Ezra the Scribe-Priest against the Backdrop of Babylonian Temple Officials

Tova Ganzel

Bar-Ilan University

The Temple functionaries described in Ezra-Nehemiah appear to hold roles that diverge in some ways from officials in the First Temple. Ezra, described as both scribe and priest, is one such case.[1] Various scribes are mentioned throughout the early and late monarchic period in biblical literature – all, whether anonymous or referenced by name, are described solely as scribes. The dual role of a scribe-priest that is used to describe Ezra (Ezra 7:1–10, 21), therefore, raises questions.[2] Within Ezra-Nehemiah, the epithets designating Ezra as scribe abound and attest to the importance the authors ascribed to his role.[3]

How does Ezra's role as described in Ezra-Nehemiah diverge from the roles of earlier priests and scribes? How may it have been influenced by the changing context in which he functioned? Below I suggest a contextualization of Ezra's role as scribe-priest, demonstrating that his administrative

[1] In this article, I do not survey additional priestly roles against the backdrop of extrabiblical sources; that requires a separate discussion.

[2] As for Ezra as a historical figure, various possibilities have been suggested; see, for example, Fried: "In sum, we may conclude that Ezra was a Persian official, one of the hundreds of gaushkaiya ('King's Ears') sent throughout the empire to inspect it to determine if the satrap and the governors in it were conducting their affairs properly in the service of the king" (Lisbeth S. Fried, *Ezra and the Law in History and Tradition*, Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014], 26). In this article, I address Ezra's role as scribe-priest as it is given in the biblical text. The question of the editing of these chapters may affect the understanding of Ezra's role. See, for example: Philip Young Yoo, *Ezra and the Second Wilderness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017), on the "Ezra Memoir," where he concludes that in Ezra 7–8 "the label of 'scribe' is a remnant of an institution from the time of the First Temple that has undergone necessary changes in the post-exilic period" (89).

[3] See Tamara C. Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra Nehemiah*, SBLMS 36 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 73–74.

responsibilities were recognized in Babylonia and accord with the common Babylonian definition of the "temple scribe."[4]

No native Akkadian term corresponds directly to *kohen* (כהן). I follow Waerzeggers's description of a priest as "a person who enjoyed the right to partake in the temple worship on account of his possession of the required legal title and on account of his ritual qualifications."[5] In the Babylonian temples, a prebendary system of owning "shares" (*isqu*) in the cult created a division of priestly labor, with the highest-ranking priests holding the most prestigious prebends and having the closest contact with the deities themselves.[6] Despite the fact that no Akkadian word exists for an individual priest,[7] there are words describing priestly collectives (*kiništu*, "temple college/assembly") from a legal/social point of view, and expressions pertaining to one's affiliation with a deity (PN/official of [*ša*] DN/temple).[8]

Ezra: Scribe and Priest

The scribe as described in earlier biblical sources was generally charged with transcribing events or prophecies or copying existing texts. Baruch son of Neriah, for example, is portrayed writing down Jeremiah's dictation (Jer 36:4; 36:32; 45:1) and reading God's words from a scroll (Jer 36:8). Scribes are often mentioned alongside other officials – high priests, senior priests, officers, and chiefs.[9] In the final years of the First Temple, the role of the scribe was not

[4] The "scribe" is usually defined in a limited way. He transcribes or copies texts, and, under Persian rule, was at times also in charge of textual records of temple administration. In Ezra he is tasked with administration and teaching texts, which are beyond the accepted definition for a "scribe."

[5] Caroline Waerzeggers, *The Ezida Temple of Borsippa: Priesthood, Cult, Archives*, Achaemenid History 15 (Leiden: NINO, 2010), 34.

[6] Caroline Waerzeggers, "The Pious King: Royal Patronage of Temples," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Cultures*, ed. Eleanor Robson and Karen Radner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 735–737.

[7] Marc J. H. Linssen, *The Cults of Uruk and Babylon: The Temple Ritual Texts as Evidence for Hellenistic Cult Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 16.

[8] See Bastian Still, *The Social World of Babylonian Priests* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

[9] The role of the scribe is related alongside that of the priests in Samuel (2 Sam 8:17; 2 Sam 20:25) and alongside the recorder, the army officer, the high priest, the senior priests, or the officer who was in charge of the palace in Kings (1 Kgs 4:3; 2 Kgs 12:11; 2 Kgs 18:18, 37; 2 Kgs 19:2) and Isaiah (Isa 36:3, 22; 37:2). He is also mentioned alongside the chiefs of clans, the

limited to scribal work; he performed administrative duties at the order of the king. For example, the scribe was sent by Josiah to the high priest to count the money collected from the people for the renovation of the Temple (2 Kgs 22:3–15). There were several scribes at that time in the king's court: Elisha (Jer 29:3), Gemariah (Jer 36:10–12), Elishama (Jer 36:20–21), Baruch (Jer 36:26, 32), Jonathan (Jer 37:15, 20), and Yazaniah (Ezek 8:11).[10] The description of the scribes is always given separately from the role of the priest; these were clearly two distinct roles before the exilic period.

Descriptions of Ezra's role, however, diverge from the earlier biblical scribal functions. Ezra is sent from Babylonia to Jerusalem with the approval of the Persian king Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:6, 21)[11] to restructure the Judaean province under the rule of the Persian authorities in accordance with "the Law of your God that is in your hand" (Ezra 7:14). Here Ezra is at times described, exceptionally, as both scribe and priest (Ezra 7:1–6, 11, 12, 13, 21; Neh 8:9; 12:26)[12] – in addition to his descriptions as solely priest (Ezra 10:10, 16; Neh 8:2), solely scribe (Neh 8:1, 4, 13; 12:36), and scribe "skilled in the Law of Moses" (Ezra 7:6).[13] Karel van der Toorn defines Ezra's role: "For the

agent of the chief priest, and the adjutant in Chronicles (1 Chr 18:16; 1 Chr 24:6; 1 Chr 27:32). Note the unique description given to Jonathan: "Jonathan, David's uncle, was a counselor, a master, and a scribe" (2 Chr 24:11; 2 Chr 26:11; 2 Chr 34:15–20).

[10] The only scribe who might have held an additional title, that of "the scribe of the army commander," is found in the list of the exiles of Jehoiachin (2 Kgs 25:19). From the language in Kings, it can be understood as a double title (a scribe who is an army minister), but it is commonly understood, as in Jeremiah (Jer 52:25), as the scribe of the army minister.

[11] This is in addition to the verses in which he does not have an additional title in Ezra (10:1, 2, 5, 6) and Nehemiah (8:5–6). Janzen notes: "Ezra 9–10 never refers to Ezra as a scribe, and there he appears as the one true priest who has avoided marrying foreign women. Nehemiah 8:2, 9 do also refer to Ezra as a priest, but the emphasis in that chapter is on his position as scribe, the office that Ezra 7:6 associates with his knowledge of the law. By also referring to him as priest, Neh. 8 again contrasts Ezra with the priests born in Judah who have failed to teach the law as he does" (David Janzen, *The End of History and the Last King* [London: T&T Clark, 2021], 21, n. 44).

[12] Another figure called Ezra is mentioned in Neh 12:1, 13, 33.

[13] That the priestly role was inherited in the days of the Second Temple is clear in Ezra-Nehemiah. For the priestly lineage and genealogy and the chronological questions that arise, see Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1989), 336–339; Hugh Godfrey Maturin Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 91–92. Note that Ezra is not referred to as a high priest; see Donna Laird, *Negotiating Power in Ezra-Nehemiah*, AIL 26 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 289–292.

implementation of the Torah as the national law, Ezra had to create an infrastructure that would render it possible to administer the Torah at a local level…. Ezra established a network of regional centers for public instruction and jurisdiction…. Ezra put Levites in charge of the local centers."[14] Ezra, as we will see, is given broader responsibilities than were earlier scribes: Scripture states that he teaches laws and rules, appoints judges, and collects contributions for the Jerusalem Temple. Eskenazi and others convincingly argue that in Ezra-Nehemiah the written text takes precedence over oral traditions. Scribes, then, would have had a central function within the community.[15]

The priestly class as described in Second Temple texts may also depart from its earlier status and function, but less is written about the roles of the priests. The festivals marked on the first and tenth of the seventh month (According to Leviticus and Numbers), the events within the Temple, and the general description of priestly functions do not appear in these texts. The priests in Ezra-Nehemiah are described as having administrative tasks; the characteristics of priestly tasks familiar to us from the First Temple are almost entirely missing. The high priests are mentioned in various contexts in Second Temple texts (Hag 1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 4; Zech 3:1, 8; 6:14; Neh 3:1; 13:28), but little is known about their function – Joshua is encouraged to begin the building of the Temple and brings sacrifices in the early years of the return (Ezra 3:2) and Eliashib, with his fellow priests, rebuilds the Sheep Gate (Neh 3:1). The lack of clarity about the priests' ritual tasks may also indicate that the role was shifting at the time; the role of scribe-priest may have been an outcome of the change. Scholars, based on the material describing Ezra's

[14] Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 249–250.
[15] See Eskenazi, *Age of Prose*, 40–42, 136–141.

function solely in Ezra-Nehemiah in its current form,[16] assert that the political power of the priesthood in the post monarchic Judah was limited.[17]

The differences between the various descriptions of Ezra's role throughout have, inter alia, served to reinforce several scholars' attempts to uncover the redaction or editing of these passages.[18] The variety of different documents and styles within Ezra-Nehemiah and the complexity of language is well demonstrated by Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer.[19]

It is not surprising that Ezra's role as scribe has been described differently by various scholars, illustrating the wide range of interpretations given to the label "scribe." Some, such as Williamson, believe it emphasizes his teaching: "the scribe…was not only a student of Scripture, but explicitly a teacher of its requirements . . . These qualities we find exemplified in Ezra's ministry."[20] Noting that his unique missions included the teaching of law, Japhet states: "as an expert in the 'laws of God,' he is the fitting man to be responsible for the establishment and operating of the legal system under these laws."[21] Van der Toorn emphasizes the interpretation and transmission of the messages, noting that "scribal education in Israel provided students with much more than the mere skills of reading and writing. Scribes received training in speaking as well. They knew how to address an audience and they

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[16] For a widely accepted monograph on Ezra-Nehemiah from this perspective see Eskenazi, *Age of Prose*, 2–9, 13–14.

[17] See Tiemeyer, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 83–84.

[18] This is part of a more complex context, illustrated in Ezra 7, which contains historical and chronological contradictions. See Sara Japhet, *Ezra-Nehemiah,* Mikra Leyisra'el (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2019), 190 (Hebrew); James VanderKam, "Ezra–Nehemiah or Ezra and Nehemiah?," in *Priests, Prophets and Scribes: Essays on the Formation and Heritage of Second Temple Judaism in Honour of Joseph Blenkinsopp*, ed. Eugene Ulrich et al., JSOTSup 149 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 55–75; Juha Pakkala, *Ezra the Scribe: The Development of Ezra 7–10 and Nehemia 8*, BZAW 347 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 183–184.

[19] Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, *Ezra-Nehemiah: An Introduction and Study Guide: Israel's Quest for Identity* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 1–65.

[20] Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 93.

[21] Sara Japhet, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 194 and Bob Becking, *Ezra-Nehemiah,* HCOT (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 138–39: "he has two faces: a traditional writer who was part of the Yahwistic Judaean tradition but in the meantime, also acceptable to the Persians to carry out a special mission." He further observes: "in the postexilic period we are dealing with a specialization of the priestly function created by the need to interpret legal texts and hand down decisions in keeping with these interpretations."

knew how to interpret the scriptures…the scribes were the new prophets; by virtue of their professional training, they were the repositories of the Word of God."[22]

Extrabiblical sources have also been used to characterize Ezra's dual role. Blenkinsopp suggests contextualizing Ezra against the backdrop of the Egyptian Udjahorresnet[23] and, according to Janzen, "Ezra's work is perfectly comprehensible within the background of administrator, priest, and scribe working within the framework of the temple assembly."[24]

In light of the texts published in recent decades, I suggest taking Karel van der Toorn's description one step further. He writes: "In the nomenclature of the Persian government, a scribe is a high-ranking member of the Persian royal bureaucracy, in Ezra's case with a special responsibility for Jewish affairs. In his capacity as secretary for Jewish affairs, Ezra is authorized to draw money from the royal treasury to pay for construction activities on the Jerusalem temple (Ezra 7:21–22)."[25] I suggest that the dual title "scribe-priest" can be contextualized even more clearly by exploring Babylonian-Persian texts, which can provide us with a more specific understanding of Ezra's standing and role within the Persian hierarchy.

The Scribe's Role in the Neo-Babylonian and Persian Empires

As Ezra was trained as a scribe in Babylonia/ Persia, it is reasonable to assume that, like other functionaries in the Jerusalem Temple community in its formative period, his role shifted in relation to cultural patterns in the Persian Empire. Recent studies expand what was previously known about temple officials in the Neo-Babylonian and Persian empires, helping clarify the

[22] Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 104.
[23] Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Mission of Udjahorresnet and Those of Ezra and Nehemiah," *JBL* 106 (1987): 409–421.
[24] See David Janzen, "The 'Mission' of Ezra and the Persian-Period Temple Community," *JBL* 119 (2000): 643.
[25] Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 79.

complex picture and relationship between Ezra the scribe-priest and other Jerusalem Temple personnel.

While the term scribe-priest is rare in a biblical context, it is in line with scholars' recent understanding of officials in Babylonian temple administration; here, the combination – or "dual function" – was well-known.

The Scribal Hierarchy

In Babylonian temple administrations, temple scribes held senior positions, alongside lower-ranking priests and scribes who worked for the temple. These lower-ranking priests and scribes who did not hold a dual position are also found in Ezra-Nehemiah (Ezra 4:8, 9, 17, 23: "Shimshai the scribe"; Neh 13:13: "the priest Shelemiah and the scribe Zadok").

Additional texts supplement information as to the nature of the role of the temple scribe (*ṭupšar bīti*). Kleber notes that the status of the temple scribe was distinguished not only from other temple officials, but also from other, lower-ranking scribes who worked for the temple.[26] The temple scribe oversaw other scribes; he is described as the "head of the temple scribes." Jursa maintains that literacy in first-millennium temple communities was not reserved only for the high administrators, temple clerks, and ritual specialists but was also common among the lower "purveying" priesthoods.[27] These lower-ranking scribes may be parallel to Shimshai and Zadok, mentioned above. Ezra was given authority over a variety of fields, as expressed in the letter from King Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:11–20). These authorities included "regulating Judah and Jerusalem according to God's law" and overseeing "any

[26] Kristin Kleber, *Tempel und Palast: Die Beziehungen zwischen dem König und dem Eanna-Tempel im spätbabylonischen Uruk*, AOAT 358 (Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 2008), 28.

[27] Note that most of the evidence we have for literacy among priests is from prebendary families who were lower-ranking priests. See Michael Jursa, "Cuneiform Writing in Neo-Babylonian Temple Communities," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, ed. Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 191.

other needs of the House of your God" (Ezra 7:19). Ezra was undoubtedly a high-ranking member of the scribal hierarchy.

Administrative and Spiritual Leadership

The temple scribe was charged with far more than merely copying or writing cuneiform texts; it was a defined role, separate from the other scribes, and had a high status in the temple hierarchy. The temple scribe's administrative role is also described in a recent publication, in which Jursa and Levavi chronicle the history of the *upnu* institution, concluding that a fee (the *upnu* payment) was levied by the temple scribe for temple expenses payable to the crown, demonstrating the centralized royal control in the sixth century.[28] This budget, which was overseen by the temple scribe and used for various purposes, can be compared to the contributions collected by Ezra for the Jerusalem temple (Ezra 7:11–28). In fact, there is a connection between the service of the *sēpiru* scribes and the *ilku* tax, also mentioned in Ezra.[29] This is consistent with the Akkadian term and the scribe's administrative duties in collecting the taxes mentioned in the book of Ezra.

Priests in smaller Neo-Babylonian temples were responsible for the administration of both temple and city, with the chief priests in smaller temples subordinate to administrators of the major temples; the chief priest of Ebabbar, for example, reports in his letters on goods arriving and legal issues regarding temple personnel.[30] Ezra is also given authority to "appoint

[28] See Michael Jursa and Yuval Levavi, "For a Fistful of Barley: More on the Remuneration of Scribes and State Taxation in the Neo-Babylonian Eanna Temple," *RA* 115 (2021): 135–42.
[29] See Yigal Bloch, *Alphabet Scribes in the Land of Cuneiform: Sēpiru Professionals in Mesopotamia in the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Periods* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2018), 334, n. 226: "The Akkadian term for service-tax is *ilku*, lit., 'going'. Originally, this term designated the actual duty of going out for service – mostly in the king's army, but also on work projects carried out by the crown. However, in many instances, this duty of service was replaced by a monetary payment to the state treasury, effectively turning into a kind of a tax. This tax is mentioned in the biblical book of Ezra-Nehemiah by the Aramaic term *hălāk* (Ezra 4:13, 20; 7:24). A payment of silver as a service-tax by a *sēpiru* professional is mentioned in the tablet BM 30589, dated to the twenty-sixth regnal year of Darius I, 496/5 BCE."
[30] Yuval Levavi, *Administrative Epistolography in the Formative Phase of the Neo-Babylonian Empire*, Spätbabylonische Briefe 2, Dubsar 3 (Münster: Zaphon, 2018), 140–142.

magistrates and judges to judge all the people in the province of across the River" (Ezra 7:25). Ezra is further tasked with "regulat[ing] Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your care" (Ezra 7:14); he even assembles the chiefs of the clans (Ezra 8:1, 15) and searches for the Levites (Ezra 8:15–20). He selects priests and entrusts them with gold and vessels, entrusting them with a mission to the Temple (Ezra 8:24–30).

Ezra is also a spiritual leader. He is granted "divine wisdom" and teaches laws and rules (Ezra 7:6, 10; Neh 8:9, 13). It is this wisdom that allows him to appoint the judges (Ezra 7:25) who, in turn, will educate the people in the ways of God and mete out punishment as necessary (Ezra 7:26).

Ezra's tasks were quite similar to those of the temple scribe in Babylonian temples – and went far beyond the job descriptions previously known for the biblical "priest" or "scribe." Just like the role of the Judean scribe was not limited to scribal work, the responsibilities of the temple scribe in Mesopotamian texts did not focus on rituals.[31] The temple scribe was one of the handful of administrative offices who were part of the prebendary system. As noted, there is no Akkadian word for an individual priest – thus, the Judean "scribe-priest" is a version of the Babylonian "temple scribe."

The Temple Scribe and the Temple Administrator

In the long sixth century,[32] the scribe's role was broad and significant; high-ranking scribes even took part in policymaking.[33] Levavi's description of

[31] Evidence regarding the way in which the Babylonian temple scribe was remunerated is scarce. See Grant Frame and Caroline Waerzeggers, "The Prebend of Temple Scribe in First Millennium Babylonia," *ZA* 101 (2011): 127–151. That the role of (biblical) scribe, like the priestly role, was inherited also emerges from the description of the Jerusalem Temple scribes; see, for example, Micaiah son of Gemariah son of Shaphan (Jer 36:10–12). On scribes and their craft in the Ancient Near East, see Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*.

[32] Michael Jursa coined this term for the era that extended from the fall of Assyria and the rise of Babylonia (around 620 BCE) until the Babylonian revolt in the second year of Xerxes (484 BCE) (Michael Jursa, *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC: Economic Geography, Economic Mentalities, Agriculture, the Use of Money and the Problem of Economic Growth*, AOAT 377 [Münster: Ugarit Verlag 2010], 5).

[33] The high status of scribes in ancient Mesopotamian culture may also be reflected by Nabû's role as, among other things, a divine scribe, the patron god of scribes, literacy, and wisdom.

temple personnel is instrumental for understanding the role and status of the temple scribe among the other officials in Babylonian temples:

> In the major temples…we find a triad of a *qīpu* (usually translated as "royal resident"), *šatammu* (usually translated as "temple administrator"), and temple scribe (Akk. *ṭupšar bīti*). In smaller temples, such as the Ebabbar of Šamaš in Sippar, it was a *šangû* rather than a *šatammu* who worked alongside the *qīpu* … The two local officials, the *šatammu* and the temple scribe, were mainly responsible the day-to-day operation of the temple and its cult, while the *qīpu* was in charge of the temple's obligations towards the crown.[34]

During the Neo-Babylonian period, the temple scribe worked closely with the temple administrator (*šatammu*), and held a position that was, in part, administrative.[35] He worked alongside local ("classic") scribes who were part of the lower-ranking temple administration in the Babylonian temples, such as the *sēpiru* professionals who were subordinate to the royal resident (*qīpu*). Based on Ebabbar documents, Bloch concludes that after the reform of Cambyses the temple scribes' role was slightly expanded [36] – but their authority was significantly inferior to that of Ezra and Nehemiah.

This comparison may also shed light on the continuing debate regarding the relationship between the roles of Ezra and Nehemiah. Nehemiah, who came from Shushan during the reign of King Artaxerxes (Neh 1:1–2), probably acting alongside Ezra, is called "Nehemiah the Tirshatha" (Neh 8:9; 10:12), or "Nehemiah the governor" (Neh 12:26), or just "Nehemiah" (Neh 12:47) with no title.

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[34] Levavi, *Administrative Epistolography*, 100–102. See also: Yuval Levavi, "The Sacred Bureaucracy of Neo-Babylonian Temples," in *Contextualizing Jewish Temples*, ed. Tova Ganzel and Shalom E. Holtz (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 6–22. The sources Levavi addresses describe the "long sixth century," including the early Persian period temple officials, although some include the Assyrian period, and others are dated to the Hellenistic period. Yet it seems that the inner temple administration remained fundamentally unchanged.

[35] Levavi, *Administrative Epistolography*, 100–102.

[36] Thus, for example, in Ebabbar the *sēpiru* professionals later received the authority to give orders concerning the transfer of commodities and settle accounts with individuals who supplied the temple with animals. See Bloch, *Alphabet Scribes*, 154.

Nehemiah's role may be seen as parallel to that of Neo-Babylonian temple functionaries: the *šatammu*, the "temple administrator," like the *qīpu*, was promoted by the king,[37] but, unlike the *qīpu*, came from the local elite families.[38] Since Nehemiah was sent by the king to oversee matters, it may be more correct to view his role as similar to the *qīpu*. Regardless, as illustrated in the texts below, the Neo-Babylonian temples were run by pairs of officials working in tandem. The temple administrator (*šatammu*) and the temple scribe (*ṭupšar bīti*) were understood to be a pair that worked together within a framework in which the hierarchy and division of roles was recognized.[39] However, as Levavi points out, various texts describe a *šatammu* who worked quite closely with the temple scribe and seems to have held considerable power at the time within the inner hierarchy and high-level bureaucratic professionalism – but there was still a place for personal management style. The dual authority of the senior officials emerges from (my) emphases in the following texts:[40]

> [1.] YOS 3, 186 (Levavi, *Administrative Epistolgraphy*, No. 7): 1–7 Letter of Ṣidqi **to the temple administrator and the temple scribe**, his lords. Daily, I pray to Bēl and Nabû for the prosperity and long life of my lords…
> [2.] YOS 21, 27 (Levavi, *Administrative Epistolography*, No. 177): 1–6 Letter of Bēl-uballiṭ **to the temple administrator and the temple scribe**, the lords. Daily, I pray to Bēl, Nabû, the Lady-of-Uruk and Nanāya for the prosperity of the lords…. The *protesters carried* [sti]cks; there were Piqūdeans and Sealanders among them. I told them, "Go to the temple administrator and to the temple scribe."

[37] Waerzeggers, *Ezida Temple*, 43.
[38] For the social background of Babylonian priesthood (based mainly on the material from Borsippa), see Waerzeggers, *Ezida Temple*, 33–38, and Still, *Social World*.
[39] Referenced by Levavi in "Sacred Bureaucracy," n. 12. For the different officials, see Levavi, *Administrative Epistolography*, 66–72.
[40] The letters were written due to difficulties addressed to the incumbents, illustrating that the tensions between the leaders and the people in Ezra-Nehemiah characterized the relations between the temple administration and the people at that time. I hope to devote a separate discussion to their content.

> [3.] YOS 21, 128 (Levavi, *Administrative Epistolography*, No. 74): 11–21 I have heard that Nabû-aḫḫē-iddin is going to Uruk. Send (me) quickly five minas of silver for iron *qappatu*-tools. By Bēl and Nabû, **the temple administrator, the temple scribe**, and all of the Eanna (personnel) all have deserted their posts, and you (in) Eanna are saying "Many provisions (are needed) for the workers for (their journey) to Uruk and one shekel of silver for the slaves"; I withheld (this) from them.
> [4.] BIN 1, 38 (Levavi, *Administrative Epistolography,* No. 172): 23–29 **Now, talk with the temple administrator and the temple scribe**; they should give ten minas of silver for the work, the bitumen, and barley **to two scribes**, and come here (with it) to use it for the work and the bitumen. 30–42 We are working threefold; we do (everything) on top of the work of last year and two years ago. **Why is it that (when) the temple administrator writes to you from here you send him silver, but (when) I write, you don't send silver**?

These letters, in which the two are addressed together, demonstrate that officials were perceived as a pair who ran the temple together[41] – like Ezra and Nehemiah, who together were responsible for the administrative and sacred needs of the Temple and the Temple community in Jerusalem.[42]

Conclusion

We can now reevaluate Ezra's title, scribe-priest, as an accurate translation to Hebrew of the senior role of the Babylonian temple scribe: an authoritative figure who, alongside another administrative official, created a framework for judging cases of administrative and financial disagreements and was charged with collecting contributions for the temple. It is clear that Ezra's description, as well as that of Ezra and Nehemiah's combined positions, attest to their

[41] Levavi, "Sacred Bureaucracy."

[42] It is possible, however, that all these functionaries together were part of a collective community parallel in some ways to the *kiništu*, as described by Still, *Social World*, 221: "An important platform for priests to act as a collective within the community was the so-called *kiništu*, commonly translated in the secondary literature as 'temple assembly'. This was a legal body composed of the principal prebendaries of a temple organization. Including lower-ranking positions such as: brewers, bakers and butchers that were particularly associated with kiništu, while the temple-enterers were traditionally set apart…. The *kiništu* was also invested with the power to represent the local temple (community) in imperial matters. As such it was sent abroad to perform (or supervise) corvée work in Elam on behalf of the religious institution, and it stood in direct communication with the king."

integration within the Babylonian context, and indeed diverge from the earlier biblical literature.[43]

The hierarchical structure of officials in the Judean Temple in Jerusalem (from approximately 538 BCE through the governorship of Nehemiah in 430 BCE) reflects, at least partially, the influence of a foreign model into the Judean province during the Persian period. Ezra's status differed from that of a lower-ranking temple scribe; he was given comprehensive authority and a function that went far beyond scribal duties.[44] Biblical texts do not reveal what role Ezra may have held prior to his arrival in Jerusalem, but it seems that if the precedent for the leadership of scribe-priest is not biblical, it likely is related to the leadership in the temples of his time and parallels the role of the temple (priest)-scribe in Babylonian temples. This was, apparently, the first stage in the significant development of the centrality of Ezra's role and contribution as given in the later days of the Second Temple. In Williamson's fitting words: "With the development of Judaism during the period of the second temple, however, the class of scribe as a student and teacher of the written Torah came increasingly into prominence. Ezra is portrayed as the first and great example of this class. He thus represents in a unique manner the transition between the different models of Torah meditation in the pre- and post-exilic periods."[45]

Thus, the formative period of the Second Temple in Jerusalem paints a multifaceted picture of the officials' roles in the Judean Temple in Jerusalem and within the postexilic community. Their hierarchy underwent shifts over time as part of the political-administrative organization of Judea and the leadership's relationship with the Persian central administration. The large

[43] Another example of a role that is specified in Aramaic in Ezra and has parallels in the Babylonian administration is the "chancellor." Bloch notes: "as appears in the tablet as *bē*l (EN) *ṭè-e-mu* (ll. 4–5). This title, normalized as *bēl ṭēmi*, was borrowed into Aramaic and appears in the Aramaic part of the biblical book of Ezra-Nehemiah as *bʿl ṭʿm* (Ezra 4:8–9, 17)" (Bloch, *Alphabet Scribes*, 280).

[44] Note that in the biblical text dating to the period of Persian rule the wide-ranging authorities of the writers also arise in the book of Esther (3:12; 8:8–9); a separate discussion should be devoted to this issue in Esther.

[45] Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 94.

number of Persian officials mentioned in Judean literature reflects the community's involvement and familiarity with the officials within Persian rule, notwithstanding the fact that they did not all operate within the Jerusalem Temple. Ezra, the scribe-priest, is just one example of officials' shifting roles in the Temple within the world of the Persian administration.[46]

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