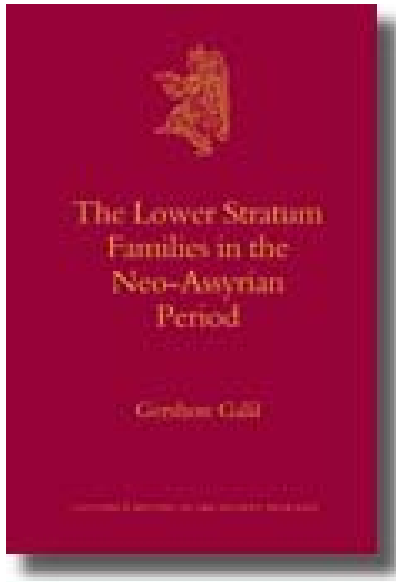


RBL 01/2009



Galil, Gershon

The Lower Stratum Families in the Neo-Assyrian Period

Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 27

Leiden: Brill, 2007. Pp. xviii + 403. Cloth. \$188.00. ISBN 9004155120.

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This book is the first of two proposed volumes designed to analyze the socioeconomic boundaries within which selected ancient Near Eastern families lived and worked in the Neo-Assyrian period (ca. 800–600 B.C.E.). Whereas Russian researchers indebted to the thinking of Karl Marx divide these families into upper, middle, and lower strata on the basis of two criteria (ownership of the means of production plus organization of labor; see, e.g., M. Dandamaev, *Slavery in Babylonia* [DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1984] and Chicago Assyriologist I. J. Gelb divides them into upper class, “semi-free serfs,” and slaves (“From Freedom to Slavery,” in *Geschellschafts-klassen in Alten Zweistromland und in den angrenzenden Gebieten: XVIII Rencontre assyriologique internationale* [ed. D. Edzard; Munich: Beck, 1972], 81–92), University of Haifa Assyriologist Gershon Galil proposes simplifying this down to “the lower stratum on the one hand, and the middle and upper strata on the other” (3). Thus, where volume 2 plans to deal with the upper and middle strata, the present volume seeks, on the basis of the author’s study of 177 nonliterary texts, to describe the socioeconomic living patterns of 447 “lower stratum” families.

From Galil’s perspective, a “family” is a “kinship group containing a number of people defined by others as a ‘family’ or defining themselves as a ‘family,’ whether blood ties exist

among them or not” (5). This includes single parents with children and masters married to female slaves but excludes arrangements denoted by mere lists of siblings or lists of slaves. Admitting the blurriness of these boundaries, he nevertheless tries to go beyond Gelb and Dandamaev (and others) and subcategorize “lower stratum” families into “true slaves” (based largely on the appearance of ARAD or GEMÉ in the texts under study); “pledged people” (those placed in a creditor’s hand as a security for debt; D. N. Premnath subcategorizes this grouping from a Hebraic perspective in “Loan Practices in the Hebrew Bible” in *To Break Every Yoke: Essays in Honor of Marvin L. Chaney* [ed. R. Coote and N. Gottwald; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007], 173–85); “persons listed in sales of land and property” (a much blurrier category than “pledged people”); “persons listed in the so-called Harran Census” (“sharecroppers?”; relying on the work of F. M. Fales, *Censimenti e castati di epoca neo-assira* [Roma: Centra per la antichita e la storia dell’ arto del vicino oriente, 1973]); “persons recorded in royal grants or personal decrees”; “ration recipients” (mostly single-parent families headed by women); and “deportees and displaced persons” (relying on texts published by F. M. Fales and J. N. Postgate, *Imperial Administrative Records, Part II: Provincial and Military Administration* [SAA 11; Helsinki: University of Helsinki Press, 1995]).

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 surveys the reconstructable characteristics of these 447 families within the seven categories just mentioned (the results visually published in tables 1–17, pp. 156–87). Part 2 then reviews all the data collected in part 1 from demographic and socioeconomic perspectives, incorporating other factors such as family type (nuclear, extended, multiple-family), family size (large, medium, small), marriage patterns (monogamous versus polygamous), childlessness (infertility, adoption), children’s age (allowing for high rates of infant mortality), single-parent families (esp. ration recipients), numerical proportions among family members (men vs. women; sons versus daughters), and number of generations in the family (one-generation, two generations, etc.). The result is perhaps the most thorough analysis of lower-stratum ancient Near Eastern families ever produced.

The volume concludes by stating that, of the 477 families studied, only about 30 percent are “clearly slaves or temporarily in that status, namely pledged people” (342). The rest are “probably free persons employed as tenants on land owned by the members of the middle and upper strata” (342). Granting that these purely administrative texts can be more than a little ambiguous, it nevertheless argues that most of the individuals attested here cannot be “true slaves.” The grouping of temple personnel Ashurbanipal exempts from taxes, for example, probably “performed *ilku* duties (“services performed for a higher authority in return for land held,” CAD I-J:73–80), a fact that raises for Galil fundamental questions about “their status,” that is, “whether true slaves are liable for these (*ilku*) services” (344).

The reasoning given to support this conclusion is as follows: (1) that the Neo-Assyrian documents produce no evidence that “true slaves” (as Galil defines the term) perform such services for their masters; (2) that using “true slaves” to do public work is too risky, given the severity of the runaway problem in this period (on which see D. Snell, *Flight and Freedom in the Ancient Near East* [CHANE 8; Leiden: Brill, 2001], 45–62); and (3) that the use of “true slaves” would be economically foolish given the fact that the yearly cost of *ilku*-service is only a few shekels. Thus, because most masters would probably not be willing to risk a property worth 60 shekels for a mere “outlay of one or two shekels,” it is “more reasonable to suggest that the personnel attested in the royal grants are tenants and not slaves” (344).

This study is thoroughly documented and carefully argued, but the fact that it ends with an *argumentum ab silentio* clearly demonstrates the limitations of the administrative literature when attempting to describe the depth of the “slavery-freedom” polarity in the ancient Near East. The ambiguity embedded into these administrative documents makes it practically inevitable that each Assyriologist will lay the definitional boundary-line between “slave” and “worker” in a different place for a different reason, and this reinforces Norman Yoffee’s insistence (agreeing with M. Liverani, *Prestige and Interest* [Padova: Sargon, 1990]) that *holistic* analysis of “culture history cannot afford to exclude the indigenous interpretations of events and behavior that are provided in myths and epics” (“Political Economy in Early Mesopotamian States,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 [1995]: 283).