

The Non-Priestly Staff of the Jerusalem Temple in the Persian Period (Gatekeepers, *Netinim*, Sons of Solomon's Servants, Temple Singers)¹

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Opening Remarks

This chapter is a revised and expanded version of the papers that both authors presented in Wrocław on September 26–27, 2024 on the occasion of the 23rd Melammu Workshop: *Serving the Gods. Artists, Craftsmen and Ritual Specialists in the Ancient World*. The topic of the conference, which deliberately focused on ritual specialists and diverted the attention from priestly roles, gave us the opportunity to focus on four groups usually referred to as 'lower' temple staff which according to biblical sources were associated with the temple in Jerusalem during the Persian period. Some themes touched upon in the talks have not found their way into this synthesis, while some others have been further elaborated.² The purpose of this chapter is a tentative historical reconstruction of the real-life groups of people in the province of Persian time Yehud who engaged in formal relations with the centre in the Jerusalem temple. For this reason the reliability of the sources, which has often been questioned,³ must be taken into account as a preliminary step.

The main sources related to the realities of the province of Yehud in the Persian period are the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Both these books contain lists (Ezra 2 / Nehemiah 7) of alleged displaced people from Mesopotamia to Palestine. We say alleged displaced people as the historical value of these lists, both in terms of numbers, proper

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² One of the authors is preparing a contribution tracing a comparison between the biblical *netinim* and the Babylonian *širkus* (unfree temple workers), and the other author plans to publish an article on the historical origins of Levites in the Persian period.

³ See recently, e.g., Fried 2020, who argues that the book of Nehemiah displays historical accuracy, at least in its portrayal of Persian authorities and their policies.

names, and the whole historical context is not clear and is often disputed.⁴ In the community of the returnees as it presented in the lists there are five special categories that fall within our field of interest: the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the *netinim* together with the sons of Solomon's servants. The book of Ezra indicates the total numbers of men who returned from the Babylonian captivity to Yehud, giving a figure of 42,360 (Ezra 2:64). These men were to be accompanied by male and female slaves, male and female singers. A list with the numbers in each group shows the following:

Priests – 973 (Ezra 2:36; cf. Neh 7:39)
 Levites – 74 (Ezra 2:40; cf. Neh 7:43)
 Singers – 128 (Ezra 2:41; cf. Neh 7:44)
 Gatekeepers – 139 (Ezra 2:42; cf. Neh 7:45)
Netinim and sons of Solomon's servants – 392 (Ezra 2:43–58; cf. Neh 7:46, 57, 60)

Archaeologists estimate, based on the number and size of inhabited settlement sites, that no more than 30,000 people lived in the province of Yehud at the end of the Persian period.⁵ In that time, the population of Jerusalem alone could not have exceeded 1,200 people.⁶ These figures, even if the estimates are not always reliable, show the scale of the population at the time in broad terms. Considering that roughly half of the population were women, the number of men in the whole province (included kids and elders) may have been ca. 15,000. Hence, the numbers given in the book of Ezra are completely unlikely, and cannot be used as they are as a starting point for any appraisal.

However, while clearly exaggerated, these numbers can still prove heuristically useful to orient a further investigation into the aforementioned categories of temple staff. In particular, it is the large number of priests that catches the attention. Ezra 2 gives a 4:3 ratio of priests to the rest of the non-priestly temple staff. This ratio belies our intuition, which would have the priests as a privileged class and a small elite, while the non-priestly groups performed lesser, menial tasks in relation to, and in support of, this elevated group.⁷ This apparent discrepancy provides an opportunity to once again question our knowledge about the operation and organization of the newly rebuilt Jerusalem temple in Persian period Yehud. The following chapter will focus on the functions and roles of three among

⁴ The passages present many text-critical and exegetical issues. Generally speaking, the two lists are similar to each other and to a third one in 1Esd 5, yet not identical: there are several differences in the orthographies of the anthroponyms in the Hebrew versions, and in some cases the Greek versions add more names but miss others that are featured in the Hebrew text. For a close examination see Bortz 2018, 16–61. For a recent attempt to text-critically make sense of the different versions of the lists see Segal 2023; cf. Zadok 2012 for a prosopographically-oriented comparative analysis of the lists. For a tentative reconstruction of the historical background of the lists based on archeological evidence, see Finkelstein 2008. His arguments, while not conclusive, point towards a late Hellenistic (Hasmonean) background. On the basis of the same data, Zevit 2009 argues instead for a late 6th c. background.

⁵ Lipschits 2024.

⁶ See the recent discussion and the survey of former literature in Eskenazi 2023, 15–9.

⁷ Cf., e.g., Schaper 2000, 280–1.

the non-priestly groups attached to the temple service – gatekeepers, *netinim* with sons of Solomon's servants, and temple singers – testing traditional scholarly understandings of these groups and their activities against a re-evaluation of the available biblical evidence.

Gatekeepers (שערים)

The term שֹׁעֲרִים *šō'arîm* is related to the noun meaning 'gate' (*ša'ar*). The meaning of the term *šō'ar* / *šō'arîm* can be reconstructed on the basis of analogies from other Semitic languages. In Punic inscriptions it occurs as 'porter', 'door-keeper', and in the form *rab šo'ar* as 'the chief of the doorkeepers'. In one Palmyrenian inscription it occurs in an obscure sense; a proposed tentative rendering is 'manager of the practical side of religious feast'.⁸ Accordingly, the translators of the LXX using the word πυλωρὸς attributed to the Hebrew term the meaning of "gate-keeper", "warder", "porter".⁹

Beyond these lexical remarks, however, it is important to see what kind of competences and expertises were attributed to these 'gatekeepers', especially in the context of the sanctuary. The term appears in the Hebrew Bible in dozens of places, most commonly in 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. We know that they came from among the Levites (1Chr 9:18–23, 26; 2Chr 8:14; 31:14; 34:13). They are commonly assigned tasks related to the temple, e.g.:

He stationed the gatekeepers at the gates of the house of YHWH so that no one should enter who was in any way unclean (2Chr 23:19).

Nehemiah 7:1 reports:

Now when the wall had been built and I had set up the doors and the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed.

Knoppers, discussing the occurrences of references to gatekeepers in Chronicles, believes that they fulfilled mainly a martial and police force role:

In discussing the gatekeepers (...) scholars have paid much more attention to questions of composition than to questions of vocation. Some have viewed the gatekeepers in Chronicles as minor clerical functionaries. (...) In recent years, another view has come to the fore, presenting the gatekeepers as an important 'paramilitary inner-city security force' (...) The latter view is, in my judgement, closer to the mark because it has evidentiary support elsewhere in Chronicles and parallels in ancient Near East lore. As we shall see, gatekeepers perform multiple functions, but the martial aspect is prominent. (...) In Chronicles this security force fulfills a variety

⁸ DNWSI, 1179–80.

⁹ GELS, *s.v.*; cf. LSJ, *s.v.*

of administrative functions – guard duty, revenue collection, temple repair, and revenue disbursement. As such, the gatekeepers are critical to temple stewardship and are portrayed positively. (Knoppers 2004b, 871; 873)

There are also pieces of evidence suggesting that the gatekeepers lived in various settlements and cities and therefore outside Jerusalem. This is explicitly mentioned in Neh 7:73 and 1Chr 9:22:

Now the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the *netinim*, and all Israel *lived in their cities*. (Neh 7:73)

Those who were chosen to be gatekeepers at the thresholds were 212 in all. They were registered by genealogy *in their settlements*, those whom David and Samuel the seer appointed in their official capacity. (1Chr 9:22)

Their distribution outside Jerusalem, if their tasks were to be carried out at the city walls or at the central sanctuary, may be surprising. Following Knoppers' view of the gatekeepers mainly as a guard service, two possible conclusions are possible. Either this is a force operating both in Jerusalem and in the province (this, however, remains only a speculative version, since there is no direct source data to support such an interpretation), or this could be a force deployed in different places, which came to Jerusalem only as a kind of term service to fulfil its tasks. Support for the second of these interpretations can be found in 1 Chronicles:

The gatekeepers were on the four sides, to the east, west, north, and south. Their relatives in their settlements *were* to come in every seven days from time to time *to be* with them; for the four chief gatekeepers, who *were* Levites, *served* in an official capacity. (1Chr 9:24–26)

Leaving aside for a moment the consideration of the whereabouts of gatekeepers, however, it should be noted that we also have testimonies that portray them attached to tasks other than those of the police.¹⁰ Three passages are important in this regard:

Mattaniah, Bakbukiah, Obadiah, Meshullam, Talmon, and Akkub were gatekeepers standing guard at the storehouses of the gates. (Neh 12:25)

Kore, the son of Imnah the Levite, the keeper of the eastern gate, was in charge of the voluntary offerings for God, to distribute the contributions for YHWH and the most holy things. (2Chr 31:14) [הַמִּזְבֵּחַ הַמִּזְבֵּחַ lit.: *haššō‘er* of the East / Eastern; LXX: ὁ πυλωρὸς κατὰ ἀνατολὰς]

Their [gatekeepers] relatives in their settlements were to come in every seven days from time to time to be with them; for the four chief gatekeepers, who were Levites,

¹⁰ Cf. Kim 2014, 39–51.

served in an official capacity, and were in charge of the chambers and in charge of the treasures in the house of God. They spent the night around the house of God, because the watch was committed to them; and they were in charge of opening it morning by morning. (1Chr 9:25–27)

As it can be seen, one of their responsibilities concerns matters relating to offerings. The passage in 1Chr 26:15 makes it explicit in this context:

For Obed-edom it fell to the south, and to his sons was allotted the storehouse.

Additionally, tasks other than ordering seem to be suggested by a rather general sentence in 2Chr 34:13:

They were also in charge of the burden bearers, and supervised all the workmen from job to job; and some of the Levites were scribes, and officials, and gatekeepers.

It cannot be denied that the passages mentioned above do not so much point to the gatekeepers as a minor rank of priests, but rather to the staff responsible for collecting, gathering, and guarding the offerings. In the reality of the province of Yehud, such offerings were one of the main sources of income for the temple and its staff.

It is worth noting at this point the passage in 1Chr 26:15 about storehouses. The expression used here is *bēt hā'āsūpīm*, literally ‘house of gathering’, from the root **ṣp* ‘to gather’. The term appears only three times in the Bible, in 1Chr 26:15; 17 and Neh 12:25. Becking argues that the passage in Nehemiah is a later interpolation.¹¹ Fried, in her commentary on this point, states:

Guards at the collection points at the gates. This is an interesting bit of description of the administration of ancient Jerusalem. The gates served as a collection points—of donations, of letters. A cache of letters as well as numerous bullae used to seal them was found, for example, beneath the debris of the pre-exilic city gate at Lachish, indicating the important role that the city gate had in antiquity. It is likely that the collection points at the gates to the temple precincts are referred to here, rather than the gates of the city. (Fried 2021, 336)

Of particular interest, however, is how these terms were rendered in the LXX.

Esd 22:25 (= Neh 12:25): ἐν τῷ συναγαγεῖν με τοὺς πυλωροὺς [When I gathered the porters]

1Chr 26:15: τῷ Ἀβδεδὸμ Νότον κατέναντι οἴκου ἐσεφίν [To Abdedom (they gave by the lot) the South, opposite the house of Esephin]

¹¹ Becking 2018, 305.

1Chr 26:17: πρὸς ἀνατολὰς ἔξ τὴν ἡμέραν, βορρᾶ τῆς ἡμέρας τέσσαρες, νότον τῆς ἡμέρας τέσσαρες, καὶ εἰς τὸν ἐσεφίν [Eastward were six watchmen in the day: northward four by the day; southward four by the day; and two at the Esephin]

The translators of the LXX probably did not understand what *bēt hāšāppīm* was, and thus they transliterated the word. There are therefore gatekeepers associated with a place where certain products were stored, and the evidence suggests that these storehouses were located near the gates. Furthermore, since there were individuals acting as superiors of gatekeepers (1Chr 9:18), it must have been an internally stratified, hierarchical structure, and the tasks they carried out were somehow distributed, i. e., differentiated in terms of competence. Certainly they were not exclusively responsible for the task of opening and closing the gates.

At this point it seems reasonable to ask if the straightforward meaning of *šō'ar* / *šō'arīm* related to guarding the traffic at the gates, especially the city gates, explain their connection to the temple staff in the Jerusalem temple. How do we square at the same time the high status of these people, as evidenced by the records exempting them from taxes (Ezra 7:24)?¹² There is a temptation here to give a slightly different understanding of the term in the context of the province of Yehud in the Persian period. We venture the hypothesis that the *šō'arīm* are related to the gates only because this was the place where they performed their activities, but they actually had little to do with guarding the gates. Indeed, some biblical passages might hint to activities related to the circulation of goods. It is worth recalling here both the verb *šā'ar*, in the sense of ‘to calculate, to reckon’ (*hapax legomenon* in Prov 23:7) and the noun *še'arīm* in Gen 26:12 meaning a certain unit of measurement:

Then Isaac sowed in that land, and reaped in the same year a hundredfold, and YHWH blessed him” [הָצָרָה מִרְעָשָׁה; lit.: a hundred measures].¹³

The passages mentioned above are also compatible with an understanding of the function of those functionaries linked to the gates as tax and revenue officers. The term *šō'arīm* itself was coined from the activity performed at the gates, i. e., ‘to estimate value’, ‘calculate’, and should thus be rendered along the lines of ‘toll-collectors’.

Dealing with the absolute dating of biblical texts is extremely controversial, and there is no chance of a universal scholarly consensus. However, it is worth noting that the gatekeepers and their role in the economic life, as well as the existence of a place called *bēt hāšāppīm*, are not attested in many biblical passages. Indeed, they are absent in Samuel-Kings and Ezra-Nehemiah, but appear in the time of the authors of Chronicles. Furthermore, the concepts associated with them are no longer known to the translators of the LXX. Therefore it might be argued – without venturing absolute dates – that the institution of gatekeepers as related to the affairs of the temple’s economical life appeared at the end of the Persian period, and disappeared by the Hellenistic period.

¹² On this exemption see further below.

¹³ LXX and some versions read ‘barley’ (κριθήν; Heb. מִרְעָשָׁה), but MT seems preferable. See Westermann 1985, 422.

The fact that in Ezra and Nehemiah the lists of temple functionaries are linked together – priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, and others – shows that they formed a certain coherent group. They are also covered by the tax exemption (Ezra 7:24), which shows that in the view of the biblical authors they constituted a privileged group attached to the Jerusalem temple. Given the functions performed by the gatekeepers, this whole group could be seen not only as personnel working in a place of worship, but as the internally diverse staff of an economic institution. The singers and priests certainly fulfilled some cult-related roles, but the others also fulfilled their tasks outside Jerusalem, and some of these tasks were not related to worship at all, but to economic matters. Even if they had an indirect influence on the sacrifices offered in Jerusalem, they must be considered temple staff delegated to economic functions rather than cultic activity.

This understanding of the gatekeepers as collectors of taxes, or tolls, and voluntary offerings would explain their association with storehouses, and with high social status. This picture would further substantiate a view of the Jerusalem temple not only as a place of worship but, in a similar fashion as the Mesopotamian temples, as an important institution in the economic life of the province of Yehud.

Netinim and Sons of Solomon's Servants (בנֵ עֲבָדֵי שְׁלֹמֹה) (נְתִינִים)

The נטינים (*netinim*, henceforth *netinim*) are mentioned eighteen times in the Bible following the Hebrew text, always in the plural as a collective, and always in writings dated to the post-exilic period. Seventeen mentions are found in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 2:43; 5:8; 7:20; 7:24; 8:17; 20 x2; Neh 3:26; 31; 7:46; 60; 73; 10:28; 11:3; 21 x2), and a last one in 1Chron 9:2.¹⁴ Most notably, the *netinim* are mentioned in the lists of the first returnees from Babylon in Yehud after the Edict of Cyrus (539), both in Ezra 2 and in Nehemiah 7. As a group, the *netinim* appear here at the bottom of the lists, after the priests and the three other groups of non-priestly temple staff: the Levites, the musicians/singers, and the gatekeepers. They are tightly linked to another body of people, the בני עבדי שלמה (*bənē 'abde Shlōmōh*, ‘sons of Solomon’s servants’), attested five times in total, only in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 2:55; 8; Neh 7:57; 60; 11:3). In fact, even if the genealogies of the two groups are listed separately, their numbers are counted together (Ezra 2:58; Neh 7:60) and amount to 392 in total.¹⁵ Another group of 220 *netinim* from Casiphia is said to have joined Ezra’s mission on the way to Jerusalem on the latter’s appeal (Ezra 8:20), in the seventh year of king Ar-

¹⁴ Ezra 7:24 has the Aramaic form נָתַנְיָה. The *qere* הַמְבִנִים in 2Chr 35:3 and its parallel ιεροδούλοι in 1Esd 1:3 might point towards a reading τανίνιμ. See Haran 1961, 165 fn1; Böhler 2016, 24. The number of attestations changes slightly in the Greek textual tradition as there is no parallel passage to MT Neh 11:21. The *netinim* are also mentioned in Qumranic and Rabbinic writings; see Knoppers 2004a, 501 for a general overview of this material.

¹⁵ For this reason Fried 2017, 149 suggested that they were in fact one group, and that *bənē 'abde Šəlōmōh* is just an editorial gloss to explain the unfamiliar term *netinim*.

taxerxes.¹⁶ Current biblical scholarship usually understands *netinim* and sons of Solomon's servants as low-ranking members of the temple-staff working for the temple in the city of Jerusalem, sometimes depicted as servants or 'slaves', and probably devoted to menial tasks such as craftsmanship, building activities, livestock farming, and husbandry in support of the cultic infrastructure.¹⁷ However, this picture is grounded in assumptions that are beset by difficulties and can be reasonably challenged, starting with the very meaning of their names. In fact, differently from the other two groups dealt with in this chapter, the designations *netinim* and *bənē 'abdē Šəlōmōh* are not immediately helpful in determining what their function and role were within the cult or the economy of the temple.

The designation *bənē 'abdē Šəlōmōh* has a transparent literal meaning, 'sons (i.e., descendants) of Solomon's servants', but it does not disclose any substantial information about the activities of this body of people. Interestingly, however, the LXX is not internally consistent in the renderings. Esd 2:55,58 have a partially transliterated form *νιοὶ Αβδησελμα*, while Esd 17:57,60; 21:3 have the translation *νιοὶ δούλων Σαλωμων*.¹⁸ The form *netinim* is a deverbal formation from the root **ntn* 'to give', 'to assign', 'to allow'. A passive connotation is usually ascribed to this term, resulting in a meaning along the lines of '(those who are/ have been) given', 'dedicated', 'bestowed'. Such meaning is usually explained on the basis of a single biblical passage, i.e., the gloss in Ezra 8:20. This passage mentions the 220 *netinim* from Casiphia and states that "David and his officials had given (*nātan*) [them] to attend the Levites",¹⁹ thus projecting their origin back to the time of David's kingdom. However, this is most probably a later gloss with a clear aetiological purpose, displaying the Chronicler's vision that systematically traces the founding of temple offices to David's charter, while *netinim* and Levites are clearly kept apart from each other in the lists in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7.²⁰ Consequently, it cannot be taken at face value in an assessment of the historical reality of the *netinim* standing behind the biblical picture.²¹

¹⁶ Usually this is interpreted as referring to Artaxerxes I Mnemon, i.e., in 458/57 BCE. For the alternate dating of Ezra's mission to the reign of Artaxerxes II Longimanus (465–424/23) see recently Fogelman 2024.

¹⁷ See, e.g., the classic and long influential views of Wellhausen 1883, 153; Baudissin 1889, 142–3, and more recently ABD 4, *s.v.*; Becking 2018, 42–3; EBR 21, 217–20; Eskenazi 2023, 171–2. A notable exception to this trend is Weinberg 1975 (= Weinberg 1992, 75–91), who understands both groups not as temple staff, but rather as the post-exilic remnants of craftsmen and hand workers employed by the royal court in pre-exilic times.

¹⁸ Cf. 1Esd 5:33: *νιοὶ παιδῶν Σαλωμων*.

¹⁹ BHS and Blenkinsopp 1988, 164 notice the inconsistency between the two subjects and the III mp form *תַּתָּא*, and read *מִתְּחִרְשָׁתָה* in place of MT *מִתְּחִרְשָׁתָה*, thus rendering "whom David had assigned as ministers"; cf. BHQ.

²⁰ Schaper 2000, 280–1; 290. Contra Leuchter 2010, 588–90. On David as archetypical cult-founder see further De Vries 1988.

²¹ Haran 1961, 165 fn1; Fensham 1982, 115; Blenkinsopp 1988, 167. The presence of a late hand in Ezra 8:20 is also betrayed by the use of the relative particle *ψ*, *pace* Williamson 1985, 117. According to Pakkala 2004, 59–63, the whole digression relating the search for Levites in Casiphia (Ezra 8:15b–20) is a later expansion added to highlight the relevance of Levites in the context of Ezra's mission. In this scenario, Ezra 8:20 (*תַּתָּא ... מִתְּחִרְשָׁתָה*) would be an even later addition in the Chronicler's spirit. See

Alternatively, we could infer that the collective act of ‘giving’ implied by the term *netinim* must have as recipient either the deity (YHWH), or the temple service itself. In fact, the root **ntn* is used in a wide array of cultic circumstances,²² including the dedication of people to particular offices (Num 31:47; Josh 9:27), the annexation of the Levites into the Aaronides (Num 3:9; 8:19), and their dedication to the liturgical offices related to the tabernacle (Num 8:16; 18:6; 1Chr 6:33; cf. Deut 28:32). In these cases, the Levites are said to be ‘given’ (*nətūnim*) to the Aaronides or to the tabernacle. However, it is not warranted to attach *eo ipso* a passive nuance to the term *netinim*; indeed, several observations call for a more cautious stance. Previous scholarship has always failed to address the issue raised by the morphological difference between *netinim* and the regular form of the masch. plur. of the passive past participle **נָתָן** (*nətūnim*).²³ As a *qatil* participial formation, the term *netinim* retains some passive connotations, but it simply denotes duration in their state of individuals related to the temple, rather than indicating the objects of an act of dedication.²⁴ This distinction is not trivial, and its relevance is highlighted by two points. First, very often the form *nətūnim* does not occur in isolation, but rather in constructions with other words derived from the same root **ntn*,²⁵ whereas *netinim* – except for the aforementioned gloss in Ezra 8:20 – is always attested as a stand-alone term. Second, *netinim* always occurs accompanied by the definite article – except again in Ezra 8:20. This suggests a regularly substantivized use of this term to identify a definite group of people, whereas *nətūnim* is always used predicatively without article.

Apart from morphological similarities, two biblical passages are often called upon to argue in favor of a connection between *nətūnim* and *netinim*, but neither of them is without difficulty. LXX 1Chr 9:2 is a particularly significant passage, because it is the only instance in the Greek text where *netinim* is translated with the participle δεδομένοι

also Fried 2017, 352. For a recent overview of the theories of the compilation of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah see Harrington 2022, 21–2.

22 DCH 5, 811a; TDOT 10, 102–7. Cf. Phoenician *ytn* ‘dedicate’ in a funerary inscription from Pyrgi (Knoppers 1992, 112–3). Some dictionaries also mention the term *ntyn’/ ntwn’* in an Aramaic inscription from Hatra (H 21:1) as a correlate. See DNSWI, 766; DULAT³, 977. Despite the tempting similitude, especially considered the epigraphic uncertainty on the mater *y/w* (see Krückmann 1952/53, 147 fn54), this word should be clearly read with the following *šry* as a single word *ntwn’šry*, the toponym for Adiabene; see Marcato 2018, 35 fn35.

23 JM §5oc. Only Speiser 1963, 72 stresses in passing the semantic distinction between the verbal meaning of **נָתָן** as a passive participle and the term *netinim* as a more technical designation of a role or occupation.

24 GKC2 §84al. Curiously enough, pre-modern scholarship had glimpsed alternative meanings for *netinim* with no passive undertones. Forster 1557, 532 ascribes the origin of the name to the fact that they gave or handed over to the priests all things needed to administer the cult (“sacerdotibus necessaria suppeditarent, a dando seu porrigendo”). Will 1745, 7 reports older views according to which the term should imply a self-dedication to the temple service, and should thus be translated as *dantes sese* ‘self-givers’.

25 Speiser 1963, who also draws a comparison with the Akkadian terminology for dedications.

instead of being transliterated as *ναθινιν*, *ναθινιμ*, or *ναθινιαῖοι*.²⁶ The use of the middle diathesis in this one occurrence would apparently suggest a passive meaning for *netinim*. However, this passage is fraught with difficulties. 1Chr 9:2 is the only undisputed place in 1–2 Chronicles²⁷ that mentions the *netinim*. Either if we assume, with many scholars, a textual dependency of 1Chr 9 from Neh 11, or rather a common dependency of the two texts from an earlier source,²⁸ it is clear that the *netinim* do not play otherwise any role in the organization of the cult and in the ranks of the temple staff described in Chronicles. Several reasons make it plausible that the LXX based its translation here on the word *nətūnîm* rather than *netinim*. First, δεδομένοι is the standard LXX rendering of Hebrew *nətūnîm* in its every other occurrence in the biblical texts, including 1Chr 6:33.²⁹ It would have been counterintuitive to use the same term δεδομένοι for *netinim*, especially if their existence is not considered anywhere else in Chronicles. Second, in all instances but one (Deut 28:32), the term *nətūnîm*/δεδομένοι is always referred to Levites. The proximity of Levites in 1Chr 9:2 as well might therefore have facilitated a confusion between *netinim* and *nətūnîm*. Third, such confusion might stem from a palaeographical reason, i.e., a close similarity of *yod* and *waw* (ו and י) in a Hebrew *Vorlage*.³⁰

The second passage usually used to argue in favor of a link between *nətūnîm* and *netinim* is Ezra 8:17, where MT has *qere* הַנְּתָנוּנִים and *ketiv* הַנְּתָנוּנִים, establishing a direct link between the two terms. Let us consider the verse in the parallel versions of MT and LXX.

וְאַוְצָא אֶתְכֶם עַל־אֶדְזָה הַרָּאשׁ בְּכָסְפִּיא הַמְּקוֹם וְאַשְׁמָה בְּפִיהֶם דְּבָרִים לְדַבֵּר אֶל־אֶדְזָה אֲחֵי הַנְּתָנוּנִים
בְּכָסְפִּיא הַמְּקוֹם לְקַבְּיָא־לְלַבְּנָה מְשֻׁרְתִּים לְבֵית אַלְהָנוֹ:
καὶ ἔξήνεγκα αὐτοὺς ἐπὶ ἀρχοντος ἐν ἀργυρίῳ τοῦ τόπου καὶ ἔθηκα ἐν στόματι αὐτῶν
λόγους λαλῆσαι πρὸς τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς αὐτῶν τοὺς ναθινιμ ἐν ἀργυρίῳ τοῦ τόπου τοῦ
ἐνέγκαι ἡμῖν ἀδοντας εἰς οἶκον θεοῦ ἡμῶν

²⁶ Esd 2:58: *ναθινιν*. Esd 2:70; 7:7.24; 8:17.20 (x2); 13:26; 31 (Βηθαναθινιμ); 17:46.60.73; 20:29: *ναθινιμ*. Esd 2:43; 21:3: *ναθινιαῖοι*. For minor (mainly vocalic) variants in the Greek mss. see the convenient overview in Cheyne 1902, 3397–400. In 1Esdras the standard equivalent for *netinim* is ιεροδούλοι: 1Esd 5:29.35; 8: 5.22.48. The same term is also used by Josephus (*Ant. Jud.* 11.3.10 §70; 11.5.1 §128; 11.5.2 §134), but this use already reflects the overlay of a Hellenistic cultural concept onto the biblical texts. See Haran 1961, 169; Cohen 2000, 59 fn9; Böhler 2016, 24; cf. TDOT 10, 105.

²⁷ Cf. above, footnote 14 on 2Chr 35:3.

²⁸ Arguing for the first option, Japhet 1993, 208 states that the *netinim* are “no more than the inadvertent survival of a textual detail from Neh. 11”. This would be confirmed by the fact the the Chronicler misses the following mention of the *netinim* in Neh 11:21. For an argument in favor of a common source of 1Chr and Neh 11 see Knoppers 2000, with a convenient summary of previous hypotheses.

²⁹ Num 3:9: δεδομένοι; Num 8:16: ἀποδεδομένοι; Num 8:19 δεδομένους; Num 18:6: δεδομένον. Cf. Deut 28:32: δεδομέναι (daughters).

³⁰ Different *lectiones* in the ancient versions also hints at an early confusion in this passage; see, e.g., the different renderings δεδομένοι, ναθινιαῖοι, ναθίνεοι, ναοὶ νέοι, θανιναῖοι in some Hexaplaric mss. (see Field 1875, 711) and Pesh. **גִּיאָוֹר** (*gîyôr*), ‘foreigners’, ‘aliens’, ‘sojourners’, in place of *netinim*.

If we consider the MT in itself, there would be no particular reason to prefer the *qere* over the *ketiv*. If we read יְחִידָה as a plural יְחִידָה ('his brothers') rather than יְחִידָה ('his brother') with the support of LXX τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς, it would not make sense to envision the *netinim* as brothers of Iddo, a leader over the Levites. For this reason, many commentators reading יְחִידָה emend the text reinstating a second allegedly lost conjunction, thus translating "to Iddo, [and to] his brothers [and] the *netinim* in Casiphia".³¹ However, this is unnecessary: a reading with *ketiv* would plainly give "to Iddo, [and to] his brother, dedicated in Casiphia",³² without the need to resort to any further emendations. Such an understanding of *nətūnîm* in the sense of religiously 'dedicated' individuals would support a view of Casiphia not just as a settlement, but as some kind of sanctuary or Levitic enclosure.³³ The *qere* reading might be explained as a later attempt at harmonization with the other close mentions of *netinim* in the gloss in Ezra 8:20 just below.³⁴ Admittedly, the *qere* has the support of LXX ναθινιμ, but an ancient misunderstanding of the Hebrew text by the translator can be easily assumed.³⁵ In the Greek version, the character of Iddo is removed from the story, and ἀδελφοὺς αὐτῶν ('their brothers', not 'his') are connected to the list of people named just above in Esd 8:16. Consequently, the translator understands the following word ναθινιμ as referred either to these brothers or to the aforementioned people,³⁶ again probably attracted by the other mentions of ναθινιμ in Esd 8:20 not far below.

All the arguments exposed above, significantly downplay any evidence used to back up a connection between *nətūnîm* and *netinim*. This clears the way from the long-held idea that the *netinim* can only be thought of as a subservient group engaged with, or rather 'dedicated to', the cultic service within the temple precinct in the narrowest sense of the world. Indeed, Ezra 2:70 and Neh 7:73 provide evidence that the *netinim* were settled in their cities in Yehud:

So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the *netinim*, and all Israel settled in their towns.

Neh 11:3 also adds the sons of Solomon's servants to those who settled in the cities:

³¹ See discussions in Fensham 1982, 114; Williamson 1985, 113; Blenkinsopp 1988, 164; Fried 2017, 347; Eskenazi 2023, 329.

³² Williamson 1985, 113; Eskenazi 2023, 329. Cf. Leuchter 2009, 177–83; 2010, 588–90.

³³ Chong 1996; TDOT 10, 106; Leuchter 2009; Fried 2017, 349–50; Eskenazi 2023, 331–2. Cf. Becking 2018, 125.

³⁴ Significantly, בְּנֵי־הַמִּנְחָה is not included in the list of words spelled with *waw* but read with a *yod* in *b. Sof. 7.4*.

³⁵ This would not be the only instance of this kind within this passage, since Esd 8:17 mistakes the toponym Casiphia (כָּסִיפָּה) with the term נְצָב 'silver' and translates accordingly 'ἐν ἀργυρίῳ'. The flimsiness of the textual tradition in this passage is further corroborated by the disagreement of the ancient versions. 1Esd 8:45 omits any mention of בְּנֵי־הַמִּנְחָה/בְּנֵי־הַמִּנְחָה altogether, while Pesh. has נְצָב 'those who dwelt' based on בְּנֵי־הַמִּנְחָה, a meaning also favored by Rashi, Ezra 8:17.

³⁶ Reading τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς αὐτῶν in the first case, τῶν ἀδελφοὺς αὐτῶν in the second. The witnesses are split as for the case of the article. See the apparatus in Hanhart 1993, 120–1.

In the towns of Yehud all lived on their property in their towns: Israel, the priests, the Levites, the *netinim*, and the sons of Solomon's servants.

Therefore, not all *netinim* settled and resided in the 'house of the *netinim* and the merchants' (*bēt hānn̄atn̄im wəhārōk̄l̄im*, Neh 3:31) on the Ophel, close to the Water Gate on the eastern slope of the temple mound (Neh 3:26; 11:21). We might speculate that, since this accommodation on the Ophel is only mentioned in the context of the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem,³⁷ it was just a temporary housing to host those among the *netinim* who were working there at that moment. This might explain why *bēt hānn̄atn̄im* appears in the singular, implying the idea of some kind of communal dormitory rather than individual houses.³⁸ Alternatively, it is not impossible that only a subgroup of *netinim* were staying in the 'house' on the Ophel, namely those with Ziha and Gishpa at their head ('al, Neh 11:21).

The absence of any mention of the specific functions of the *netinim* and the sons of Solomon's servants, as well as their presence all over the territory of Yehud, favors a picture of them not as menial workers within the temple, but rather as segments of the civic community which could, as opposed to the common people, boast some kind of connection to the temple endeavor. To further substantiate this reassessment of the prevalent scholarly view, three closely intertwined issues need to be addressed: the historical origins of these groups, their social standing within the community of the returnees in Yehud, and the ethnic constitution and geographical provenance of their members.

To begin with, it is not possible to establish the origin of either one of the two groups before the post-exilic period. There is no positive evidence to back up this view,³⁹ since they are not mentioned anywhere in the biblical sources outside the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Moreover, as shown above, the LXX shows unfamiliarity with the term *netinim* and to some extent even with the sons of Solomon's servants, strengthening the idea that these groups were established and existed only in a very specific place and time, i. e., Yehud in the Persian period. The context of a new establishment of these two groups provides the rationale for the elaboration of foundational stories which tailored their antiquity, artificially linking them to a pre-exilic past to justify their existence in post-exilic times.

³⁷ Neh 11:21 would be an exception in this sense, but it is part of a later addition to the text of Neh 11 (vv. 21–24) and probably drawn from Neh 3:26. See Fensham 1982, 248; Blenkinsopp 1988, 326–7; Becking 2018, 298–9. Some commentators deem Neh 3:26 itself a gloss, but this is unwarranted. See Fensham 1982, 26; Williamson 1985, 198.

³⁸ Fried 2017, 120. The same might be said for the 'house of the warriors' (*bēt haggibbōr̄im*), i. e., the barracks. See Williamson 1985, 208; cf. Levine 1963, 210.

³⁹ The name **שְׁרִקָּה** (Qerosi) in ostracon 18 from Arad (HCIBP, 119–22) from the beginning of the 6th c. BCE cannot be used as evidence of a pre-exilic origin of the *netinim*, as Levine 1969, 49–51 and Weinberg 1992, 83–6 would have. In fact, it is likely just a regular personal name, and not a gentilic designating a family of workers in the 'house of YHWH' (הַמִּזְבֵּחַ) in Arad parallel to **בָּנֵי קְרָבָה** in Ezra 2:44/Neh 7:47. See Fried 2017, 120–1. This is further confirmed by the presence of another personal name, **הַגָּבָה** (Hagab) both in ostracon 1 from Lachish (6th c. BCE; HCIBP, 56–7) and Ezra 2:46, without any reference to the cult or the temple. A seal from Jerusalem, tentatively dated to the 7th c. BCE, probably belonged to an individual with the same name, judging by the inscribed letters **הַגָּבָה**. See Fried 2017, 122.

As already mentioned, the origin of the *netinim* is projected back to David's constitution in the gloss in Ezra 8:20. Something similar happens with singers and gatekeepers in Neh 12:46.⁴⁰ A possible yet tentative alternate origin story of the *netinim* might be glimpsed in the episode of the subjugation of the Gibeonites by Joshua, whom the Israelite leader had “dedicated (lit. ‘given’, *wayyittənēm*) as woodcutters and drawers of water for the congregation and for the altar of YHWH” (Josh 9:27). The aetiological purpose of the clause is made explicit by the standard expression *‘ad-hayyōm hazzeb*, “up to this day”. Many commentators have taken at face value the historicity of this connection between Gibeonites and *netinim*, abetted by Talmudic *halakhah*.⁴¹ However, not only the book of Joshua cannot be considered a reliable historical source, but also Joshua 9 in particular seems to reflect a post-exilic background very close to that of the list of returnees in Nehemiah 7.⁴² In the case of the sons of Solomon servants, even in absence of an explicit aetiological narrative, their purported origin is suggested in their very name. They are ideal ‘descendants’ of the *‘abdē Šəlōmōh* mentioned in 1Kgs 9:27. According to Levine, this is a reference not to the foreign workers enslaved by Solomon (*mas ūbēd*, 1Kgs 9:20), but rather to a class of free people employed by the king and engaged in mercantile activities (1Kgs 9:22; cf. 2Chr 8:18; 9:10).⁴³ If the name ‘sons of Solomon servants’ is a newly coined designation meant to display a connection to an ancient and illustrious past, then the latter option would be the likelier.

Information on the social standing of the sons of Solomon servants in the post-exilic community is inconclusive. On the one hand, they do not take part in the pact (*‘āmānā*) signed by the community (*qāhāl*), including other groups of temple staff (Neh 10:29–30a),⁴⁴ and it is doubtful that they can be identified with the ‘workers of the house of god’ (*pālōbē bēt ‘ēlāhā*)⁴⁵ who received the tax and corvée exemption for the temple personnel decreed by Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:24). On the other hand, Ezra 2:64 / Neh 7:66 imply that they are included among the members of the *qāhāl*, while slaves, maidservants, and even

⁴⁰ On Neh 12:46 see further below.

⁴¹ See *b.Yeb.* 78b–79a. Cf. *b.Yeb.* 71a; *b.Hor.* 4b; *b.Makk.* 13a. For classic formulations of this hypothesis see Haran 1961 and Grintz 1966. The former envisioned the Gibeonites as one of several different ethnical groups that merged into the group of *netinim* over a long period of time. See also Blenkinsopp 1988, 90; Day 2007, 134–7.

⁴² Dozeman 2015, 414–5. Fried 2005, 87 fn23 reconstructs Neh 10:29–30a as a later addition by a redactor in the context of the stipulation of the pact (*‘āmānā*) in the community of returnees (*gāhāl*). This would reflect on the one hand the fact that the *netinim*, as well as other categories of temple staff, were originally not considered full members of the community (cf. Ezra 2:64), as they did not swear an oath to follow the Mosaic law, and they did not sign the *‘āmānā*. On the other hand, this gloss might be an attempt at including them in the community at a later stage. Since the Gibeonites, “hewers of wood and drawers of water”, were probably included in the community that renewed the covenant in Deut 29:10, the connection between the Gibeonites and the *netinim* might have also served the purpose of promoting the latter by analogy as members of the post-exilic community as well.

⁴³ Levine 1963, 209–10.

⁴⁴ But see above, fn42 about the possibility that Neh 10:29–30a might be a gloss.

⁴⁵ *Contra* Williamson 1985, 97; Blenkinsopp 1988, 91. The term *pālōbē* in Official Aramaic seems to simply designate those who ‘serve’ a god without further nuances as, e.g., in KAI 269, 4. See Fried 2017, 327; cf. Weinberg 1992, 87–8.

singers are explicitly excluded from it. Another argument against their serf condition is given in the already seen Neh 11:3, where they appear to dwell each in his own property (*‘âbūzzâb*) in the cities of Yehud. If the *‘abdē Šəlōmōh* to whom the sons of Solomon's servants reach back are indeed to be thought of as royal merchants, it would be tempting to see the latter as the merchants (*hārōk̄lîm*) who shared their residence with the *netinîm* on the Ophel during the restoration of the Jerusalem walls (Neh 3:31). It is not unrealistic to think of a class of traders as belonging to the ranks of the temple personnel, if the 'temple' comprised not only strictly speaking the facilities where cultic offices took place, but also the material and economic infrastructures that supported such activities.⁴⁶ In Neo-Babylonian temples, *tamkāru* merchants were an integral part of the economic organization and played an important role as brokers, buying foodstuffs and other primary goods produced in the temple properties, and supplying luxury goods in turn.⁴⁷

A serf status of the *netinîm* is disputable on similar grounds. On the one hand, the names of the *netinîm* listed among the first returnees in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 feature an unusual number of hypocoristics and informal nicknames based on physical features, e.g., Gahar 'Freckles' (Ezra 2:47/Neh 7:49),⁴⁸ or on professions or skills, e.g., Harsha 'Smithy' (Ezra 2:52/Neh 7:54).⁴⁹ Such nicknames were typically given to slaves, servants and unfree workers.⁵⁰ On the other hand, the *netinîm* do take part in the *‘āmānā* in Neh 10:29–30a, like the sons of Solomon's servants they are included as members of the *qâhâl* (Ezra 2:64 / Neh 7:66), and they dwell in the cities of Yehud in their own properties (Neh 11:3). Moreover, according to Ezra 7:24, they received together with the rest of the temple staff some tax exemptions as per Artaxerxes' decree:

[Regarding] all the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, *netinîm*, and workers of this house of god, neither rent [*mindâ*], tribute [*bôlô*], nor corvée [*halâk*] is authorized to impose upon them.

While the exact scope and nature of these exemptions remain debated matters,⁵¹ this passage makes clear at least that the *netinîm* were subject to the same financial conditions as

⁴⁶ See Stevens 2006, 82–120, esp. 117–20 on trade; Niesiołowski-Spanò, 2025.

⁴⁷ Joannès 1999, 177–8; Jursa 2010, 580–1; Alstola 2017, 28. Cf. Moser 2025: 487–8.

⁴⁸ Zadok 1980, 112; Fried 2017, 123.

⁴⁹ Eskenazi 2023, 174. Cf. Zadok 1980, 114 who translates 'deaf' based on the Aramaic word.

⁵⁰ Zadok 1980; Williamson 1985, 36; Blenkinsopp 1988, 90–1; Fried 2017, 120; Eskenazi 2023, 174.

⁵¹ Aramaic *mindâ*, *bôlô*, and *halâk* are Akkadian loanwords. *Halâk* (Akk. *ilku*) designated service obligations, mostly corvée labor, which temple officials were providing regularly to the crown all over the Achaemenid empire; see Fried 2004, 20–4; 63–5; 108–19; 2017, 304. There is no consensus on the precise meaning of the other two terms, *mindâ* (Akk. *mandattu*) and *bôlô* (Akk. *biltu*). For discussion providing former literature see Fried 2017, 214–5; Silverman 2021, 356–8; Eskenazi 2023, 230–1.

the other groups of temple staff vis-à-vis the Persian authority.⁵² Moreover, chattel slaves were likely not expected to render corvée labor in their own rights.⁵³

As for the origins of the *netinim* and the sons of Solomon's servants, the picture is a little clearer. Out of the forty-five known names of the two groups combined, most are West-Semitic non-Hebrew names, a few others are foreign names of different origins (Arabian, Aramaic, Egyptian), and only nine are Hebrew.⁵⁴ While it is true that an individual foreign name does not automatically equal a foreign origin, such a high incidence of non-Hebrew names when compared with the other name lists of returnees leaves little doubt that these two groups were not natives to Yehud. However, this should not automatically imply that they were descendants from prisoners of war captured from neighboring regions in pre-exilic times, as some interpreters would have.⁵⁵ A closer look at these two name lists reveals that there are many parallels or comparable personal names in documents from two cuneiform archives, the so-called 'Fortification archive' in Persepolis and, notably, the Yâhûdu archive.⁵⁶ Given this picture, it seems likelier that the bulks of those groups were brought together during or after the exile, not before, and this would further endorse the view of a (post-)exilic origin of *netinim* and sons of Solomon's servants.

If the long-held parallel between *netinim* and Babylonian *širkus* (temple oblates) in the 1st mill. BCE holds any plausibility,⁵⁷ it would not be about the latter's condition of servitude, which is disputable,⁵⁸ but rather about the diverse nature of their contributions as people

⁵² Fried 2017, 326–7 observes that the Persian king could not have known the names of the different groups of temple-staff in the Jerusalem temple, and thus the list in Ezra 7:24 was not originally included in Artaxerxes' decree. This is certainly true, but it does not necessarily mean, in our case, that the inclusion of the *netinim* cannot be trusted as historical. After all, the sources are consistent in presenting the *netinim* as providing corvée work (*balâk*) in the construction of the walls of Jerusalem before the decree; see Fried 2018. Cf. Bedford 2015, 345.

⁵³ Cf. Kleber 2011, 107.

⁵⁴ The most thorough onomastic analyses of these lists can be found in Zadok 1980, 110–6 and Bortz 2018, 290–7.

⁵⁵ If Meunim and Nephishim (Ezra 2:50/Neh 7:52) are to be considered gentilics rather than personal names, then they might refer to members of Arabian tribes taken as prisoners of war during monarchic times according to 1Chr 5:19; 2Chr 26:7. See Zadok 1980, 116; Williamson 1985, 36; Blenkinsopp 1988, 90; Eskenazi 2023, 174; cf. Knoppers 2004a, 369. In any case, however, there is no way to prove the historicity of those narratives.

⁵⁶ See the detailed survey in Bortz 2018, 290–7.

⁵⁷ Starting from Dougherty's monograph dedicated to *širkûtu* (Dougherty 1923), most scholarly contributions on the *netinim* included at least a mention in passing to Babylonian *širkus*; see most recently Kellenberger 2024; Moser 2025. The latter offers the strongest argument for the influence of the *širkûtu* institution on the formalization of the *netinim* as a distinct class of temple personnel. It is important, however, to note the difference between Moser's approach and our own. He understands the *netinim* as part of an idealized temple complex envisioned by postexilic biblical authors in the context of an aspirational and utopian reconfiguration of the Judahite cult. In contrast, the present study seeks to situate the *netinim* and comparable institutions within the historical realities of Persian-period Yehud.

⁵⁸ Far from designating the condition of chattel slaves owned by the temples, the concept of *širkûtu* encompassed a wide range of different socio-economic situations. Babylonian sources attest to a great

related to the temple. The *netinim* would be a class of miscellaneous professionals providing a wide range of activities and services that were necessary to the maintenance of the temple endeavor and that were not performed by the other groups of temple staff.⁵⁹ This picture makes the best sense of the numbers and the internal subdivision of the *netinim* and sons of Solomon's servants. In fact, it is true that their total number in the lists (392) is far higher than that of other temple-staff, but the numbers of their collectives are also much higher (45 in Ezra 2; 42 in Neh 7), resulting in a much lower ratio of individuals per collective.⁶⁰ This makes a subdivision based on descent or clan relations far less likely.⁶¹ Rather, the lists of *netinim* and sons of Solomon's servants might enumerate groups of independent contractors affiliated with the temple and sorted by the nature of their activity.⁶² This explains the presence in the lists of *netinim* of some (nick)names indicating professions – smiths, stonecutters, woodcutters, craftsmen, hunters⁶³ – and the possibility that only selected *netinim*, likely construction workers, were living in a shared housing facility on the Ophel while working on the restoration of the walls of Jerusalem under the supervision of Ziba and Gishpa (Neh 11:21), i.e., their taskmasters or foremen. The sons of Solomons servants represented still other professional categories beyond the *netinim*, maybe engaged in trading and brokering the import-export of goods to and from the temple endeavor.

This scenario is not at odds with but rather complemented by Fried's hypothesis of these lists as a census of *hadru* units similar to those known from Babylonia in the Persian period, i.e., estates tied to groups of residents organized by ethnicity, kinship, or occupa-

diversity of activities carried out by *sirkus*, at different levels of the social hierarchy and of the economic spectrum. Their obligations towards the temple were not constructed as coercions or forced labor followed by a remuneration, but as tax obligations instead. See Ragen 2006; Kleber 2011; 2018; 444–46; Wunsch and Magdalene 2014; Dromard 2017. Most recent discussions can be found in Bartash 2025: 55–58 and Wunsch 2025. The latter draws attention on the oversimplification brought about by the use of the new vulgata terminology of 'semi-free' applied to *sirkus*. In contrast, she highlights a more nuanced picture, where social standing is defined not only through and by the legal status of an individual (slave/'semi-free'/free), but also through his relationship with the head of the household – be it a private or a temple household, where the deity has the role of the head of household (195–96).

⁵⁹ The suggestion put forward by some interpreters (Gray 1962, 116; cf. 1965, 213; Levine 1963, 211–2; Blenkinsopp 1988, 90 *contra* Weinberg 1992, 79) that the *netinim* had a sort of forerunner in the *ytnm* mentioned in a register (*spr*) of wine rations from Ugarit (KTU³ 4:93 I 1) is probably misguided. Despite many philological difficulties, the text is clearly not related in any way to temple environments. The term *ytnm* seems indeed to refer to a group of professionals, but these were more likely 'overseers' (<*yt*), with no relation to the root **ytn*, 'to give'. See Dietrich and Loretz 1977, 338–9. Cf. Zamora 2000, 366; DULAT³, 977; Fried 2017, 119. In any case, a parallel between two historical realities almost a millennium apart from each other, based exclusively on linguistic grounds and without the support of any other circumstantial evidence cannot be regarded as more than an exercise in imagination.

⁶⁰ The ratio for the *netinim* is 8,7 or 9,3 people per collective (in Ezra 2 and Neh 7 respectively). The next lowest ratio is that of the gatekeepers, ca. 23 per collective.

⁶¹ Weinberg 1992, 89–90.

⁶² Cf. the reconstruction in Levine 1963, who argued that the *netinim* as a unit formed a cultic guild. Cf. Aharoni 1981, 121.

⁶³ Zadok 1980, 110–6; Fried 2017, 120–8; Bortz 2018, 290–7; Eskenazi 2023, 171–6.

tion for purposes related to the collection of taxes and labor force.⁶⁴ Significantly for the case in question, Kleber argues that the organization of *badrus* according to profession rather than agnation reflected new measures introduced with a tax reformation in the Achaemenid administration after the Babylonian insurrections against Xerxes and the turmoils of 484.⁶⁵ If the lists in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 were indeed *badru* lists, it would not have been too difficult for a later redactor to standardize them and make them look like a demographic register of returnees.

This analysis revealed a different angle on the *netinim* and the sons of Solomon's servants, challenging the prevalent scholarly view. They were not 'given' to the temple and did not live in Jerusalem to administer menial tasks in support of the cultic offices. They were not workers *for* the temple, but in their capacity as independent contractors they lived in their own cities in Yehud, and they were rather professionals working *with* the temple as contributors, or providers of all those logistical and economic activities that ensured the smooth operation of the temple economy and its requirements for offerings, staples, materials, and provisions. This group of foreign professionals soon came to be recognized not only as part of the community in Yehud, but also, because of their affiliation to the temple, as a privileged segment of the population, and were granted the same perks as other categories such as priests, Levites, singers, and gatekeepers. The order in which these categories appear in the lists, rather than implying a hierarchy based on the criterion of decreasing cultic importance, or 'sanctity', or 'nobility',⁶⁶ might in fact indicate different degrees of economic and organizational autonomy from an ideal center (the temple) in concentric circles, with the priests in the closest sector, and the *netinim* and the sons of Solomon's servants in the furthest.

Temple Singers (משררים)

The term *משררים* (*mašōrərim*, 'Singers') derives from the word *šyr* 'song'.⁶⁷ It is therefore the name of a group built denominatively from what the members of this group were supposed to be concerned with. This designation remains in some relation to another term used to describe singers: *šārīm* (e.g. 1 Kgs 10:12; Ps 87:7).⁶⁸ The term appears in the Hebrew Bible in a dozen places, but only in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles, making it difficult to decide from the term itself whether it is a neologism coined in the Persian period – therefore suggesting that the institution of such singers only originated at that time – or whether it is a continuation of an institution dating back to the time

⁶⁴ Fried 2017, 138–41. On *badrus* see further Stolper 1985, 70–103; van Driel 2002, 230–45; 308–10. Settlement patterns in southern Yehud in the late Persian period might reflect a territorial organization compatible with a *badru*-based system, but the archeological data are far from being clear; see Silverman 2021, 363; Eskenazi 2023, 189 for discussion and references.

⁶⁵ Kleber 2021, 72–3. On the Babylonian revolts against Xerxes in 484 see Waerzeggeres 2003/04.

⁶⁶ E.g., Schaper 2000, 281–2; cf. Weinberg 1992, 86.

⁶⁷ DCH 8, 337–8.

⁶⁸ Cf. Fried 2017, 114.

of the monarchy. Along these lines, it might also be speculated that the use of the term *mašōrōrim* might have been used as a new designation for a certain category of people, rather than a simply denoting the activity that those people performed. So every *mašōrēr* was also one of the *šārīm*, but not every *šārīm* was one of the *mašōrōrim*. In the LXX, the Hebrew term is rendered ἀδοντες, a pres. prtl. from ἀδειν – “to sing”, which leaves no room for interpretation, as in the case of the Latin term *cantores*.

In this context, it is worth asking whether the temple singers were professionals, i.e., if they were engaged exclusively with this activity and therefore received a wage from the temple, or if they only sang ‘after-hours’. Another point in question would be if the singers performed their role voluntarily, or they were rather bound to the temple by some formalized relationship. They could have been either a hired choir, which was paid for its services, or representatives of a population not entirely free who had as part of their duties the ‘artistic’ service of the temple. The answer to such questions may help understand the structure and economic nature of the temple in Jerusalem. If singers were indeed professional cantors engaged exclusively in their service to the temple, then the latter as an institution must have had significant resources to sustain, among other expenses, a body of singers on a permanent basis. It is possible, however, that the singers were not professionals at all, but served in the temple on top of other activities. This would then be some sort of contribution in kind to the cultic institution by those on whom such a contribution was imposed.

In some biblical passages this group is treated as overlapping with that of the Levites, as evidenced, for example, by 2Chr 5:12 which mentions ‘all the Levitical singers’ [*halōwiyyim hamšōrōrim*]. It may therefore be considered that, despite the presence of this name in Ezra 2 as a separate group, it is a differentiation by virtue of the various tasks associated with the singing in the temple, and not indeed a separate category. Ezra 2:70 refers to the division of the settlers into two groups: those who settled in Jerusalem - the priests, Levites ‘and some of the people’ and those who settled in ‘in their towns’, among whom were also the singers:

So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the *netinim*, and all Israel settled in their towns. (cf. Neh 7:72)

If the singers were to perform their function continuously and professionally in the temple, their distribution in the cities would have been a hindrance to their service. This is a reason to see in this group a category of people who settled in the province of Yehud, and whose designation did not denote a full-time profession, but the nature of the duty they were obliged to provide to the temple. Just like the gatekeepers, the singers were paid with funds raised by the temple:

For in the days of David and Asaph long ago there was a leader of the singers, and there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. In the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah all Israel gave the daily portions for the singers and the gatekeepers. (Neh 12:46–47).

Interestingly, the book of Nehemiah gives details of the settlement of this group:

The companies of the singers gathered together from the circuit around Jerusalem and from the villages of the Netophathites, also from Beth-gilgal and from the region of Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built for themselves villages around Jerusalem. (Neh 12:28–29)

At the same time, one can see what could and probably did happen when the temple did not fulfil its obligations to, among others, the singers:

I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and the singers who had conducted the service had gone back to their fields. (Neh 13:10)

The reference in Neh 12:46 to the times of David and Asaph – which does not necessarily refer to the real past, but only signals a reference to some past, perhaps simply suggesting a time before the Babylonian exile – might be a signal that the author wanted to suggest that the group of singers and gatekeepers had a long tradition. Should this kind of declaration not be taken as evidence of innovation, accompanied by the construction of an argument about the ‘antiquity’ of the institution, as it was probably the case with the *netinim*?⁶⁹ In this point the MT contains a variant about the number of the leader(s), depending on the reading *rō’ṣ* (singular), or *rō’ṣē* (plural).⁷⁰ The LXX leans towards the singular ($\pi\rho\omega\tau\varsigma$), which may suggest that this ‘leader of the singers’ (*rō’ṣ haməṣōrərīm*) may have been not much of a conductor, but also the person responsible for distributing the payments to the members of this group. However, the question about the competence of this leader of the singers cannot be answered with certainty and must be regarded just as a working hypothesis.

These scant sources suggest that the temple singers were a group characterized only by virtue of the activities they performed in the temple. They were therefore not a separate professional group. They lived mainly outside Jerusalem and received payments for their services in the temple. Does it follow that they were a group of cantors whose high artistry required remuneration? If they were engaged in other professions this would be unlikely. Perhaps then it is possible that the ‘portions’ due to the singers for their work in the temple were not proper wages, but rather reimbursements for their lost days of work in ‘their fields’.

Final Remarks

It is not clear whether the four categories discussed above, somehow linked to the functioning of the temple in Jerusalem, form a coherent reality, since we do not know whether

⁶⁹ Cf. Niesiolowski-Spanò 2021.

⁷⁰ Singular *ketiv* (שָׁרֵךְ), plural *qere* (שָׁרָכִים); see BHQ.

they actually existed simultaneously. However, we do have a clear indication of their common placement in the Ezra-Nehemiah corpus. Let us therefore assume that either they functioned side by side in the imagination of the authors of these texts, or indeed their descriptions are a reflection of the reality described by these biblical authors. For the sake of conclusion, let us make the optimistic assumption that such groups may have existed in the Persian period, whether we date them as usual to the middle of the 5th c. BCE or to the time of Artaxerxes II (404–358).⁷¹

There is a clear distinction between these groups and the rest of the population of Yehud, although not in a homogeneous way. The gatekeepers appear to be high-ranking officials involved in the economic activity of the temple. The *netinim* seem to be members of the civic community enjoying special rights in spite of (or in connection with) their foreign origins. The sons of Solomon's servants are the most 'artificial' group, for already in their name they contain a reference to a meta-text, or tradition, the form and extent of which at the time of Ezra's writing we cannot be certain of. Finally, the temple singers do not appear to us – as they often do in scholarly literature – as low-ranking choristers or cantors, but rather individuals obliged to render services to the temple and therefore somehow distinguished from the rest of the people in Yehud.

It is also not insignificant to link the reality we are reconstructing here to the hypothesis – proposed by one of us – that the Jerusalem temple in the Persian period owned significant landholdings.⁷² Therefore, in this respect it was similar to contemporary temples in Mesopotamia, which were important centres of local and regional economic life in addition to their cultic activity.⁷³ Accepting this hypothesis, we may venture to suggest that when the biblical authors speak of groups performing certain duties for the temple they may mean performing them locally, i.e., in temple estates situated outside Jerusalem. This would be possible especially in the case of the gatekeepers, if we accept their activity in the taxation sphere, and the *netinim* and sons of Solomon's servants, whose scope of activity we are not sure about.

On the other hand, if we think – especially in the case of the singers – that these services were indeed performed in the main sanctuary, some conclusions can be put forward. First, if the population residing outside Jerusalem was obliged to provide services to the central sanctuary it must be assumed that this work was strictly defined and these services recorded. We would therefore have to assume the existence of a detailed bookkeeping of the work provided to the temple. Second, the organization of such a system of services would have to be based on a precisely defined calendar, applicable to all, in which certain activities and the fulfilment of obligations could be foreseen and planned in advance. Guillaume argued that the creation of the 364-days Sabbatical calendar should not be considered a product of Qumranic sectarianism, but that it was rather introduced in Yehud in the years immediately

⁷¹ Fogelman 2024.

⁷² Niesiolowski-Spanò 2025.

⁷³ *Contra* Bedford 2007, who does not see Babylonian temples as pertinent parallels "given the difference in scale, range of activities, control of land, modes of extracting income, economic importance, and close interaction with the crown" (*20); cf. Lipschits 2024.

following the shift from the Babylonian to the Persian authority.⁷⁴ If we are to trust this reconstruction, then the system we tried to describe in these pages would be contemporary with, or later than, the creation of this calendar in use in Yehud.

Admittedly, this historical reconstruction placed in Persian period Yehud encounters another difficulty. As Fried argues convincingly,⁷⁵ in Persian times power was firmly in the hands of the Persian governor, and the potential role of the temple was subordinate to his authority. Then how do we place the groups obliged to provide services to the temple when we should rather expect services to the Persian crown? An organization of the territory based on *hadru* units would be compatible with the picture of the Jerusalem temple as an extension of the Persian state,⁷⁶ i.e., not only a centre for cultic services and ceremonies, but also and maybe primarily an organizational infrastructure for taxation and collection of labor, mediating between the population of peasants in the province of Yehud and the imperial authority.

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⁷⁴ Guillame 2005.

⁷⁵ Fried 2020; cf. Bedford 2015; Lipschits 2024.

⁷⁶ Cf. Kleber 2011, 107.

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Bernhard Schneider,
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in the Ancient World

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