

## REMNANT

The prophetic writings of the eighth through fourth centuries BC portray descriptions of historical events in which the future existence of a distinct ethnic and geopolitical people named \*[“Israel”](#) was often in question (e.g., aggression and destruction of Samaria and the northern kingdom in 734 BC and 722 BC, the threat against Jerusalem in 701 BC, and subsequent incursions against and deportations of Judeans in 605, 597, 586 and 581 BC) (see [Israelite History](#)). As the threat of either slavery or pogrom from other surrounding nations such as the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian and Persian Empires was continually in the purview of the northern and southern kingdoms, the prophetic figures associated with Israel and Judah interpreted the concept of “remnant” both in negative and positive manners. There are five Hebrew lexemes that provide a semantic range associated with a “remnant theology” (*ʾhr* [[NIDOTTE 1:360–62](#); [TDOT 1:207–12](#)]; *ytr* [[NIDOTTE 2:571–74](#); [TDOT 6:482–91](#)]; *plṭ* [[NIDOTTE 3:621–26](#); [TDOT 11:551–66](#)]; *śrd* [[NIDOTTE 3:1271–72](#); [TDOT 14:215–18](#)]; *šʾr* [[NIDOTTE 4:11–17](#); [TDOT 14:272–86](#)]); the corresponding Greek lexemes in the LXX are *leimma*, *hypoleimma*, *loipos* and *kataloipos*. Beyond the lexical material, the idea of a remnant people can also be adduced through conceptual developments. The conceptualization of a people who are “left behind” has multiple connotative values that may range from positive or negative to suprahistorical or eschatological. The concept of remnant is directly associated with the various historical events that caused those in Israel and Judah to reinterpret who they were as a people of Yahweh.

Depending on the approach taken, theological or strictly historical, the answer to the question of how the understanding of “remnant” originated and developed will differ accordingly. Concerning the former, the first explicit occurrence of the remnant motif is found in [Genesis 7:23](#): “He [God] wiped out everything that was on the face of the ground, from humanity and animals to creeping things and birds of the sky. They were wiped away from the earth. Only Noah was left [*wayiššāʾer*], and those with him in the ark” (see Elliott, [723](#)). Since this is the first appearance of the remnant motif in the canon of the HB set in the context of the primeval flood story, it is curious that the first literary occurrence of this topos in the ancient Near East is found in another Sumerian flood story from the third millennium ([ANET 42–44](#)). Although the observation that this idea occurs early in the “biblical history” of Israel demonstrates its importance to the metanarrative of a more comprehensive biblical theology of “remnant groups” (Rendtorff, 265–79), our concern will be with the prophetic literature and how this literary corpus takes up the remnant topos as a response to the various historical events that shaped the history and self-identity of Israel/Judah.

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### **1. The Historical Question of Origins**

The variety of adaptations of the remnant theme in ancient Near Eastern literature (see Hasel 1980, 50–134) suggests that the concept derived from the practical concern that a people might survive a natural threat such as disease or drought or a social threat such as war or civil strife (Hasel, *ISBE* 5:130). Further, this topos is present in Egyptian mythological texts (e.g., “Book of the Cow of Heaven” [[ANET 10–11](#); [COS 1.24](#):36–37]) and Mesopotamian king lists (e.g., Sumerian King List [[ANET 265–69](#)]). The Akkadian creation story *Enuma Elish* ([ANET 60–72](#), [501–3](#); [COS 1.111](#):390–402) features a remnant people as well as the Syria-Palestine creation story Baal and Anath Cycle ([ANET 129–42](#); [COS 1.86](#):241–74). The remnant motif is also found in the Hittite “Plague Prayers” of King Muršili II ([ANET 394–96](#); [COS 1.60](#):156–60). These primary texts are just a sampling, and the remnant motif spans West Semitic and Mesopotamian literature genres, including hymns, myths, epics, prayers and annals. Although the Neo-Assyrian Empire employed the motif as a propagandistic military tactic to terrify conquered peoples (see Müller and Preuss; Carena), this use is a later specification of the concept as seen in the eighth-century BC prophets (Amos, Isaiah, Micah) after it was already well ingrained in the conceptual and literary milieu of the ancient Near East. The widespread dissemination across all types of *Gattung* suggests that the concept arose from the quite mundane desire for humanity’s survival and existence when life was jeopardized by natural threats. G. Hasel suggests that the remnant concept can be either “historical” or “eschatological,” but this may be slightly reductionistic, and, strictly speaking, the pervasive concern of the writing prophets was not so much for the eschaton as for the return from Babylonian exile. Instead, we can observe in the literature, whether in the OT or greater ancient Near Eastern context, that the survival of a remnant people was viewed both as looking back to physical harm or national disaster and looking forward to a future hope of national existence and identity. Therefore, the notion of remnant evinced a dimension of discontinuity whereby a people were kept for or from judgment and a dimension of continuity whereby a people were kept for [\\*salvation](#).

### **2. Remnant in the Prophetic Literature of the Neo-Assyrian Era**

From the first and earliest instances where the remnant motif is employed in the prophetic literature, the purpose is clear: Yahweh has spared a people from judgment and destruction. The idea refers to a people who have survived either foreign or domestic threats, whether war, famine or pestilence. Amos and Isaiah support this purpose.

**2.1. Amos.** As with the motif of the Day of Yahweh in [Amos 5:18–20](#), the Judean prophet to northern Israel has anything but positive pronouncements to the people. The concept of a remnant theology is pervasive in the book of Amos, but to Amos’s audience this notion only signifies a people who escape destruction from the aggressive Assyrian armies, where an initial deportation occurred in

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734 BC and was then fully realized in 722/21 BC. The first mention of the remnant motif occurs in the oracles against the nations ([Amos 1:2–2:16](#)). As the prophet proclaims Yahweh’s judgment over the surrounding enemies of Israel and Judah, even the “remnant” (*šē’ērîṭ*) of the Philistines will be destroyed ([Amos 1:8](#)). The same is said for Israel, where Yahweh will allow only a few people to remain for a time ([Amos 3:12; 5:3](#)) before he eventually sends the sword and serpent to kill any who have escaped the first round of judgment ([Amos 9:1–4](#)). Yahweh will make sure that there is no “escapee” (*pîṭ*) from the northern kingdom to make up a surviving remnant. This use of the remnant motif corresponds with the Neo-Assyrian war annals, where a conquered and displaced people were left alive so that they might be a sign of judgment for other nations. As Yahweh “shakes” Israel and the other nations, not one “pebble” will fall to the ground ([Amos 9:9–10](#)). Thus, the final form of Amos marks out Joseph/Ephraim (i.e., northern Israel) for death, but a remnant from the house of Jacob (i.e., southern Judah) will continue in covenant relationship. The prophet’s use of the remnant topos is diverse and innovative. He negates the preconceptions of those in Bethel (cf. [Amos 7:10–17](#)), and he sets forth a hope for a remnant people of Yahweh as exclusive to those who align themselves with the reconstitution of the “booth of David” (*sukkat dāwîd*) in Jerusalem ([Amos 9:11–15](#)). The diverse appropriations in the book of Amos provide a conceptual richness that both antedates and influences subsequent prophetic traditions (see Hasel 1980, 173–215).

**2.2. Isaiah.** The characteristics of the remnant motif in [Isaiah 1–39](#) differ from those in [Isaiah 40–66](#), largely due to issues regarding composition, audience and historical concerns. From the outset of the book, Daughter \*Zion has already suffered from war and brutality ([Is 1:7–8](#)), and the surviving community recognizes that it is only due to Yahweh’s mercy that anyone from Judah is still alive ([Is 1:9](#)). Although only a few remain (*hôtîr lānû šārîd*), this motif of the “left over” people contributes to the literary plotline of the book of Isaiah.

The “remnant” people of Yahweh are set against the historical backdrop of Assyrian hegemony and recurring aggression, principally under the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah. The initial image regarding the remnant motif is that of a tenth of a people who survive divine judgment, and they serve as the “holy seed” (*zera’ qōdeš*) who will repopulate the land ([Is 6:13](#)). In [Isaiah 7](#) the prophet’s son, Shearjashub (*šē’ār yāšûb*), is a sign both to Ahaz and to Isaiah himself that King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah of Israel will turn back to their own countries as “fire stumps” that are all but extinguished. In this way, the eldest son of the prophet Isaiah serves as a “living sign” that Yahweh will provide victory over Judah’s northern aggressors. In [Isaiah 10](#) there is a further development of this eponym. Now Yahweh declares that a “remnant will return” (*šē’ār yāšûb*) in the context not of Judah’s defeated enemies but rather of Judah’s continued existence by means of a people who will survive the destruction that Yahweh has determined for the southern kingdom ([Is 10:20–23](#)). The only hope of national existence from the defeat of first the Neo-Assyrian armies and then the Neo-Babylonian armies is that Yahweh keeps a “remnant of Jacob.” Although this remnant people will be dispersed among the surrounding nations ([Is 11:11–12](#)), Yahweh will provide for their return to the land. This hope, however, is not given to the surrounding nations and their remnant people ([Is 16:14; 17:1–6; 21:16–17](#)).

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The chief contribution that Isaiah evinces for the remnant motif is its depiction in terms of agrarian and horticultural imagery. Some scholars see this interpretive expansion as having taken place post-586 BC (*TDOT* 14:279–80). This development is provided in a number of texts ([Is 4:2–3](#); [11:1](#), [10](#); [17:6](#); [37:31–32](#)). In this manner, the conceptualization of a remnant people for Yahweh is associated with the “root” (*šōreš*), “shoot” (*gēzaʿ*, *nēšer*) and “branch” (*šemaḥ*, *ḥōṭer*) of a tree. It is difficult to determine whether the origin of this metaphor is drawn from the ancient Near Eastern notion of a cosmic tree, where the root, shoot and branch represent the three-tiered cosmos, or from a divine or royal figure that symbolizes the source of earthly fertility. For Isaiah, the locus of this people is Mount Zion ([Is 37:31–32](#)), which then brings together the motifs of the cosmic tree coming out of the cosmic mountain. In other prophetic texts such as [Joel 2:32](#); [Haggai 1:12](#), [14](#), a remnant is identified by those who are faithful to Yahweh in Mount Zion (i.e., Jerusalem). This observation implies that the expectation of a remnant people in the prophetic literature is directly linked to those who are loyal to the \*[worship](#) of Yahweh in his Jerusalem sanctuary.

In the latter literary unit of [Isaiah 40–66](#) little lexical and thematic attention is given to the remnant theme ([Is 44:17](#); [46:3](#); [49:21](#)). However, when the concept does surface, it applies to the “survivors of the nations” (*pēlîṭê haggōyim*) that Yahweh calls to worship ([Is 45:20–22](#)). Although the lexical terms do not occur often in this latter part of the book, the concept is there and is enforced by the theme of new exodus in [Isaiah 40–55](#), and an exilic audience is in view that is reminded of the remnant expectations in [Isaiah 1–39](#). The idea of a new or second exodus suggests a salvific or redemptive divine act for the benefit of a remnant people, this time leaving Babylonia. This motif has been readily observed, for example, in [Isaiah 40:1–11](#); [48:17–22](#), where Yahweh leads his people out of Babylonia and into the land of Israel. In addition to the preservation and deliverance of a people, the motif of a second exodus is associated with a renewed creation ([Is 51:3](#)). Both of these events—the preservation of a people and the restoration of creation—find their locus at Mount Zion (see [Anderson](#)).

**2.3. Micah.** The prophet Micah had just witnessed the Neo-Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom in 722/21 BC, and this aggressive empire was set to besiege Jerusalem in the closing years of the eighth century BC. Regardless of whether the remnant theme is due to a postexilic editing, the book of Micah gives this concept a strong theological import. Two perspectives are in view in Micah. On the one hand, the gathering of Yahweh’s people will occur when a sign act is observed whereby a woman will give birth to a child. This event will mark the period when the “remainder” (*yeter*) of the child’s brothers will return to and constitute Israel ([Mic 5:3](#)). In response to the birth of this child, Yahweh will gather together a nation from this exiled remnant ([Mic 2:12](#); [4:6–7](#); [5:7–8](#)). The “remnant [*šē’ērîṭ*] of Jacob” is described as “dew” that comes from Yahweh ([Mic 5:7](#)) and as a “lion” that is fierce and overpowering ([Mic 5:8](#)). In this poetic imagery the remnant topos is given a diverse collocation that allows the concept of remnant to intimate both permanence and retribution. As reflected in the prophets such as Amos and Isaiah, Mount Zion (i.e., Jerusalem) is the locus of this remnant people ([Mic 4:7](#)). A parallel interest is given in other prophetic books where the “escapees” (*pēlîṭâ*) take refuge at Yahweh’s earthly sanctuary ([Joel 2:32](#); [Obad 17](#)).

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### 3. Remnant in the Prophetic Literature of the Neo-Babylonian Era

Once Neo-Assyrian armies exiled northern Israelites and Neo-Babylonian armies exiled southern Judeans, the Prophetic Books reaccommodate the remnant motif to provide hope for a deported and displaced people. Among the Book of the Twelve, Micah (see [2.3](#) above) and Zephaniah contribute to this development, and then Jeremiah and Ezekiel provide complementary perspectives for how the prophets envision this future hope.

**3.1. Zephaniah.** There are three instances of the remnant motif concerning Yahweh's people in Zephaniah ([Zeph 2:7, 9; 3:13](#)). This book is set in the historical context of King Josiah of Judah ([Zeph 1:1](#)), and so the reader is aware that Judah is at the cusp of Babylonian deportation. Just four years after the death of Josiah in 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar already exercised control over Judah and began to deport Judeans (cf. [Dan 1:1–3](#)). Moreover, in the final order of the Book of the Twelve, Zephaniah is positioned as the last book before the Babylonian exile, while the subsequent book of Haggai takes up the concerns of the remnant which has returned to Jerusalem.

In [Zephaniah 2:7](#) the very regions where Nebuchadnezzar has complete hegemony (i.e., the coastal area of Ashkelon) are where Yahweh will restore the influence and control of the “remnant [*šē'ērîṭ*] of the house of Judah.” The same idea is conveyed in [Zephaniah 2:9](#), where Yahweh's “remnant” (*šē'ērîṭ*) will control not only Cisjordan but also Transjordan areas, including Ammon and Moab. The third occurrence of this topos is in [Zephaniah 3:13](#), where the “remnant [*šē'ērîṭ*] of Israel” is returned by Yahweh to the land, and the people are characterized by the removal of sin and deceit from their midst. The writer of Zephaniah portrays the “remnant” of the impending exile as those who will have control over the very areas where the Neo-Babylonian Empire was conquering territory, and they will be a purified and holy people for Yahweh. The descriptions correspond to the overall theme that Yahweh will “remove” (*swr*) a prideful people and that he will “leave” (*š'r*) a humble people ([Zeph 3:11–12](#)). But first, Yahweh must remove the “remnant [*šē'ār*] of Baal” from the land ([Zeph 1:4](#)).

**3.2. Jeremiah.** Jeremiah follows a similar line to that of Amos, with the notion of a “remnant” people largely being a description of disdain. The root *š'r* is used often (42x), but the root *glh* is what signifies that the community who would become the postexilic remnant people of Yahweh (*NIDOTTE* [4:16](#)). With a few passages, however, the idea of a “remnant” is still a positive notion (cf. [Jer 23:3; 31:7](#) [*šē'ērîṭ*]; [Jer 39:9](#) [*yeter*]; [Jer 43:5–6; 50:20](#)) For Jeremiah, the “remnant” is destroyed by Yahweh, but the “exiled” are preserved in Babylon to secure a future generation who will return to the land ([Jer 28:4; 52:28–30](#)). The “escapees” (*plṭ*) and “survivors” (*šrd*) of the Babylonian invasion will die if they stay in Judah or seek refuge in Egypt ([Jer 42:17; 44:14](#)). The book of Jeremiah abounds in metaphor, and this is no different with the remnant theme. It is the “good figs” that are preserved in exile, while the “bad figs” are a rotten remnant that will die in Jerusalem or Egypt ([Jer 24:5–10](#)). The “good figs” are actually the Golah community in Babylonia, who are beneficiaries of Yahweh's favor and promise of return ([Jer 29:4–14](#)). W. L. Holladay notes that this reversal of remnant expectation takes language from Jeremiah's initial call in [Jeremiah 1:10](#) (Holladay, [141](#)). Yahweh sets the prophet “to build” (*bānâ*) and “to plant” (*nāṭa'*), and then Yahweh decides to “build” and “plant” the exiles in Babylonia ([Jer 24:6](#)) and commands the Golah

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community to “build houses” and “plant gardens” in exile ([Jer 29:5](#)). This interesting turn for Jeremiah identifies the Golah with the remnant people who will repatriate Israel in a later generation (Clements, 281–82). Although the concern for a remnant people is central to Jeremiah, it is not a positive term for anyone who remained in Judah or Egypt.

**3.3. Ezekiel.** On two occasions the priest Ezekiel, who served as a prophet during the exile, cries out to Yahweh to relent from killing the “remnant [*šē’ērîṭ*] of Israel” ([Ezek 9:8](#); [11:13](#)). These accounts clearly note that Ezekiel understands the remnant to be the sole hope for the continuation of the Judean people. The oracles of Ezekiel employ the idea of a remnant people who initially would be associated with the Golah community in Babylonia and later with a Golah community that would repopulate Jerusalem in the postexilic period. The presence of Yahweh continues only with those who are in Babylon ([Ezek 11:16](#)), while any other alleged remnant will indeed be abandoned and scattered “to every wind”—that is, throughout the earth ([Ezek 5:10](#) [*šē’ērîṭ*]; [Ezek 17:21](#) [*hanniš’ārîm*]). Other than an enigmatic “mark” (*tāw*) on the forehead of those who are still loyal to Yahweh in Jerusalem ([Ezek 9:4](#)), which separates them from being killed by Yahweh’s agents of judgment ([Ezek 9:6](#)), remnant terminology is sparse in Ezekiel, which is the very prophetic tradition in which it should be most expected. These observations point to the possibility that a thoroughgoing theology of remnant was formulated in Persian Yehud after the Golah community had already returned to Jerusalem.

#### 4. Remnant in the Prophetic Literature of the Persian Era

**4.1. Haggai and Zechariah.** Haggai and Zechariah display the remnant motif and are set in the context of postexilic Persian Yehud. The references to a surviving or remnant people are exclusive to the Golah community that has returned from the Babylonian exile ([Hag 1:12, 14](#); [2:2, 3](#); [Zech 8:6, 11–12](#)) (L. V. Meyer, 671). In this respect, the idea of a remnant people serves as the “bridge concept” between previous generations who have been judged and destroyed by Yahweh and future generations who will be a community prepared for the messianic age (Elliott, 724). As the remnant community set out to build the second temple under the shadow of the Persian Empire, the self-designated remnant saw itself as the true people of Yahweh over and against those who would not take up the task of rebuilding Yahweh’s sanctuary in Jerusalem ([Hag 1:12, 14](#)). Not only did this Golah remnant rebuild the Jerusalem \*[temple](#) cult ([Hag 1:8](#)), but also they alone had obeyed Torah and consequently received Yahweh’s covenantal blessings ([NIDOTTE 4:17](#)). In addition, this Golah community was imbued with the spirit of Yahweh. For Haggai’s audience, only those who have the spirit are designated as the remnant of Israel (cf. [Hag 1:12, 14](#)). Further, only the remnant (*šē’ērîṭ*) of the former people will experience the full restoration of Jerusalem ([Zech 6:15](#); [8:7–8](#)) and the subsequent effect on agricultural prosperity and fecundity over the entire land ([Zech 8:11–12](#)). The expectation for a remnant people in [Zechariah 9–14](#) encompasses both those who are Gentiles ([Zech 9:7](#)) and those who are Judeans ([Zech 13:7–9](#)). This accords well with the expectation that concludes Zechariah where only those nations who worship Yahweh at the annual autumn Feast of Booths in Jerusalem will be spared drought and plague, which again identifies the remnant of Yahweh as those who support the Yahweh’s sanctuary at Mount Zion.

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**4.2. Malachi.** The last book of the Twelve has one reference to the remnant topos. As with Haggai and Zechariah, the postexilic designation of the remnant having the spirit of Yahweh is also noted in Malachi. Only those who have the “remnant of the spirit” (*šē’ār rūah*) have not betrayed Yahweh through cultic and social rebellion ([Mal 2:15](#)).

## 5. Remnant in the Literature of the Greek and Roman Eras

**5.1. Developments in Qumran, Intertestamental and New Testament Literature.** Foreign religious and political entities in Judea grew more oppressive against those who sought to keep Torah and hold fast to the Second Temple cultus during the last two centuries BC. Manuscripts at Khirbet Qumran provide an understanding of the remnant motif that associates the notion with survivors from historical, physical threats ([1Q33 I, 6](#); [IV, 2](#)) as well as the self-understanding of those who composed this “sectarian” literature ([1Q33 I, 3](#); [XIII, 8](#); [XIV, 8](#); [4Q393 3, 7](#)). For the sectarians, keeping Torah was prerequisite to being within the remnant community ([1Q33 XIII, 8](#); [XIV, 8–9](#)). After rehearsing Israelite history at the beginning of the *Damascus Document* ([CD-A I–III](#)), the writer connects the surviving remnant from this historical overview with those who have covenanter identity ([CD-A III, 21–IV, 4](#)). Among the Qumran documents, these *Zadokite Documents* are most revealing of the sectarian’s self-designation with Yahweh’s remnant (Collins, 288–92).

Even in the pseudepigraphal literature this group distinguished itself as Yahweh’s remnant in light of having undergone intense persecution ([4 Ezra 7:27](#); [8:26–28](#)). Moreover, it is those who survive physical threats and who continue in works and faith who will be the eschatological remnant and will be returned to the land ([4 Ezra 9:7–9](#)). The agrarian motif is taken up in *1 Enoch*, where the “remnant” is the seed for a new people ([1 En. 83:8](#); cf. [Apoc. Ab. 29:17](#)). As mentioned in a number of the prophetic traditions, the locus of the remnant people is expected to be Mount Zion ([2 Bar. 40:1–2](#)). Appearances of the remnant topos in the NT are relatively sparse (cf. [Mt 22:14](#); [Lk 12:32](#); [Rev 11:13](#)), but there is a conceptual reality of exile for the Jewish people, which is enlivened with the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. The apostle Paul provides a sustained treatment of the remnant motif in [Romans 9–11](#).

**5.2. Exile in the First Century AD** Since the remnant motif is exhibited in literature as late as the first century BC, it may be inferred that some Jewish groups still considered themselves to be in an exilic state (cf. [Tob 13:5, 13](#); [14:5](#); [Sir 36:10](#); [2 Macc 2:7, 18](#); [Pss. Sol. 8:28](#)). E. P. Sanders argues that a removal of foreign presence in the land and the restoration of the twelve tribes were focal points to a postbiblical remnant understanding (Sanders, 95–98). Evans notes that Jesus’ ministry of preaching and providing signs and wonders exhibited an exilic awareness (Evans, [91–100](#)). Taking this evidence into account, N. T. Wright maintains that a first-century AD Jew would answer positively, “We are in exile,” when asked by a fellow Jew, “Where are we?” In this manner, the exile/restoration nexus with that of a remnant people provides for a remnant theology that moves beyond that of the Babylonian exile and significantly influences the social and literary developments among NT writers (see the essays in Scott).

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## 6. Conclusion

The “escapees” (*plṭ*) and “survivors” (*šrd*) of the successive invasions and deportations by the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the late eighth century BC and the Neo-Babylonian Empire in the early sixth century BC struggled with a continual theological resignification of their remnant status. The development of the remnant motif can be seen in the prophetic literature whereby certain historical events brought about the need to reassess theologically the nature and identity of Israel (TDOT 14:278–79). In a sense, remnant terminology became a *de facto* mark of identity for those loyal to Torah and the centralization of the second temple in fifth-century BC Yehud. In later Jewish traditions, various groups aligned themselves with this remnant designation where each understood itself to be the *šē’ērîṭ* of Yahweh. However, after AD 70 the Pharisees became the dominant and authoritative group in Judaism and believed that all Israel constituted the remnant and would be saved for the coming world. Again, agrarian metaphor was applied to the remnant motif, but this time within an eschatological perspective: “All Israel will have a portion in the world to come, for it is written: ‘Your people are all righteous; they shall inherit the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified’ ” ([b. Sanh. 90a](#)).

See also [EXILE](#); [DAY OF THE LORD](#); [ISRAEL](#); [ISRAELITE HISTORY](#); [TEMPLE](#).

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