten und Altes Testament 80; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2012) 520–65.

taking their legal documents with them.[45] Gauthier Tolini speculates that political considerations and status claims were the primary motivation for bringing the documents back to Syria. The tablets were practical remnants for demonstrating continued leadership legitimacy in a context in which returning deportees might face challenges from those who had remained in Syria and potentially assumed leadership roles in their absence.[46]

The Persian Empire generally adopted a posture of tolerance toward Judean communities, so long as imperial loyalty was maintained. Cyrus's edict, echoed in the Cyrus Cylinder, extended an opportunity for exiled peoples to return and restore their sanctuaries, often with imperial permission or support. The decree's language as reported in Ezra frames the return as divinely ordained: "the Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:2). By attributing imperial policy to divine initiative, the text integrates the remnant's restoration, portraying Persian imperial action as an instrument of God's will. For Judeans, this opened the gates to Jerusalem. In the narrative of Ezra, subsequent rulers, including Darius and Artaxerxes I, are depicted as supporting the Jerusalem temple through decrees guaranteeing resources and granting a measure of autonomy to its officials (Ezra 6:6–12; 7:11–26).

While a segment of Judeans reconstituted themselves in Judah as a remnant, a large portion remained dispersed throughout the Persian Empire—most notably in Babylonia, but also in Egypt and possibly other regions. Understanding the dynamic between the diaspora and the homeland is essential for grasping the broader contours of Judean identity under Persian rule. Imperial policy, marked by flexibility and regional pragmatism, allowed for the emergence of multiple legitimate centers of Judean life—Jerusalem among them, but not the sole one. Rather than existing in isolation, Judean communities were partially integrated into Babylonian society, balancing economic participation with cultural distinctiveness.[47]

In Babylonia, the exiles and their descendants gradually integrated into economic and social life while preserving communal cohesion. The conclusion of 2 Kings depicts Jehoiachin's favorable treatment in Babylon and Jeremiah's letter

[45] Israel Eph'al, "The Western Minorities in Babylonia in the 6th–5th Centuries B.C.: Maintenance and Cohesion," *Orientalia* 47 (1978) 84–87; Gauthier Tolini, "From Syria to Babylon and Back: The Neirab Archive," in *Exile and Return: The Babylonian Context* (ed. Jonathan Stökl and Caroline Waerzeggers; BZAW 478; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015) 57–94. For the original publication of the tablets, see Édouard Dhorme, "Les tablettes babyloniennes de Neirab," *RA* 25.2 (1928) 53–82.

[46] The tablets demonstrate that the Nusku-gabbe family maintained their leadership role during exile in Babylonia by (1) providing loans to other community members, (2) acting as guarantors for purchases and debt settlements, (3) mediating disputes within the community, and (4) maintaining economic relations with the royal administrations. My thanks to Jan Safford for his assistance in research on this topic.

[47] Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia*, esp. 272–75.

encourages the exiles to build, plant, and seek the welfare of the cities in which they dwelled (chap. 29); both anticipate this development. Cuneiform archives from the settlement of Āl-Yahūdu ("Village of Judah") and surrounding areas offer an unparalleled glimpse into this process.[48] These texts document Judeans working as farmers, contractors, and canal workers, participating in Babylonian legal and economic frameworks while maintaining ties to fellow Judeans and preserving Yahwistic names and traditions.[49] The continued use of Yahwistic theophoric names served as a durable marker of Judean identity in the diaspora.[50]

Significantly, many diaspora Judeans did not return after Cyrus's decree in 538 B.C.E. Ezra 1:6 acknowledges that some households remained abroad but supported the restoration materially. Over time, biblical texts maintain, prominent Judean figures such as Ezra and Nehemiah emerged from these communities, describing people who were deeply versed in Jewish tradition yet also embedded in the Persian administrative elite.

The Book of Esther offers a compelling literary reflection of this phenomenon. Mordecai, a Jew in Susa, is portrayed not as a displaced exile but as an integrated imperial official whose Jewish identity remains intact. The fact that he does not return to Judah is not portrayed as betrayal but as continuity within a new paradigm, one in which Jewish identity can thrive under imperial auspices without requiring physical restoration to Zion. The narrative presents the diaspora community as cohesive yet dispersed, sustaining distinctiveness through fasting, communal solidarity, and the public retelling of its deliverance (Esth 4:3, 16; 9:27–32). This portrayal marks a significant development: Jewish identity is shown as viable beyond the land itself, no longer dependent on physical presence in Jerusalem. This literary and historical convergence reframes exile not only as a condition awaiting reversal, but as a durable and even desirable form of existence for many Judeans. Diaspora thus emerges not as the antithesis of the remnant, but as an inversely parallel and legitimate expression of covenantal identity under Persian rule.

Judeans were part of Persian society, serving as garrison soldiers, scribes, and merchants. The Jewish military colony at Elephantine in Egypt, with its function-

[48] See Wunsch, *Judaeans by the Waters*, esp. 1–20. See also Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia*, 272–76, on the integration and distinct identity of Judean communities in Babylonia under Persian rule.

[49] Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles*, 1–14. The Āl-Yahūdu tablets span from the early Persian period (ca. 572 B.C.E.) to the mid-fifth century and illustrate Judeans leasing land, borrowing and repaying silver; and there is even a case of a Judean obtaining a royal grant of land. For analysis, see Cornelia Wunsch, "Glimpses on the Lives of Deportees in Rural Babylonia," in *Arameans, Chaldeans, and Arabs in Babylonia and Palestine in the First Millennium B.C.* (ed. Anjelika Berlejung and Michael P. Streck; Leipziger Altorientalische Studien 3; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013) 247–60.

[50] Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia*, 47–49, 218–19.

ing temple to the God of Israel, attests to the empire's pragmatic religious pluralism. Despite Jerusalem's symbolic centrality, the Persian system allowed for multiple temples for the God of Israel, each locally grounded and imperially sanctioned.[51] This flexibility reveals a significant reality: religious centrality was not enforced territorially, and diaspora Judeans could cultivate local cultic life under Persian rule without compromising imperial structures.

In this context, the concept of remnant could apply to more than one setting. In Judah, it referred to the modest population rebuilding amid ruins, sustained by imperial tolerance and prophetic hope. In the diaspora, it described communities that, though integrated into imperial society, maintained distinctiveness and a continuing bond with the homeland while developing autonomous expressions of Jewish life. The theology of Ezek 11:16—God as "a sanctuary in little" in exile—captured this emerging orientation: fidelity could be sustained even far from Zion. While the Judean community at least partially undertook the restoration of temple and Torah and the reestablishing of cultic life, diaspora communities likewise maintained Jewish identity through emerging practices of law study, fasting, and communal gathering.[52] This reimagining of covenantal identity laid the groundwork for Judaism's future adaptability and resilience.

In Judah itself, Persian policy appears to have balanced encouragement with oversight, at least as reflected in Ezra-Nehemiah. The rebuilding of the temple, framed by biblical texts as occurring under imperial authorization, did not mean the restoration of a native monarchy. Governance remained in the hands of appointed governors—sometimes of Judean descent, like Nehemiah—answerable to the satrapy of Beyond the River or directly to the king. Judah's strategic placement also invited the stationing of other ethnic groups such as Phoenicians along the coast or foreign elements near key routes, ensuring that the Judeans were never a homogeneous or isolated population even in their ancestral land. Under Achaemenid rule, Judean identity was negotiated between imperial citizenship and covenantal distinctiveness. Figures like Nehemiah are described in the biblical text as

[51] For Elephantine, see Bezalel Porten, *Archives from Elephantine: The Life of an Ancient Jewish Military Colony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) 283–96 (pp. 283–96 pertain to the Temple of YHW). The Elephantine papyri include appeals to the Persian governor of Judah and to Jerusalem priests for support in rebuilding the Elephantine temple, indicating a network of communication between diaspora and homeland. This case illustrates Persian flexibility: the Persian authorities did not strictly enforce a one-temple policy for the God of Israel, although the destruction of the Elephantine temple by Egyptian locals in 410 B.C.E. was only partially redressed by the imperial officials.

[52] This is hinted at in sources such as Zech 7:5: "Say to all the people of the land and to the priests: When you fasted and lamented in the fifth and seventh months all these seventy years, did you fast for my benefit?" See Tova Ganzel, "The Fast of Gedaliah: Its Continued Observance and Significance in the Restoration Period" [Hebrew], *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 20 (2010) 51–69.

living in that duality: loyal servants of the king, yet fiercely devoted to Jerusalem's renewal.

Tensions with neighboring populations, particularly the Samaritans, reveal the contested nature of the title "remnant." The Samaritans claimed continuity with preexilic Israel; they considered themselves the true descendants of the Israelites, the only ones who remained in the land after the Assyrian exiles. Indeed, archaeological surveys and historical analysis suggest that a significant portion of the northern Israelite population was never deported but continued to reside in the region under Assyrian and later Persian rule.[53] This demographic continuity complicated Judean claims to exclusive legitimacy. As Gary Knoppers notes, portions of the so-called lost tribes were never truly lost, and the Samaritans' self-definition as the authentic remnant of Israel reflects a parallel and competing narrative of covenantal continuity.[54]

Second Temple literature, however, largely excluded the Samaritans from the covenantal community. Persian provincial structures reinforced this division, distinguishing between Samaria and Judah and enabling divergent religious developments. The title "remnant" thus became a marker of Judean legitimacy and fidelity—a term reserved by Judean leaders for their own community, even as competing groups constructed alternative narratives.

While Judeans were part of a larger pattern of displacement, the surviving textual record disproportionately preserves their theological interpretations of survival. Other deported groups surely developed their own strategies of meaning-making, but these are largely lost to us.[55] What is distinctive in the Judean case, therefore, is the extensive corpus of writings in which themes of remnant, exile, and restoration are elaborated. The parallels with other deported groups thus highlight both the typicality of Judean displacement within imperial practice and the richness of the Judean literary response.

The Judeans fashioned their identity around the notion of a שארית—a remnant divinely preserved for restoration. The role of the "remnant," however, did not end with the Persian period. It received later elaborations, as in the *Damascus Docu-*

[53] Knoppers, *Jews and Samaritans*, 2–3, 28–42.

[54] Ibid., 9–11.

[55] Sources attest to the presence of many such groups in Babylonia and Persia: Carians, Urartians, Phrygians, Melitians, Tabaleans, Lydians, Philistines, Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites. These were resettled and often organized into associations (*ḥadru*) or settlements named after their homelands. Despite this, their traces remain administrative and economic rather than theological, underscoring the uniqueness of the Judean remnant's interpretive response. See, for example, Carian archives from Borsippa and Nippur; Urartian presence attested in ration lists and in Darius's Behistun inscription; Melitian and Lydian *ḥadru* associations near Nippur; Philistine settlements Ḫazatu (Gaza) and Išqallūnu (Ashkelon) in the Murašû archive; and scattered evidence for Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites in personal names and contracts.

ment.[56] More broadly, as Adi Ophir and Ishay Rosen-Zvi have argued, scriptural traditions in Second Temple literature were proofs to legitimize minority communities and their claims to covenantal authenticity.[57]

The abundance of Judean texts that display this type of reflection underscores the uniqueness of the community's response to imperial displacement: not merely survival, but continuity imbued with covenantal meaning. The parallels with other deported groups reinforce the interpretation of the Judean experience as both unique in its theological framing and typical of broader imperial patterns of displacement and localized resilience.

V. Conclusion

The remnant of Judah in the post-destruction and Persian periods was not merely a "leftover" but rather a historically adaptive community whose identity was framed through the evolving literary concept. Biblical texts reflect an ongoing negotiation of the term, with each prophetic book framing the remnant in relation to a purpose, whether that purpose be survival or a moral or divine end: Jeremiah and Ezekiel initially express hope for the remnant in Judah, but ultimately shift the term to relate to those in Babylonia; Haggai and Zechariah link the returnees to Judah to the remnant concept; and Ezra-Nehemiah frames the same returnees as the divinely preserved remnant. The term, which once described survivors in the land, came to be associated primarily with the returnees from exile and their descendants, who viewed themselves—at least as represented in Ezra-Nehemiah—as the reconstituted Israel.

Archaeological evidence confirms some of the material conditions presupposed by this literary construction (such as the small scale of settlement and the fragile economy). The modest scale of Persian-period Jerusalem, the administrative prominence of Ramat Raḥel, and the imperial trade networks visible at sites like Tel Mikhmoret all attest to a Judah that was politically subordinate and eco-

[56] See the opening of the *Damascus Document*: ובזכרו ברית ראשונים השאיר שארית לישראל ולא נתנם לכליה . . . (CD A 1 i 4–5) ("But recalling the covenant with the first ones, he left a remnant of Israel and did not give them to destruction"). The Hebrew text and English translation are from Joseph M. Baumgarten and Daniel R. Schwartz, "Damascus Document (CD)," in *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek Texts with English Translations,* vol. 2: *Damascus Document, War Scroll, and Related Documents* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; PTSDSSP; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 12–13. Devorah Dimant notes that the *Damascus Document* presents the Qumran sect as the "remnant" preserved by God after the destruction, heirs of the ancestral covenant, and opposed to the "sons of darkness" ("The Inheritance of the Land of Israel According to the Ideology of the Qumran Community" [Hebrew], *Megillot* 8–9 [2010]: 113–33).

[57] Adi Ophir and Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *Goy: Israel's Multiple Others and the Birth of the Gentile* (Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

nomically peripheral. Yet the community is described in the biblical texts as persisting, rebuilding, and articulating a distinct identity centered on Torah, cultic purity, and hope for restoration. The physical poverty of Judah paralleled a period of remarkable religious productivity; the compilation of texts and the reformulation of tradition addressed the remnant as both a present reality and an eschatological promise.

Persian imperial policy, marked by selective support and strategic noninterference, provided the conditions for this remnant identity to develop. The return to Judah was permitted but not imposed; diaspora life was not condemned but accommodated. Judeans, therefore, inhabited a dual reality: rooted in land and temple, they were also capable of sustaining covenantal identity far from both. This orientation would become foundational for Judaism in the centuries ahead.

Ultimately, the story of the remnant in the Persian period is the story of a people rebuilding amid loss, redefining identity within empire, and preserving theological coherence across multiple geographies. The remnant became both a memory of survival and a vision of continuity—small in number, perhaps, but capacious in calling. It signaled that God's purposes were not extinguished in exile but refined, and that faithfulness was still possible in the shadow of empire. The legacy of this remnant would shape the religious imagination of Judaism long after the Persian period had passed.