

SHEDDING NEW LIGHT ON THE DARK YEARS OF
THE “EXILIC PERIOD”: NEW STUDIES, FURTHER
ELUCIDATION, AND SOME QUESTIONS REGARDING
THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF JUDAH AS AN “EMPTY LAND”

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Babylonian attack on the kingdom of Judah at the beginning of the sixth century B.C.E. brought about the desolation and utter destruction of Jerusalem and its immediate environs. The house of David ceased to reign; the temple was left in ruins; “the foxes walk upon it” (Lam 5:18). Furthermore, the western border of Judah was destroyed as part of the Babylonian military campaign, and the urban and administrative centers, the military forts, as well as many of the rural settlements in the region were crushed and deserted. In what was probably a longer, more complex process, the peripheral regions of the kingdom in the Negev to the south and in the Judean Desert, the Jordan Valley, and the western shore of the Dead Sea to the east all collapsed, with ruinous consequences. Many of the Judahites were exiled to Babylon, while many others escaped or were forced to leave their land and homes, or perished from the harsh penalties of the long war and the presence of the Babylonian forces in Judah. The small kingdom, which had existed for hundreds of years, turned into a province. A new period in the history of Judah had begun, its borders shrunk and its population sharply depleted. The social, theological and historical center of its gravity shifted to the community of deportees in Babylon. This is, at least, the gloomy, depressing picture that scholars have painted for decades of the “exilic period” of Babylonian rule over Judah (604–539 B.C.E.).

In recent years, new finds from the sixth century B.C.E., as well as new studies concerning the archaeology of Judah between the seventh and the fifth centuries B.C.E., have shed new light on our understanding of this period. Despite its harshness, the sixty-five-year interval has shown itself to be a period of administrative, economic, and cultural continuity, especially in the close peripheral circle to the north and south of Jerusalem. The dreary picture was not quite so bleak after all.

In this essay I will briefly present these new studies and new finds, and will discuss their meaning and implications for our understanding of the history of Judah in the sixth century B.C.E., and for our understanding of the biblical descriptions of the Babylonian destruction. This will provide us with the basis for discussing and clarifying the problematic nature of the current methodologies for understanding the archaeological research of this period, the limitation of historical research based on archaeological material, and the motivation and “hidden polemics” of scholars studying the “empty land” in Judah.

2. NEW STUDIES AND NEW FINDS THAT SHED NEW LIGHT ON THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE SIXTH CENTURY B.C.E. IN JUDAH

2.1. The Continuation of the Judahite Administrative Center at Ramat Raḥel from the Late Iron Age to the Persian Period

The site of Ramat Raḥel provides a first case in point. The earliest building level at Ramat Raḥel (Aharoni’s Stratum Vb) was settled in the late eighth, more probably in the early seventh century B.C.E.¹ Few architectural

1. Yohanan Aharoni, *Excavations at Ramat Raḥel: Seasons 1961 and 1962* (Serie archeologica 6; Rome: Università degli studi, Centro di studi semitici, 1964), 61–63, 119–20; Oded Lipschits et al., “Ramat Raḥel and Its Secrets” [Hebrew], *Qad* 138 (2009): 61–64; idem, “Palace and Village, Paradise and Oblivion: Unraveling the Riddles of Ramat Raḥel,” *NEA* 74 (2011): 10–14. Aharoni (*Excavations at Ramat Raḥel: Seasons 1961 and 1962*, 119) dated this early level to the late eighth and early seventh centuries B.C.E. (see also Miriam Aharoni and Yohanan Aharoni, “The Stratification of Judahite Sites in the 8th and 7th Centuries B.C.E.,” *BASOR* 224 [1976]: 73–90). The renewed excavations at the site (2005–2010) confirmed this date and demonstrated that this early building phase, which probably began only after the 701 B.C.E. Assyrian campaign to Judah, continued to exist without any break through the seventh century B.C.E. See Lipschits et al., “Ramat Raḥel and Its Secrets,” 61–64; Oded Lipschits, Omer Sergi, and Ido Koch, “Royal Judahite Jar Handles: Reconsidering the Chronol-

remains belong to this phase, but a large quantity of pottery and about 225 *lmlk* stamped jar handles, most of which originated in fills under the second building level (Aharoni's Stratum VA), are a clear indication that already in this early phase the site served as a Judahite administrative center. The site was built near Jerusalem at the time when Judah was a vassal kingdom under Assyrian auspices, probably in order to collect goods in kind, mainly jars of wine and oil.²

In the second building phase (Aharoni's Stratum VA), dated to the last third of the seventh century B.C.E.,³ an imposing edifice stood atop the mound.⁴ This is one of the most impressive structures discovered in Judah, and it is no wonder that scholars have described it as either a palace for Judean kings,⁵ or an Assyrian⁶ or Judahite administrative center.⁷ Its walls were of ashlar blocks, unique in Judahite architecture, and it was

ogy of the *lmlk* Stamp Impressions," *TA* 37 (2010): 3–32; idem, "Judahite Stamped and Incised Jar Handles: A Tool for Studying the History of Late Monarchic Judah," *TA* 38 (2011): 5–41.

2. Oded Lipschits and Yuval Gadot, "Ramat Raḥel and the Emeq Rephaim Sites—Links and Interpretations," in *New Studies in the Archaeology of Jerusalem and Its Religion: Collected Papers* (ed. D. Amit and G. D. Stiebel; 2 vols.; Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2008), 2:88–96; Lipschits et al., "Palace and Village," 16–20.

3. See Yohanan Aharoni, *Excavations at Ramat Raḥel: Seasons 1959 and 1960* (Serie archeologica 2; Rome: Università degli studi, Centro di studi semitici, 1962), 51–53; idem, *Excavations at Ramat Raḥel: Seasons 1961 and 1962*, 119–20, which dated this palace to the time of Jehoiakim (609–598 B.C.E.). But the renewed excavations proved that the date of this phase extends from the last third of the seventh century into the sixth century without any indication of destruction at the beginning of the sixth century B.C.E.

4. Lipschits et al., "Ramat Raḥel and Its Secrets," 64–70; idem, "Palace and Village," 20–34.

5. Aharoni, *Excavations at Ramat Raḥel Seasons 1961 and 1962*, 119–20; Ephraim Stern, *The Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Periods (732–332 B.C.E.)* (vol. 2 of *The Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 69, 162; Gabriel Barkay, "Royal Palace, Royal Portrait? The Tantalizing Possibilities of Ramat Raḥel," *BAR* 32 (2006): 34–44 (39–42).

6. Nadav Na'aman, "An Assyrian Residence in Ramat Raḥel," *TA* 28 (2001): 260–280 (271–73).

7. Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 213–16; Lipschits and Gadot, "Ramat Raḥel and the Emeq Rephaim Sites," 88–96; Lipschits et al., "Palace and Village," 20–34.

decorated with volute (proto-Aeolic) capitals,⁸ magnificent window balustrades, small limestone stepped, pyramid-shaped stones (probably part of the crenellation that topped the edifice wall), and other stone ornaments. Yohanan Aharoni assumed that the palace was surrounded by a wide, fortified courtyard extending over an area of about 2 hectares.⁹ However, the renewed excavation project revealed that the edifice was surrounded on the south, west, and north by a magnificent garden, well built on artificially flattened bedrock. In and around this area large pools with high quality ashlar were built, surrounded by tunnels, channels, and other water installations covered with thick layers of plaster. This garden, as well as the edifice to its east, continued to exist until the Persian period, when the edifice was expanded on its northwestern corner. Of about 235 rosette stamp impressions known today, which date to the last decades of the Judean monarchy, forty-three were excavated at Ramat Raḥel, all of them above the floors of the second building phase, none of them below it.¹⁰ This is a clear indication that the site continued to function as an important administrative center in Judah during the period when the large edifice and gardens were built.

Contrary to Aharoni's interpretation, there is no evidence for the destruction of Ramat Raḥel at the beginning of the sixth century B.C.E., or for a long occupational gap at the site.¹¹ The renewed excavations clearly demonstrated that the site continued to exist during the sixth century B.C.E., when Jerusalem was in ruins and Mizpah/Tell en-Naṣbeh was the capital of Judah.¹² Throughout this period, the second building phase at the site persisted without marked change.

8. Oded Lipschits, "Persian Period Finds from Jerusalem: Facts and Interpretations," *JHS* 9 (2009): 2–30.

9. Aharoni, *Excavations at Ramat Raḥel: Seasons 1961 and 1962*, 119.

10. Nadav Na'aman, "The Kingdom of Judah under Josiah," *TA* 18 (1991): 3–71 (31–33, 42–43, 57); idem, "An Assyrian Residence in Ramat Raḥel," 291–93; Ido Koch and Oded Lipschits, "The Final Days of the Kingdom of Judah in Light of the Rosette-Stamped Jar Handles" [Hebrew], *Cathedra* 137 (2010): 7–26.

11. Aharoni, *Excavations at Ramat Raḥel: Seasons 1961 and 1962*, 120.

12. Oded Lipschits, "Nebuchadrezzar's Policy in 'Hattu-Land' and the Fate of the Kingdom of Judah," *UF* 30 (1999): 473–76; Lipschits et al., "Ramat Raḥel and Its Secrets," 70; idem, "Palace and Village," 34–37.

Aharoni dated his next stratum, IVB, to the long period covering the Persian and Hasmonean eras.¹³ Numerous small artifacts from these periods have been found, but only fragmented architectural remains. The renewed excavations at the site have uncovered valuable new evidence that illuminates Persian period Ramat Raḥel and emphasizes the continuum between the second and the third building phases, dated from the late sixth to the late fourth century B.C.E., with two main subphases. The remains of a new building, both sturdy and large, were exposed. Rectangular in shape, it was built on the northwestern side of the second-phase edifice complex, covers an area of about six hundred square meters, and comprises a new wing added to the existing complex, surrounding the largest pool of the second building phase. In the southeastern corner of the site, a huge pit was excavated that contained hundreds of pottery vessels, among them more than ten restorable jars, some of them bearing stamp impressions from the early *yhwd* types, and some with sixth-century “private” stamp impressions together with lion stamp impressions on body sherds. These finds, together with hundreds of stamp impressions on jar handles dated to the Persian and Hellenistic occupation periods at the site, are the best indication that Ramat Raḥel was the main center of the *yhwd* system in which the jars circulated. The possible involvement of the central Achaemenid government may be indicated by the intensive construction at the site and in the unusual creation of the additional wing on the northwestern side of the existing edifice, the style and strength of which are unparalleled by any other finds in the area in the same period.¹⁴ As for the history of the site during the sixth century B.C.E., it seems that the continuous function of Ramat Raḥel as an administrative site is best attested by the continuity of use of the system of stamped jar handles, as indicated below.

2.2. The Continuation of the System of Stamped Jar Handles during the Sixth Century B.C.E.

The unique administrative nature of Ramat Raḥel is best reflected in its profusion of stamped jar handles. Over three hundred stamped handles from the late Iron Age have been found at the site, including *lmlk* and “pri-

13. Aharoni, *Excavations at Ramat Raḥel: Seasons 1961 and 1962*, 120–21; cf. Stern, *Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Periods*, 324, 436–37.

14. Lipschits et al., “Ramat Raḥel and Its Secrets,” 70–72; idem, “Palace and Village,” 34–37.

vate” stamp impressions (late eighth and early seventh centuries B.C.E.); concentric circle incisions (mid-seventh century B.C.E.), and rosette stamp impressions (late seventh to early sixth centuries B.C.E.). In the Persian and Hellenistic periods, too, Ramat Raḥel was the main center of stamped jar handles, with more than three hundred *yhw*d stamp impressions dated to the late sixth to mid-second centuries B.C.E., and *yršlm* stamp impressions (second century B.C.E.). All in all, this phenomenon takes in more than half a millennium of continuous, systemized administration of the collecting of jars of wine and oil. During long periods of this half millennium, Ramat Raḥel functioned as the main Judahite administration and collection center—as is evidenced by the presence at this small site of the large number of most of the different types of stamped handles excavated in Judah. No other Judahite site, not even Jerusalem, can challenge Ramat Raḥel’s record.

2.3. The Lion Stamped Jar Handles and the Sixth-Century B.C.E. Administration in Judah

Wedged between the two systems of stamped jar handles—that from the Iron Age and that from the Persian and Hellenistic periods—another system existed in Judah, and mainly at Ramat Raḥel: the lion stamp impressions on the body or the handles of jars. Seventy-seven lion stamped jar handles were excavated at Ramat Raḥel, out of a total of about 110 stamped handles known to us to date. A modified typological classification demonstrates that two out of ten types were found solely at Ramat Raḥel, that one additional type was found at Ramat Raḥel and Nebi Samwil only, and that all the other types are represented mainly at Ramat Raḥel. Until recently, scholars dated the lion stamp impressions to the very beginning of the Persian period.¹⁵ The reason is the absence of these stamped handles from the “classic” Persian period strata, and the historical assumption that they

15. Ephraim Stern, *Material Culture of the Land of the Bible in the Persian Period, 538–332 B.C.* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1982), 209–10; idem, *Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Periods*, 541. Cf. Donal Tzvi Ariel and Yair Shoham, “Locally Stamped Handles and Associated Body Fragments of the Persian and Hellenistic Periods,” in *Excavations at the City of David 1978–1985, IV* (ed. D. T. Ariel; Qedem 41; Jerusalem: Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2000), 141. However, see H. G. M. Williamson, “The Governors of Judah under the Persians,” *TynBul* 39 (1988): 60–64.

cannot be dated to the pre-Persian period (i.e., to the “exilic period”). In addition, Ephraim Stern interpreted the “object”¹⁶ or “indistinct signs”¹⁷ forming part of a scene depicting a lion standing on his hind legs, with the two front legs stretched out wide, as an Achaemenid “fire altar.” However, a new study of the iconography of this type hints at the connection of these objects with the Assyrian-Babylonian world.¹⁸ Furthermore, petrographic analysis of the lion stamped handles made by Boaz Gross and Yuval Goren shows a resemblance to Iron Age patterns of the rosette jar handles (pottery production in the Shephelah of Judah and in the area of Jerusalem) rather than to Persian-period patterns of the *yhwd* jars (pottery production solely in the area of Jerusalem).¹⁹

The conclusion is that the lion stamp impression system belongs to an earlier and wider sixth-century B.C.E. administrative system and that it should be placed in the Babylonian period. This is the “missing link” in administrative continuity in Judah; it was part of the Babylonian administration that lasted until the beginning of the Persian period, at which point it was replaced by the *yhwd* stamp impression system.

The prominence of the lion stamp impressions is another indication that Ramat Raḥel continued to have a major administrative role during the sixth century B.C.E., while its second building phase continued to exist. Only one *mwšh* stamp impression—which probably also dates to the mid-sixth century B.C.E.²⁰—came from Ramat Raḥel, whereas thirty *mwšh* stamp impressions were excavated at Tell en-Naṣbeh, the new capital of Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem.²¹ This fact suggests that the administrative center that continued to exist at Ramat Raḥel had a different role and status from those of the capitals, whether Jerusalem or Mizpah.

16. Aharoni, *Excavations at Ramat Raḥel: Seasons 1961 and 1962*, 45.

17. James B. Pritchard, *The Water System of Gibeon* (Museum Monographs; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1961), opposite of fig. 46.

18. Benjamin Sass, “The Lion Stamp Impressions from Sixth Century B.C.E. Babylon and Their Connection to the Lion Stamp Impressions from Judah” [Hebrew], in *New Studies on the Lion Stamped Jar Handles from Judah* (ed. O. Lipschits and I. Koch; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2010), 13–14.

19. Boaz Gross and Yuval Goren, “A Technological Study of the Lion Stamped Handles—Preliminary Results,” in Lipschits and Koch, *New Studies on the Lion Stamped Jar Handles from Judah*, 11–12.

20. Jeffrey R. Zorn, Joseph Yellin, John Hayes, “The *M(W)ŠH* Stamp Impressions and the Neo-Babylonian Period,” *IEJ* 44 (1994): 161–83.

21. Lipschits, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 179–81.

2.4. The Continuation in Pottery Production in Judah between the End of the Iron Age and the Persian Period

New discoveries at Ramat Raḥel have proven the theory that characteristics of the well known local pottery assemblages dating to the end of the Iron Age and to the Persian period exhibit continuity, and therefore attest to the existence of an unbroken tradition of pottery production in Judah from the end of the seventh to the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E.²² There is a time gap of 150 years between the well known pottery assemblages from the late Iron Age, as discovered at Lachish Level II, City of David Stratum 10, Tell Beit Mirsim Stratum 3A, Tel Arad Strata VII-VI; Tel 'Ira Stratum VI; En-gedi (Tell Goren) Stratum V, and building levels 1 and 2 at Ramat Raḥel,²³ and the typical pottery assemblages from the Persian period, as known from En-gedi Stratum IV, Stratum 9 of Area G in the City of David, Jabel Nimra Stage II, building level 3 at Ramat Raḥel, and sites in the region of Benjamin.²⁴ The new pottery assemblage from Ramat Raḥel is the only one thus far that clearly fills this gap, and thus supports the theoretical assumption that the local traditions of pottery production continued throughout the sixth century B.C.E.

The best examples of this continuity are the store jars from the Persian period, characterized by an ovoid- or sack-shaped body, convex base, narrow neck, rounded shoulder, thick, everted rim and four loop handles that extend from the shoulder to the body (Type A, according to Stern).²⁵ These jars exhibit the features of those jars characteristic of the end of the Iron Age in Judah (known also as “rosette jars”), continued the tradition of production, and were widespread only within the province of Judah.²⁶ The fact that exactly this type of jar was recently discovered at Ramat Raḥel with sixth century “private” and lion stamp impressions on the body of the jars, with the same type of jars bearing the early types of *yhwd* stamp impressions on their handles, all of them very similar in shape and proportion to the “rosette jars” from the late Iron Age, is a clear indication that

22. *Ibid.*, 192–205, with further literature; Lipschits et al., *What the Stones Are Whispering: 3000 Years of Forgotten History at Ramat Raḥel* [Hebrew] (forthcoming).

23. Lipschits, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 192–93, with further literature.

24. See, e.g., *ibid.*, 193, with further literature.

25. See Stern, *Material Culture of the Land of the Bible*, 103; Lipschits, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 199.

26. Stern, *Material Culture of the Land of the Bible*, 103.

jars of this kind continued to appear in Judah in the sixth century B.C.E. Later, in the Persian period, the jars with a more pronounced globular, sack-shaped body and those with two to four handles or with no handles at all (Types B and C, according to Stern)²⁷ gradually replaced this type of jar. On many of the handles of these jars, middle and late types of *yhwd* stamp impressions were discovered.

This is also the case with many other pottery vessels from the Persian period that continued to be produced from the late Iron Age into the sixth and early fifth centuries B.C.E. During the fifth century B.C.E. they began to demonstrate new features in terms of shape, processing technique, and material, probably due to influences of internal slow and gradual developments and interaction with both neighboring regions and cultures as well as with the culture of the Babylonian and Persian empires, and later on with the Hellenistic civilization. The characteristics common to almost all of the Persian-period vessels are the thickened, everted rim, trumpet base or raised disc base, globular sack-shaped body, and raised or “suspended” handles. These “classic” characteristics appear only in the fifth century B.C.E., and it seems that the sixth century B.C.E. serves, to some extent, as a transition period between the cylindrical-elliptical shape characteristic of the Iron Age and the shape characteristic of the Persian period. One main feature of the changes in the technique of pottery production is the disappearance of the polishing, especially of the bowls.²⁸

This “intermediate” culture of the sixth century B.C.E. was not identified until now and did not get its typological and chronological definition because of its close similarity to the pottery assemblages that preceded and followed it. As will be discussed below, it was also not identified because scholars assumed that life ceased to exist in Judah during the “exilic period,” and that pottery production and all other expressions of economy and administration could not be developed in Judah during this period. This assumption caused archaeologists to identify the “intermediate” material culture of the sixth century B.C.E. as representing the late Iron

27. *Ibid.*, 103–4.

28. See Lawrence A. Sinclair, “Bethel Pottery of the Sixth Century B.C.,” in *The Excavation of Bethel (1934–1960)* (ed. James L. Kelso and William F. Albright; AASOR 39; Cambridge: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1968), 71; and Nancy Lapp, ed., *The Third Campaign at Tell el-Ful: The Excavations of 1964* (AASOR 45; Cambridge: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1981), 84–85, who dated this change to the first half of the sixth century B.C.E.

Age (late seventh to early sixth centuries B.C.E.). This is so even in areas where there is a scholarly consensus that life continued in Judah in the sixth century B.C.E.²⁹

The newly discovered, and not yet published, pottery assemblage from Ramat Raḥel stands as the clear marker for this group of sixth century B.C.E. pottery assemblage. Similar pottery assemblages can be found at a number of central sites, primarily in the Benjamin region, such as Tell el-Fûl (Stratum IIIb), several defined loci in Stratum I at Tell en-Naṣbeh, as well as well-defined pottery assemblages at Beitin and el-Jib.³⁰

2.5. Continuation in the Rural Settlements to the North and South of Jerusalem

During the Babylonian period, a marked change took place in the characteristics of the settled areas. The settlement center of gravity moved from Jerusalem to the close periphery, and a new pattern of settlement was created in which the core was depleted and the nearby periphery continued to exist almost unchanged.³¹

29. See, e.g., the assumption of Finkelstein in Yitzhak Magen and Israel Finkelstein, *Archaeological Survey in the Hill Country of Benjamin* (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority Publications, 1993), 27.

30. Lipschits, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 193–94, with further literature.

31. There are two main changes in settlement pattern and characteristics in Judah following the Babylonian 586 B.C.E. campaign. Since the beginning of the 1950s, many scholars have noted the different fate that befell the Benjamin region and the archaeological reality that prevailed there after the destruction of Jerusalem. See, e.g., Abraham Malamat, “The Last Wars of the Kingdom of Judah,” *JNES* 9 (1950): 218–28 (227); G. Ernest Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), 199; Paul W. Lapp, “Tell el-Full,” *BA* 28 (1965): 2–10 (6); Shmuel S. Weinberg, “Eretz Israel after the Destruction of the First Temple: Archaeological Report” [Hebrew], *PNAS* 4 (1970): 206; Joel P. Weinberg, “Demographische Notizen zur Geschichte der nachexilischen Gemeinde in Juda,” *Klio* 54 (1972): 47–50; Stern, *Material Culture of the Land of the Bible*, 229; idem, “The Babylonian Gap,” *BAR* 26.6 (2000): 51; idem, *Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Periods*, 321–23; Hans M. Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land: A Study in the History and Archaeology of Judah during the “Exilic” Period* (SO 28; Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996) 47–48; idem, “After the ‘Myth of the Empty Land’: Major Challenges in the Study of Neo-Babylonian Judah,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (ed. Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 6–9; Ianir Milevski, “Settlement Patterns in Northern Judah during the Achaemenid Period, according to the Hill Country of

The lack of definition of the sixth-century material culture and the continuation of the familiar late Iron Age material culture to the “exilic period” of the sixth century B.C.E. caused a phenomenon in which, at sites lacking archaeological evidence of the Babylonian destruction, especially in the small and rural sites, no distinction was made between strata from the end of the Iron Age and strata from the Babylonian and Persian periods. Even at sites where archaeological evidence of late Iron Age destruction was found, but life continued and another building level was located, the exact time of the destruction and settlement restoration could not be archaeologically located, and historical interpretation was used and presented as archaeological conclusion. This is the case mainly with the destruction of many sites in the Negev, the Southern Shephelah, the southern part of the Judean Hills, the Jordan Valley, and the Dead Sea area. On the basis of historical assumption, the destruction of many Iron Age sites in these areas was ascribed to Babylonian activity at the beginning of the sixth century B.C.E.; other options such as a gradual collapse before and after the fall of Jerusalem were never considered.³² Furthermore, at many sites the finds from the Babylonian, Persian, and sometimes even Hellenistic periods were not separated, mainly because settlement continuity prevailed in the transition from Babylonian to Persian rule as well as in the transition to the Ptolemaic and Selucid periods, and there was difficulty in distinguishing between these periods.³³

Benjamin and Jerusalem Surveys,” *BAIAS* 15 (1996–1997): 7–29; Oded Lipschits, “The History of the Benjaminite Region under Babylonian Rule,” *TA* 26 (1999): 155–90; idem, “Judah, Jerusalem and the Temple (586–539 B.C.E.),” *Transeu* 22 (2001): 131–35; idem, “Demographic Changes in Judah between the Seventh and the Fifth Centuries B.C.E.,” in Lipschits and Blenkinsopp, *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, 346–51; idem, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 237–49; Oded, “Myth of the Empty Land,” 71. It is probable that the same archaeological picture existed also in the area south of Jerusalem, between Bethlehem and Tekoa, and to a lesser extent in the area more to the south, as far as Beth-zur (Lipschits, “Demographic Changes in Judah,” 351–55; idem, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 250–58; Lipschits and Gadot, “Ramat Raḥel and the Emeq Rephaim Sites,” 88–96.

32. On the archaeological data and its interpretation, see Lipschits, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 224–37, with further literature.

33. See, e.g., the broad definition given to the “Persian-Hellenistic period” in Gezer (500 B.C.E. to 100 C.E.); to the “late Judahite period” in Jericho; to the “Hellenistic period” in Beth-zur (between the destruction of the First Temple and the Roman period); to the far-ranging characterization in Gibeon of all of the meager remnants between the sixth century B.C.E. and the first century C.E.; to the preliminary dating

During this time, the Judahite population that continued to subsist in the northern Judean highlands and in the Benjamin region preserved its material culture. There lies the great difficulty posed to archaeological research in discerning this culture and defining it. Many scholars have discerned the different fate of the Benjamin region and the archaeological reality in it after the destruction of Jerusalem.³⁴ The biblical description regarding the fate of this region during the Babylonian campaign against Jerusalem and after the destruction of the city, together with excavation data of the main sites explored in the Benjamin region and the data of surveys conducted there, attest that the region was not destroyed with Jerusalem. As a historical interpretation of this data, one may assume that already before the fall of Jerusalem the Babylonians had chosen Mizpah as the alternative capital of the Babylonian province, and appointed Gedaliah as the first governor.³⁵

The area to the south of Jerusalem, with the Rephaim Valley in its center, probably had the same fate as the Benjamin region. The Rephaim Valley, with its rich alluvial soil and moderately terraced slopes, has historically been one of the prosperous agricultural districts in the environs of Jerusalem, vital to the economy of the city. The mounting archaeological data from this area, underscored by the many agricultural installations and small farmsteads found in and around the valley, confirms that those periods during which the Rephaim Valley flourished agriculturally are the same periods during which there was construction at Ramat Raḥel, that is, from the late Iron Age to the Persian period, with no sign of a hiatus (including, e.g., storage jars stamped with lion stamp impressions discovered at Khirbet er-Ras [not yet published]).

The site of Rogem Ganim was the main production center in the Rephaim basin.³⁶ It is located at the western edge of the upper part of the Rephaim catchment, about seven kilometers west of Ramat Raḥel. In addi-

of Stratum IV at Ramat Raḥel between the fifth century B.C.E. and the first century C.E., etc.

34. See Malamat, "The Last Wars of the Kingdom of Judah," 227; Wright, *Biblical Archaeology*, 199; Lapp, "Tell el-Full," 6; Weinberg, "Eretz Israel after the Destruction of the First Temple," 82; Nahman Avigad, "Two Hebrew Inscriptions on Wine Jars," *IEJ* 22 (1972): 8; Stern, *Material Culture of the Land of the Bible*, 229; idem, "The Babylonian Gap: The Archaeological Reality," *JSOT* 28 (2004): 273; Lipschits, "History of the Benjaminite Region," 155–90; idem, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 237–49.

35. Lipschits, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 98–112.

36. Raphael Greenberg and Gilad Cinamon, "Stamped and Incised Jar Handles

tion to a large tumulus (9 m high and 40 m across), Raphael Greenberg and Gilad Cinamon uncovered winepresses, storage caves, and plastered cisterns, but no architecture evidence of a site of agricultural industry and storage. The pottery discovered at the site included mostly jars, and most of the repertoire dates to the late Iron Age and to the Persian period.³⁷ According to the new assumptions concerning the lion stamp impressions and the sixth century B.C.E., the site may have continued to exist during the Babylonian period as well.³⁸

All in all, it seems that Rogem Ganim was the main economic-agricultural site in the Rephaim basin, functioning in tandem with the administrative center at Ramat Raḥel.³⁹ Khirbet er-Ras, located on the slopes of a spur just above the riverbed of the Rephaim Valley, is the only site in the valley where private houses were discovered beside agricultural installations. During the surveys and the excavations, different structures and agricultural installations were discovered with pottery and other finds from the late Iron Age, with some scant remains from the Middle Bronze and Early Roman periods.⁴⁰ A *lmlk* stamped jar handle

from Rogem Ganim and Their Implications for the Political Economy of Jerusalem, Late 8th–Early 4th Centuries B.C.E.,” *TA* 33 (2006): 229–43.

37. *Ibid.*, 229.

38. Four *lmlk* stamped jar handles, four other handles with concentric circles, and three rosette stamped handles were discovered from the late Iron Age. Three lion stamp impressions were discovered from the sixth century B.C.E. From the Persian period two *yhwd* stamp impressions of the early types dated to the late sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. and five *yhwd* stamp impressions from the middle types dated to the fourth and third centuries B.C.E. (see *ibid.*, 231–33, 234 fig. 3, 240; Oded Lipschits and David Vanderhooft, *Yehud Stamp Impressions: A Corpus of Inscribed Stamp Impressions from the Persian and Hellenistic Periods in Judah* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, forthcoming). No Hellenistic remains come from the site, which dovetails with the absence of *yhwd* stamp impressions of the late types.

39. Gilad Cinamon, “The Tumuli South-West of Jerusalem and Their Significance to the Understanding of Jerusalem’s Countryside in the Iron Age II” (M.A. thesis, Tel Aviv University, 2004); Greenberg and Cinamon, “Stamped and Incised Jar Handles,” 229, 233–35; Lipschits and Gadot, “Ramat Raḥel and the Emeq Rephaim Sites,” 88–96; Lipschits and Vanderhooft, *Yehud Stamp Impressions*.

40. Nurit Feig, “The Environs of Jerusalem in the Iron Age II” [Hebrew], in *The History of Jerusalem: The Biblical Period* (ed. S. Ahituv and B. Mazar; Jerusalem: Yad Yitshak Ben Tsevi, 2000), 387–409.

was discovered,⁴¹ dated to the early seventh century B.C.E.⁴² and two lion stamp impressions were discovered at the site and at the slopes above it (not yet published), indicating the continued use of the site during the sixth century B.C.E. No *yhwd* stamped jar handles were discovered at Khirbet er-Ras, but according to the surveys Persian-period pottery is present at the site.⁴³

These sites may also have functioned together with other small hamlets, farms, and agricultural installations in the area, all of them with late Iron Age and Persian-period pottery,⁴⁴ and probably attached to winepresses. These include, beside the farm at er-Ras,⁴⁵ a farm (?) and winepresses at Beit Safafa;⁴⁶ a cave site excavated near the Holyland Hotel in Jerusalem;⁴⁷ and probably also the sites at Manaḥat, Giv'at Massuah, and some other small sites.⁴⁸

Although no continuous stratigraphic sequence exists at such small sites, Greenberg and Cinamon hypothesize, on the basis of the chronological distribution of the jar stamp impressions, that the area served as

41. Nurit Feig and Omar Abed-Rabo, "Khirbet er-Ras" [Hebrew], *Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 103 (1995): 65–66.

42. Lipschits, Sergi, and Koch, "Royal Judahite Jar Handles," 3–32.

43. Amos Kloner, *Survey of Jerusalem: The Southern Sector* (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2000), 29.

44. Greenberg and Cinamon, "Stamped and Incised Jar Handles," 233.

45. Nurit Feig, "New Discoveries in the Rephaim Valley, Jerusalem," *PEQ* 128 (1996) 3–7; Gershon Edelstein, "A Terraced Farm at Er-Ras," *Atiqot* 40 (2000): 39–63.

46. Nurit Feig, "Excavations at Beit Safafa: Iron Age II and Byzantine Agricultural Installations South of Jerusalem," *Atiqot* 44 (2003): 191–238.

47. Sarah Ben-Arieh, "Salvage Excavations near the Holyland Hotel, Jerusalem," *Atiqot* 40 (2000): 1–24.

48. Greenberg and Cinamon ("Stamped and Incised Jar Handles," 234–36 and Table 2) mentioned thirty-five winepresses (eight wine presses at Rogem Ganim, sixteen at the nearby site of Manaḥat, five at Giv'at Massuah, four at Beit Safafa, and two at Khirbet er-Ras), together with numerous other installations connected to wine production such as plastered tanks and storage caves. The absence of silos like those discovered at the nearby site of Moza (Zvi Greenhut and Alon De Groot, "Moza—A Bronze and Iron Age Village West of Jerusalem" [Hebrew with English abstract], *Qad* 123 [2002]: 8–11; Zvi Greenhut, "Production, Storage and Distribution of Grain during the Iron Age and Their Linkage to the Socio-Economic Organization of the Settlement in Israel" [Hebrew] [Ph.D. diss., Tel Aviv University, 2006], 195–281), and of animal pens or corrals so common in other areas of the hill country also point to wine production as the *raison d'être* for these sites. On this subject, see Avraham Faust, "Judah in the Sixth Century B.C.E.: A Rural Perspective," *PEQ* 135 (2003): 37–53.

Jerusalem's southwestern wine country from the late eighth to the fifth centuries B.C.E.⁴⁹ Following other scholars, they connected the development of the Rephaim basin in the latter part of the eighth century B.C.E. with the development of Jerusalem during the same period. Following Nadav Na'aman's suggestion and based on the detailed discussion by Oded Lipschits and Yuval Gadot,⁵⁰ Lipschits and David Vanderhooft⁵¹ hypothesize that the development of the Rephaim basin was connected to the emergence of Ramat Raḥel as an administrative center in the region under Assyrian rule, and not as part of the development in Jerusalem. It follows logically that the development in the Rephaim basin in the hinterland of Jerusalem was connected with the organization of royal estates in the kingdom of Judah during the late eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E.,⁵² probably after the period when Judah became an Assyrian vassal kingdom. The Rephaim basin appears to have been developed as a royal estate to supply local administrators, probably with wine. This explanation fits the centralized processing demonstrated by the concentration of winepresses not associated with village infrastructure, the process of organized decanting and shipping of the wine, and the function of Ramat Raḥel in all of the periods in question as an administrative center in the region. As with the Benjamin area to the north of Jerusalem, the administrative and economic nature of this area, its connection to the administrative center at Ramat Raḥel, and the archaeological evidence for its continuous use until the early Hellenistic period are clear indications of its existence under Babylonian rule as well.⁵³

49. Greenberg and Cinamon, "Stamped and Incised Jar Handles," 236–38.

50. Na'aman, "An Assyrian Residence in Ramat Raḥel," 260–80; Lipschits and Gadot, "Ramat Raḥel and the Emeq Rephaim Sites," 88–96.

51. Lipschits and Vanderhooft, *Yehud Stamp Impressions*.

52. Israel Finkelstein, "The Archaeology of the Days of Manasseh," in *Scripture and Other Artifacts: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Honor of Philip J. King* (ed. Michael D. Coogan; J. Cheryl Exum, and Lawrence E. Stager; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 169–87 (174; 177–78); Nili Sacher Fox, *In the Service of the King: Officialdom in Ancient Israel and Judah* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2000), 216–40.

53. It is not clear to me why, in a series of papers, Avraham Faust insisted that the sites in this region did not continue to exist in the sixth century and during the Persian period, and even built a theory on the crisis of the rural settlement in Judah based on this data ("Jerusalem's Countryside during the Iron Age II-Persian Period Transition" [Hebrew], in *New Studies on Jerusalem: Proceedings of the Seventh Confer-*

In contrast with the settlement continuity in the northern area of the Judean Hills, the main and prominent change in the settlement, demography, and borders of Judah is the creation of the Idumaeen province in the southern Judean hills, the southern Shephelah, and the Negev, previously parts of the kingdom of Judah.⁵⁴ It was probably a long and gradual change, set in motion by Sennacherib and the harsh Assyrian conquest of the region. The northern and southern Judean hills transformed into diverse settlement units. The northern unit was clearly allied with the areas north of it, and one must draw parallels between the settlement processes taking place there and those taking place in the Benjamin region. The southern unit was linked with settlement processes taking place in the Negev and the southern part of the Shephelah, and was separate from the settlement processes that took place in the northern highland.⁵⁵ In view of this settlement picture, one can understand why, when the array of border fortresses in the Beersheba-Arad Valleys collapsed (whether as part of the Babylonian attack or a gradual process that began before the final Babylonian attack and continued afterwards), the vast, relatively empty areas of the southern highlands of Judah became a lodestone for the Arab and Edomite tribes that had begun to invade from the south.⁵⁶ In any case, this region went through a different geopolitical and demographical process that cannot be compared with that which took place in the northern Judean hills and the region of Benjamin.

ence [ed. A. Faust and E. Baruch; Bar Ilan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002], 83–89; idem, “Judah in the Sixth Century B.C.E.: a Rural Perspective,” 37–53; idem, “Social and Cultural Changes in Judah during the 6th century B.C.E. and Their Implications for Our Understanding of the Nature of the Neo-Babylonian Period,” *UF* 36 [2004]: 157–76; idem, “Settlement Dynamics and Demographic Fluctuations in Judah from the Late Iron Age to the Hellenistic Period and the Archaeology of Persian-Period ‘Yehud,’” in *A Time of Change: Judah and its Neighbours in the Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods* [ed. Y. Levin; London: T&T Clark, 2007], 23–51; idem, “Judah in the Sixth Century B.C.E.: Continuity or Break,” *Erlsr* 29 [2009]: 339–47).

54. Stern, “The Babylonian Gap: The Archaeological Reality,” 274.

55. Oded Lipschits, “The ‘Yehud’ Province under Babylonian Rule (586–539 B.C.E.): Historic Reality and Historiographic Conceptions” [Hebrew] (Ph.D. diss., Tel Aviv University, 1997), 298–99.

56. Lipschits, “Demographic Changes in Judah,” 334–38; idem, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 140–46, 181–84.

3. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NEW FINDS AND THE NEW STUDIES
FOR UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORICAL REALITY OF THE SIXTH
CENTURY B.C.E. AND THE BIBLICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE
“EXILIC PERIOD” IN JUDAH

The meaning of the new finds from the sixth century B.C.E. and the new observations concerning the “exilic period” in Judah is that after the destruction of Jerusalem and the other main urban and military Judahite centers by the Babylonians at the beginning of the sixth century B.C.E., “the people who were left in the land of Judah” (2 Kgs 25:22) continued to live in close proximity to the north and south of Jerusalem, continued to maintain a rural economy, continued to pay taxes in wine and oil and other agricultural products in the same way and in similar stamped jars as they had previously, continued to produce pottery in the same Iron Age tradition, and continued to serve under the same administration. The administrative center at Ramat Raḥel continued to function as the collection center of the taxes, mainly in the form of jars filled with wine and oil, with no marked change, except for the new lion stamp impressions on the handles of the jars, which replaced the rosette stamp impressions on the same type of jars, even when the capital of the newly established province of Yehud moved to Tell en-Naṣbeh (Mizpah), which served as the *bīrah* for 141 years, from 586 B.C.E.,⁵⁷ through the Neo-Babylonian period,⁵⁸ until the time of Nehemiah (445 B.C.E.).⁵⁹ These observations confirm the conclusion that in many aspects the Babylonian empire continued the Assyrian ideology and administration, took over the Assyrian provincial system, and made only the minimal and necessary adjustments.⁶⁰

57. Lipschits, “Judah, Jerusalem and the Temple (586–539 B.C.E.),” 129–42.

58. André Lemaire, “Nabonidus in Arabia and Judah in the Neo-Babylonian Period,” in Lipschits and Blenkinsopp, *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, 292.

59. Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Judean Priesthood during the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Periods: A Hypothetical Reconstruction,” *CBQ* 60 (1998): 42 n. 48; cf. André Lemaire, “Populations et territoires de Palestine à l’époque perse,” *Transeu* 3 (1990): 39–40; idem, “Nabonidus in Arabia and Judah,” 292.

60. See, e.g., Ronald H. Sack, “Nebuchadnezzar II and the Old Testament: History Versus Ideology,” in Lipschits and Blenkinsopp, *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, 221–34 (229). A similar opinion was expressed by Ephraim Stern (“Assyrian and Babylonian Elements in the Material Culture of Palestine in the Persian Period,” *Transeu* 7 [1994]: 51–62), as against later statements (see, e.g., Stern, *Assyrian*,

The major and most conspicuous archaeological phenomenon in sixth century B.C.E. Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem was the sharp decline in urban life, which is in contrast to the continuity of the rural settlements in the region of Benjamin and in the area between Bethlehem and Beth-zur.⁶¹ This settlement pattern also continued throughout the Persian period when, despite the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the restoration of its status as the capital of the province, there was no strengthening of urban life in this area, and settlement in Judah remained largely based on the rural population.⁶²

This sharp decline in urban life has other implications for the material culture, such as the disappearance of the typical family burial caves usually associated with urban and other elite classes in society.⁶³ This is a reflection of deep religious and social change. Since there is continued use of some of the burial caves in the area of Benjamin, in Jerusalem and other sites,⁶⁴ there is no need to connect it to the isolated crisis of 586 B.C.E., but rather to a broader and graduated change in religion and society that occurred during the sixth century B.C.E. and perhaps mainly at the beginning of the Persian period, when other changes, such as the disappearance

Babylonian, and Persian Periods, 307–8). See, in this line, also Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Bible, Archaeology and Politics; or, the Empty Land Revisited,” *JSOT* 27 (2002): 179–80. A different view was expressed by David S. Vanderhooft (*The Neo-Babylonian Empire and Babylon in the Latter Prophets* [HSM 59; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999], 90–114), but see against his views Sack, “Nebuchadnezzar II and the Old Testament,” 226–27.

61. On this subject, see Charles E. Carter, “The Province of Yehud in the Post-Exilic Period: Soundings in the Site Distribution and Demography,” in *Second Temple Studies 2: Temple and Community in the Persian Period* (ed. Tamara C. Eskenazi and Kent H. Richards; JSOTSup 175; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 106–45; Milevski, “Settlement Patterns in Northern Judah,” 7–29; Lipschits, “‘Yehud’ Province under Babylonian Rule,” 171–336; idem, “History of the Benjaminite Region,” 155–90; idem, “Demographic Changes in Judah,” 326–55; idem, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 250–58; Nadav Na’aman, “Royal Vassals or Governors? On the Status of Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel in the Persian Empire,” *Hen* 22 (2000): 43.

62. See Lipschits, “Demographic Changes in Judah,” 326–55; idem, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 206–71.

63. Gabriel Barkay, “Burial Caves and Burial Practices in Judah in the Iron Age,” in *Graves and Burial Practices in Israel in the Ancient Period* (ed. I. Singer; Jerusalem: Izhak Ben Zvi, 1994), 96–104.

64. Faust, “Judah in the Sixth Century B.C.E.: Continuity or Break,” 341, with further literature.

of iconography in the stamp impressions on jar handles (the well dated change from the lion to the *yhwd* stamp impressions) occurred.

Other elements that emphasize the change in material culture from the Iron Age to the Persian period, such as the disappearance of the typical Judahite house, are probably part of a gradual change that had already begun during the seventh century B.C.E. and continued for hundreds of years afterwards, with some typical four-room houses still built during the sixth century B.C.E.⁶⁵ One should remember in this regard that, aside from the monumental building at Ramat Raḥel and the industrial site at En-gedi, there are only scanty architectural remains in Judah dated to the Persian period. The domestic architecture that can be compared with Iron Age Judahite architecture came from the Hellenistic period. From an archaeological perspective it is difficult to date the disappearance of the typical Judahite house and to connect it to a specific period when a sharp decline in urban life occurred but other aspects in the material culture continued to exist.

These new observations concerning sixth century B.C.E. Judah fit well with the biblical account of this period—both with the description of the destruction of Jerusalem and with the description of the days of Gedaliah in the short period afterwards. There are some clear clues in the biblical description about the destruction of the border fortresses and cities in the Shephelah (Jer 34:7), and this information fits well with the archaeological data concerning the destruction of these sites, as well as of many small towns, villages, and hamlets in the region,⁶⁶ and the mention of Azekah in Ostrakon 4 from Lachish.⁶⁷ The biblical description of the period of the Babylonian destruction focuses, however, on the destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the centers of government and religious ritual in the city (2 Kgs 25; Jer 37; 52), as well as the burning of “all of the houses of Jerusalem,” and “every large house” (2 Kgs 25:9), and the total destruction of the city walls (25:10). This description accords with the archeological finds that were revealed in the excavations at the City of David, the Ophel, and the southwestern hill of Jerusalem.⁶⁸ It seems that the beginning of

65. Jeffrey R. Zorn, “Mizpah: Newly Discovered Stratum Reveals Judah’s Other Capital,” *BAR* 23 (1997): 29–38, 66.

66. Lipschits, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 218–23.

67. Harry Torczyner, *Lachish I: The Lachish Letters* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 76.

68. Lipschits, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 210–13.

the systematic destruction of Jerusalem, about a month after the king's flight and the surrender of the city, is evidence that this was not a spontaneous deed. It was a considered and conscious political act attesting to a strategic decision: to obliterate the center of rebellion and to prevent its future rebuilding, so as to eradicate, once and for all, the seeds of ferment and instability in Judah. Along the same lines, the biblical description of the destruction of the kingdom of Judah mentions only the deportation of the populace of Jerusalem (2 Kgs 25:11; Jer 39:9; 52:15), and does not mention deportations from other areas in Judah. This description accords with accounts given in 2 Kgs 25:12, Jer 39:10, and Jer 52:16, mentioning "the poorest people of the land" who were left by Nabuzaradan, the commander of the guard (2 Kgs 25:12; Jer 42:16), to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil.⁶⁹ This is a description deriving from the qualitative, economic, and class-oriented judgment of the elite deported to Babylon toward those who remained in the land, pronounced also in the tendentious summary generalization, "So Judah was carried away captive out of his land" (2 Kgs 25:21b; Jer 52:27b). There is only a semantic gap between this attitude toward the question of how many were deported and from where, and how many remained and where, and the attitude toward the same questions in the two versions describing the days of Gedaliah (2 Kgs 25:22–26; Jer 40:7–41:18). According to these verses those who remained in Judah were not "the poorest people of the land," but rather "the people who remained in the land of Judah" (2 Kgs 25:22a); "men, women from those who were not deported to Babylon" (Jer 40:7),⁷⁰ or even "a remnant for Judah" (40:11). They were left under the leadership of Gedaliah to continue the national life of the people in its land (2 Kgs 25:22b, 24b; Jer 40:7a β –b; 10). Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylon, is the one who left them (2 Kgs 25: 22a).

There are no details in the biblical description regarding how many people remained in Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem. Since the focus of the description is the deportation of the people from Jerusalem, it is reasonable to assume that the "remnant" was part of the rural population, especially in the regions around the city. Gedaliah was officially appointed

69. See a detailed discussion of these descriptions and expressions in *ibid.*, 102.

70. In the Septuagint version, which at this point seems more reliable, "children and some of the poorest people of the land" are missing from the text. Thus, the text refers only to "men and women who were not deported from Judah." See J. Gerald Janzen, *Studies in the Text of Jeremiah* (HSM 6; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 53; and Lipschits, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 118–22, with further literature.

over “those who remained in Judah” (2 Kgs 25:22b, 23aβ; Jer 40:7),⁷¹ and this population had a well-defined status and place, probably in the region of Benjamin and the environs of Jerusalem.⁷² The events described in the story of Gedaliah’s period of rule in Judah are restricted, geographically, to a specific area around Mizpah, where “the land of Judah” (2 Kgs 25:22) or “the land” (v. 24) were mentioned. In the version in Jer 40–41, there are “the cities” around Mizpah (40:10) “in the land of Judah” (40:12). These cities include Gibeon (41:12, 16), and there is reference to the people living “in Geruth-Kimham, near Bethlehem” (41:17).⁷³ This is the reason for and the background to the description of the days of Gedaliah’s rule in Mizpah. Gedaliah commanded the people left in the land and the refugees “who were in Moab, in Ammon, in Edom, and in all the countries” (Jer 40:11), who had returned “out of all the places to which they had been scattered” (v. 12a), to join the people that were left in Judah and “stay in the land and serve the king of Babylon, and it shall go well with you” (2 Kgs 25:24; Jer 40: 9–10).⁷⁴

71. After Peter Machinist, “Palestine, Administration of (Assyro-Babylonian),” *ABD* 5:79, there is nothing to support the assumption that Gedaliah was appointed as a king. See Lipschits, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 88–92, contra J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 421–25; cf. Francesco Bianchi, “Zorobabele re di Giuda,” *Hen* 13 (1991): 133–50; idem “Le rôle de Zorobabel et de la dynastie davidique en Judée du VI^e Siècle au I^e Siècle av.J.-C.,” *Transeu* 7 (1994): 153–65; André Lemaire, *Nouvelles inscriptions araméennes d’Idumée au musée d’Israël* (Supplément 3 à *Transeu*; Paris: Gabalda, 1996), 48–57. Cf. also Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.* (SBL SBL 3; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 92–93 n. 166.

72. See Lipschits, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 339–44, with further literature.

73. For the meaning of the name “Geruth-Kimham,” see Yair Hoffman, “Literature and Ideology in Jeremiah 40:1–43:7” [Hebrew], in *Studies in Bible and Exegesis, Vol. V: Presented to Uriel Simon* (ed. M. Garsiel et al.; Ramat Gan: Universitat Bar Ilan, 2000), 117–18 n. 29; idem, *Jeremiah: Introduction and Commentary* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: ‘Am ‘Oved, 2001), 724.

74. The silence of the Bible on events that occurred in Judah after the murder of Gedaliah cannot be interpreted as evidence of the view that life in Judah ceased. On this subject, see Lipschits, ed., *Can We Define the Material Culture of the Sixth Century in Judah?* [Hebrew] (Abstracts from the Conference Held in Tel Aviv University; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1998), 467–87; idem, “History of the Benjaminitic Region,” 161–65; Jill A. Middlemas, *The Troubles of Templeless Judah* (OTM; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 36–37.

The conclusion from all the above is that there is agreement between the biblical description of the days of the destruction and the archaeological finds. The Babylonians dealt a harsh blow to the kingdom of Judah, the harshest blow in the history of the kingdom. They destroyed Jerusalem, as well as many of the urban, military, economic, and administrative centers. They deported the king and all the religious, economic, social, and political elite, and Judah lost its independence.⁷⁵ From the demographic point of view, based on all the available archaeological data, one can estimate that, as a result of the long war and as part of its effect and outcome, there was approximately a 60 percent decline in population, from about 110,000 people to about 40,000.⁷⁶

3.1. Ammon in the Sixth Century B.C.E.: What Can We Learn about the Fate of Judah under Babylonian Rule?

The new finds and recent studies presented above support and strengthen the “middle path” presented by the current author elsewhere.⁷⁷ They offer the option of focusing on the search for the “half full cup.” In this case, the comparison of the archaeological situation in Judah with that in Ammon enables us to view the processes in a neighboring country without benefit of biblical descriptions and without theological influence or any historical interpretation.

Rabbath-Ammon during the Babylonian period is an archaeological and historical blank. We have no information about the fate of this capital city. However, in contrast to the continuation of the settlement in the area immediately south and north of Rabbath-Ammon, we can reconstruct a deliberate destruction of the main sites on the western border of the kingdom and along the main road from the west to Rabbath-Ammon (Tell

75. Lipschits, *Can We Define the Material Culture*, 467–87.

76. Lipschits, “Demographic Changes in Judah,” 323–79; idem, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 267–71; cf. Charles E. Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period: A Social and Demographic Study* (JSOTSup 294; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 246–48.

77. See, e.g., Lipschits, “History of the Benjaminite Region,” 155–90; idem, “The Rural Settlement in Judah in the Sixth Century B.C.E.: A Rejoinder,” *PEQ* 136 (2004): 99–107; idem, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*; idem, “The Babylonian Period in Judah: In Search of the Half Full Cup (A Response to the Panel Discussion: In Conversation with Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*),” *JHS* 7 (2007): 39–47.

Mazar, Tell es-Sa'idiyeh, and Tel Nimrin).⁷⁸ Similar to what happened in Judah (the Babylonian destruction of the western borders and cities in the Shephelah), this archaeological situation in the western border sites of the kingdom of Ammon can be interpreted as part of the “opening of the door” to the heart of the kingdom by the Babylonian army. As in Judah, in Ammon too there was a continuation of the rural settlement from the end of the Iron Age to the Persian period. From the results of Tell el-‘Umeiri excavations and the survey conducted as part of the Madaba plains project, scholars have demonstrated that a large area south of the capital of Rabbath-Ammon was not destroyed by the Babylonians and even flourished throughout the Babylonian and the Persian periods.⁷⁹ In Ammon, as in Judah, one can discern different geopolitical and demographic processes in the different areas of the kingdom. One can reconstruct a continuation of the rural settlement in the area around ‘Umeiri and Ḥesban, south of Rabbath-Ammon and perhaps also in the Baq‘ah region, north of Ammon. Farms and small villages continued to exist in those areas, characterized by diverse agricultural installations, mainly winepresses.⁸⁰ As at Mizpah in Benjamin, at about 580 B.C.E., after the Babylonian expedition against Ammon and under Babylonian rule, Tell el-‘Umeiri was built as the new administrative center of the Madaba plains region.⁸¹ Furthermore, the size of the settlement in ‘Umeiri was diminished, and it appears that the smaller settlement took on a highly specialized administrative and political function⁸² very similar to that assumed for Mizpah.⁸³ The one

78. Lipschits, “The Rural Settlement in Judah,” 41.

79. *Ibid.*, with further literature.

80. Larry G. Herr, “Organization of Excavation and Summary of Results at Tall al-‘Umayri,” in *Madaba Plains Project 3: The 1989 Season at Tell el-‘Umeiri and Vicinity and Subsequent Studies* (ed. L. G. Herr et al.; Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1997), 16.

81. Larry G. Herr, “Organization of the Excavation and Summary of Results on the Tell,” in *Madaba Plains Project 2: The 1987 Season at Tell el-‘Umeiri and Vicinity and Subsequent Studies* (ed. L. G. Herr et al.; Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1991), 8–14 (12–13).

82. *Ibid.*, 12–13.

83. See Jeffrey R. Zorn, “Tell en-Nasbeh: A Re-evaluation of the Architecture and Stratigraphy of the Early Bronze Age, Iron Age and Latter Periods” (Ph.D. diss.; University of California Berkeley, 1993), 151–83; *idem*, “Tell en-Naşbeh and the Problem of the Material Culture of the Sixth Century,” in Lipschits and Blenkinsopp, *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, 418–33.

Neo-Babylonian style seal that was found in 'Umeiri⁸⁴ can be interpreted as a reflection of the Babylonian influence on this administrative center, if not as evidence of actual presence at the site, and it can be compared with the abundance of Babylonian material in Tell en-Naşbeh.⁸⁵ In addition, the seventy-five seals and seal impressions that were found at Tell el-'Umeiri, emphasizing its administrative nature,⁸⁶ are similar in function and number to the *m(w)sh* and *gb'n gdr* stamp impressions, which date to the sixth century B.C.E. and reflect organized economic and administrative activity in the Babylonian province of Judah.⁸⁷

Thus the destruction of the main cities and administrative, urban, and military centers was parallel in Judah and Ammon, and should not be understood as an indication of a total destruction and demographic gap. Both destructions should be interpreted as focused and intentional, according to the interests and intents of the empire, albeit with many diverse and even difficult consequences. One must take care nonetheless to differentiate very cautiously between varying regions in the kingdom, and not to draw conclusions from one region to another, and especially not to generalize when it comes to the rural settlements and to indications of administrative, economical, and cultural continuity existing in some regions and not in others.⁸⁸

Both from the situation in Ammon and from the new finds and recent studies of the material culture, administration, and economy in sixth-century B.C.E. Judah, it is clear that continuity in material culture can be well attested in the rural areas that continued to survive after the destruction of the urban, military, and administrative centers, and that these regions

84. See Larry G. Herr, "The Ammonites in the Late Iron Age and Persian Period," in *Ancient Ammon* (ed. Burton MacDonald and Randall W. Younker; SHANE 17; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 231.

85. See Zorn, "Tell en-Naşbeh and the Problem of the Material Culture," 433–40.

86. See Larry G. Herr, "The Inscribed Seal Impression," in *Madaba Plains Project 1: The 1984 Season at Tell el 'Umeiri and Vicinity and Subsequent Studies* (ed. L. T. Geraty, et al.; Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1989), 369; idem, "Organization of the Excavation," 12.

87. Lipschits, "History of the Benjaminite Region," 178–83; idem, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 174–81.

88. See, for example, the discussions of Stern (e.g., "The Babylonian Gap: The Archaeological Reality," 273–77), which combine in his survey different regions, including Assyrian provinces in the northern part of the land, with different regions in Judah. Compare this to Vanderhooff's discussion in *Neo-Babylonian Empire*, 106.

functioned as the places where many aspects of the material culture were preserved and continued through the “dark ages.” The general agreement on the settlement continuum in the area of Benjamin during the sixth century B.C.E.,⁸⁹ and the new data on the similar continuum in the Rephaim Valley and the area south of Jerusalem, are the best indications for the place where the “people that remained in the land” continued to live, with the same pottery and other indications for the material culture that are well known from the period before the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E.

In light of the above, the question is, what can we learn from the new discoveries and the new studies on Judah in the sixth century B.C.E. about the role of archaeological research in biblical studies and historical reconstructions?

4. WHAT IS BEHIND THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECONSTRUCTIONS OF THE “BABYLONIAN GAP” AND THE “EMPTY LAND”?

The archaeological study of the end of the kingdom of Judah has usually been based on destruction layers, especially in Jerusalem, but also in other cities such as Lachish, military fortresses such as Arad, industrial villages (kinds of royal estates) such as En-gedi, and other large and medium-sized towns and agricultural settlements. The results of these excavations and surveys have usually been interpreted as clearly affirming that Judah was almost entirely destroyed and that its population disappeared from most of the kingdom’s territory.

A direct line can be drawn from William Foxwell Albright’s 1949 statement “There is not a single known case where a town of Judah was continuously occupied through the exilic period”⁹⁰ to the assessments of David Jamieson-Drake⁹¹ of a “complete societal collapse” and “almost complete dissolution” and to the title of Stern’s 2004 essay, “The Babylonian Gap: The Archaeological Reality,” and the conclusion in the chapter on the Babylonian period in his 2001 book: “A review of the archaeological evidence from sixth-century B.C.E. Judah clearly reflects the literary (i.e.,

89. Stern, “The Babylonian Gap: The Archaeological Reality,” 273.

90. William F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1949), 142.

91. David W. Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools in Monarchic Judah: A Socio-archaeological Approach* (JSOTSup 109; Sheffield: Almond, 1991), 75, 146.

biblical) evidence for the complete destruction of all the settlements and fortified towns by Nebuchadnezzar II's armies in 586 B.C.E."⁹²

Archaeologists have claimed that "this view is based upon purely archaeological considerations and is not motivated by hidden ideological considerations,"⁹³ and have usually used these archaeological "facts" as a basis for a historical reconstruction of the "Babylonian gap" and the "empty land" during the sixth century B.C.E., until the time of the return from the exile at the beginning of the Persian period. Are these, however, "purely archaeological considerations"? Can archaeology really differentiate between the material culture from the end of the First Temple period and material culture that was used by "the people who remained in Judah" in the years afterwards, especially at sites that were not destroyed by the Babylonians?

It seems to me that this archaeological "fact" of a total destruction at the beginning of the sixth century B.C.E. is merely an outcome of historical preconceptions about this period based on a traditional interpretation of the biblical description.⁹⁴ Bustenay Oded was right to claim that scholars supporting the "myth of the empty land" as a by-product of the thesis about "mythical ancient Israel" have common presumptions, especially regarding the reliability of the biblical description concerning the destruction and deportation, which is part of a late myth, invented as a political claim.⁹⁵ He is right in his attempt to demonstrate how much their thesis of the creation of the "myth" is unacceptable and not well founded on archaeological grounds, and even not on biblical grounds. However, it seems to me that just as in the case of the different emphases in 2 Kgs 25:12, 22, the "school" of scholars supporting the "Babylonian gap" and reconstructing a "real" empty land in Judah during the "exilic period" are likewise studying the archaeological finds and interpreting the texts with common presumptions, focusing on general impressions from the statements made by exiles and returnees in order to substantiate their right to the land, rather than using the more delicate research on the different voices and descriptions of this period.

92. See Stern, *Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Periods*, 323, and the citations in Blenkinsopp, "The Bible, Archaeology and Politics," 178.

93. Stern, "The Babylonian Gap: The Archaeological Reality," 273.

94. See, e.g., Stern, *Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Periods*, 353, 581; Oded, "Myth of the Empty Land," 59–66.

95. Oded, "Myth of the Empty Land," 57–58.

It seems to me that the fundamental problem with the archaeological reconstruction of the “empty land” is that until now there has been no archaeological way to differentiate between the material culture of the early or middle sixth century B.C.E. in Judah and the material culture of the last generations before the destruction. In many respects, since archaeologists have not expected to find the material culture from the sixth century B.C.E., this material culture was not discovered, located, or identified. Gabriel Barkay was right when he claimed that “it seems that the destruction of the Temple and the fall of Jerusalem influenced modern scholarship, which fixed the date of the end of the Iron Age according to a historical fact and not on the basis of the archaeological picture.”⁹⁶ Indeed, it would appear that historical considerations are what stand behind the generalized dating of the destruction layers in all sites in Judah in approximately 587/6 B.C.E., and that these considerations have caused a lack of appropriate attention to the possibility that a large population continued to exist in Judah even after the destruction of Jerusalem. Even in the analysis of the finds from the survey in Benjamin,⁹⁷ where there is general consensus among scholars that during the sixth century B.C.E. many settlements continued to exist, the pottery dated to the late First Temple period was considered as representing only the period before 586 B.C.E., and the decline in settlement was considered as “undoubtedly related to the destruction of Judah in the early sixth century B.C.E.”⁹⁸ Paradoxically, these archaeological assertions have provided material for historical studies, which are based on dating the strata of destruction to create a historical profile of the Babylonian destruction throughout the land of Israel.⁹⁹

Furthermore, no archaeologist could or has even tried to demonstrate from the archaeological perspective any kind of “mass return” at the beginning of the Persian period, as described in the introductory section to Ezra-Nehemiah. This “mass return” had to be well attested in any case of

96. Gabriel Barkay, “The Iron Age III: The Babylonian Period” [Hebrew], in *Is It Possible to Define the Pottery of the Sixth Century B.C.E. in Judea?* (ed. O. Lipschits; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1998), 25.

97. See Magen and Finkelstein, *Archaeological Survey in the Hill Country of Benjamin*.

98. See *ibid.*, 27. For a critique of these conclusions and a renewed discussion of the finds of the survey, see Lipschits, “History of the Benjaminite Region,” 180–84; Lipschits, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 245–49.

99. See Vanderhooff, *Neo-Babylonian Empire*, 106–7.

“mass deportation” and “empty land,” as indicated in Ezra 1–6, according to which some 50,000 immigrants returned to Judah at the very beginning of the Persian period with the support of the imperial authorities.

The current indications, as presented above, for the continuity in material culture, economy, and administration, not only from the late Iron Age to the “exilic period,” but also to the Persian period, force us to see the sixth century B.C.E. as a period when despite the destructions and deportations, despite the gap in the history of Jerusalem and the temple, despite the move of the social and religious center of gravity from Judah to Babylon, Judahite life continued in Judah, and in many aspects continued in a way very similar to what we know about Judah before the 586 B.C.E. destruction.

It seems to me that while studying the Babylonian period a very detailed and careful examination of different regions is essential from the methodological point of view. By studying archaeological material in this way, even the most enthusiastic supporters of the “empty land” and the “Babylonian gap” theses could not assume that Judah was a truly vacant area.¹⁰⁰ Stern explicitly emphasized that by the term “empty,” he refers “to a land that was virtually depopulated.”¹⁰¹

100. Ibid., 104–10, 206; Stern, “The Babylonian Gap,” 51; idem, *Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Periods*, 321–26; idem, “The Babylonian Gap: The Archaeological Reality,” 276; Oded, “Myth of the Empty Land,” 66–71.

101. See Stern, “The Babylonian Gap: The Archaeological Reality,” 274. From this aspect, the “ultra-conservative thesis” presented by Faust in a series of papers (e.g., Judah in the Sixth Century B.C.E.: A Rural Perspective,” 37–53; idem, “Social and Cultural Changes in Judah during the 6th Century B.C.E. and Their Implications for Our Understanding of the Nature of the Neo-Babylonian Period,” 157–76; idem, “Settlement Dynamics and Demographic Fluctuations in Judah from the Late Iron Age to the Hellenistic Period and the Archaeology of Persian-Period ‘Yehud,’” 23–51; idem, “Judah in the Sixth Century B.C.E.: Continuity or Break?” 339–47) carries many problems and does not stand the test of the historical, archaeological, and biblical critiques. Faust presented the most extreme theory regarding the “empty land” in Judah, ignoring the data presented above on rural settlement in the Rephaim Valley and its surroundings, discussing mainly sites that were explored in salvage excavations without separating the Negev, Southern Judean hills, and the southern Shephelah—which undoubtedly suffered from a demographic crisis at the beginning of the sixth century B.C.E., and became very soon after part of a different province of Idumaea—from the northern Judean hills and the region of Benjamin. He ignored the vast data on the fate of the area of Benjamin, hypothesizing without any basis that although the urban settlement in this region continued uninterrupted, the rural settlement suffered from the events

5. CONCLUSIONS

Putting aside unacceptable theories that deny the destruction of Jerusalem and its consequences, what then is the essential difference between the scholars who belong to the “empty land” and “Babylonian gap” school and the way I have presented the situation in Babylonian Judah in this essay?

I believe that like the two voices that can be found in the biblical description of this period—on the one hand agreeing that Judah was not entirely void of population, but on the other hand at odds about where the “true Judah” actually was—so, too, the problem with the interpretation of the archaeological finds is the question of focus and scope. Is the cup half full or half empty? Scholars concur that the Babylonians caused major destruction in Judah, deported part of the population, turned the vassal kingdom into a province, and moved its capital from Jerusalem to Mizpah. The problem is the scope of the destruction caused by the Babylonians, the scope of the deportation, and the scope of the population that was left behind.

I hope that the “middle path” I have suggested here again—this time backed up by additional archaeological data discovered in recent years, especially at Ramat Raḥel and with some further studies that shed new light on the history, administration, economy, and material culture of Judah in the sixth century B.C.E.—will open the way for further refined observations both in biblical and archaeological research, and will give this important period in the history of Judah and its land the place in the sun it rightly deserves.

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of 586. Furthermore, in all these papers, Faust used as a control group a very limited and defined area—the Samarian foothills—an area that was part of the Samarian province since the late eighth century B.C.E., and was one of the most demographically and politically stable regions. It is no wonder that there is continuity in this area between the end of the Iron Age and the Persian period. But the question is whether the history of this region has any relevance to the history of the rural settlements in Judah.

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