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## THE RURAL SETTLEMENT IN JUDAH IN THE SIXTH CENTURY B.C.E.: A REJOINDER

ODED LIPSCHITS

*A revival of an ultra-conservative thesis, supporting the reality of the 'empty land' biblical descriptions and the historicity of the 'Babylonian gap' in Judah, may be detected in recent research. The present paper claims that the major and most conspicuous archaeological phenomenon in Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem is 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. These archaeological investigations demonstrate that a new pattern of settlement was created in Judah, in which the core settlements were destroyed or abandoned while, at the same time, the surrounding region continued to exist almost unchanged. The differences between the various regions of this small kingdom should be understood as the outcome of a planned Babylonian policy of using some of the rural highland areas as a source for agricultural products. The settlement in those areas became a place of specialized wine and oil production, and was used both for paying the taxes and supplying the basic products for the Babylonian administration and forces stationed in the area. A similar situation is detectable in the area south of Rabbath-Ammon, around Tell el 'Umeiri and Tell Hesbân, and perhaps also in the Baq'ah region, north of Rabbath-Ammon.*

### THE LAST DAYS OF THE KINGDOM OF JUDAH AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SIXTH CENTURY B.C.E. RURAL SETTLEMENT

The Babylonian campaign against Judah (587–586 B.C.E.) brought about an utter and deliberate destruction of Jerusalem and its immediate environs, and the region was almost completely emptied of its population (Lipschits 1997, 246–75; 1999b, 472–75; 2001, 132–34; 2003, 328–34). As part of the military activity, the Babylonians destroyed the main cities and fortresses of Judah's western border in the Shephelah (Dagan 1992, 259–62), probably as the 'opening of the door' to the heart of the kingdom and the control of the major supply routes that connect the coast with the mountain ridge (Lipschits 1997, 300–11; 2003, 341–46). It seems that the hinterland areas in the south and east of the kingdom toppled in a longer, more complex process with ruinous consequences. The thriving array of settlements that had existed in the Judean desert, Jordan valley, and Dead Sea environs disappeared completely (Lipschits 2003, 338–41, with further literature). The border fortresses of the Judean kingdom in the Beersheba-Arad valleys collapsed, together with the settlements that had existed alongside them (Beit-Arieh 1995, 310–15; 1999, 1–3). Tribal elements that previously had resided in close proximity, consisting primarily of Arabian and Edomite tribes, began to make incursions into the vast and relatively empty space north of the Negev, to the southern part of the Shephelah, and to the Hebron hills (Lipschits 2003, 334–38; in press a).

However, beginning with the 1950s, many scholars noted the different fate that befell the Benjamin region and the archaeological reality that prevailed there after the destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> It is probable that the same archaeological picture existed also in the area south of Jerusalem, between Beth-Lehem and Tekoa, and to a lesser extent in the area more to the south, as far as Beth-Zur (Ofar 1993, 2.125–42, 4.16–18; 1998, 46–48; Lipschits 1997, 276–99; 2003, 351–55; in press a, and see also the discussion following).

The major and most conspicuous archaeological phenomenon in Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem is 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 the settlement in Judah remained largely based on the rural population (Lipschits 1997, 190–95; 2003, 326–55, in press c).

The unavoidable conclusion is that during the Babylonian period, a marked change took place in the characteristics of the settled areas. The settlement centre of gravity moved from the core 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.

#### REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN JUDAH AFTER THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM

The continuation of the rural settlement in some regions within the territory of the kingdom of Judah calls our attention to another important conclusion: the differences between those regions and neighbouring regions of the small kingdom, where such a continuation cannot be detected. It looks as if the explanation for such differences is the Babylonian policy of destroying the capital and deporting the élite, without causing intentional destruction in all the territory of the kingdom. Furthermore, one can assume that the Babylonian interest was to preserve the rural settlements in some areas, where they could get wine, olive oil, grain, and other agricultural supplies, as well as to gain stability in the region (Lipschits 1999a; 1999b, 481–82; 2003, 346–51). The Babylonians must have recognized the fact that a demographic and political vacuum in the hilly regions would attract semi-nomadic groups, and that control over those areas around the destroyed capital would be much harder. However we have no indication of a Babylonian policy of encouraging the rural areas in the western part of the empire, or of developing a system of rule and exploitation of the hilly regions in the western part of the empire. One should assume that Babylon depended on the resources and ability of the population in the different regions to exist under the new situation — Babylonian control, without the leadership and protection of the religious, urban, social, political, and economic elite.

#### RURAL SETTLEMENT AND REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SIXTH CENTURY B.C.E. AMMON

A similar archaeological situation — the continuation of the rural settlement from the end of the Iron Age to the Persian period — is discerned in Ammon. 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 (Sauer 1985, 213–14; 1986, 18; McGovern 1989, 40–42; Herr 1995, 121; 1997, 244–46; 1999, 227; LaBianca and Younker 1995, 411; Bienkowski 2001, 270).

However, in Ammon, as in Judah, one can discern different geopolitical and demographical processes in the different areas of the kingdom (Lipschits, in press b). One can reconstruct a continuation of the rural settlement in the area around 'Umeiri and Hesbân, south of Rabbath-Ammon and perhaps also in the Baq'ah region, north of Ammon. Many farms and small villages continued to exist in those areas, characterized by many wine presses and other agricultural installations (Herr 1997, 16). This is exactly the same as the situation in the region of Benjamin, north of Jerusalem, and in the northern part of the Judean hills, south of the ruined capital. Around 580 B.C.E., after the Babylonian expedition against Ammon and under Babylonian rule, Tell el 'Umeiri was built as the new

administrative centre of the Madaba plains region (Herr 1991, 12–13), similar to Mizpah in Benjamin (Lipschits, in press b). 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 function (Herr 1991, 12–13), again, similar to the situation assumed to have developed in Mizpah (Zorn 1993, 151–83; 2003, 418–33). The one neo-Babylonian style seal that was found in ‘Umeiri (Herr 1999, 231) can be interpreted as a reflection of the Babylonian influence on this administrative centre, if not as evidence of an actual presence at the site, and it can be compared with the abundance of Babylonian material in Tell en-Nasbeh (Zorn 2003, 433–440). Parallels can be made to Mizpah (and the *m(w)sh* seal impressions) and Gibeon (and the *gb’n gdr* seal impressions), which date to the sixth century B.C.E. and reflect the organized economic and administrative activity in the Babylonian province of Judah (Lipschits 1999a, 178–83). It is possible to explain the seventy-five seals and seal impressions that were found in Tell el ‘Umeiri similarly, as emphasizing its administrative function (Herr 1989: 369; 1991: 12).

There is no archaeological or historical information about the fate of the capital city Rabbath-Ammon during the Babylonian period. However, in contrast to the continuation of the settlement in the area immediately south and north of Rabbath-Ammon, one 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 Mazār, Tell es-Sa‘īdiyyeh, and Tel Nimrin). In parallel to what happened in Judah (the Babylonian destruction of the western border fortresses 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.

#### THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA AND THE CONTINUATION OF THE RURAL SETTLEMENT IN THE SIXTH CENTURY B.C.E. JUDAH: EXCAVATIONS, SALVAGE EXCAVATIONS, AND SURVEYS

The comprehensive archaeological data come usually from the excavations of urban sites, mainly tells. Our knowledge of the rural sites comes mainly from the surveys and the salvage excavations. The surveys can complete our knowledge for wide areas, and they are still the basic source of information for most of the rural sites, from isolated installations and structures, through small farms and large villages. The problems with the accuracy of the surveys have been discussed exhaustively in the literature, but surveys are still the basic tool for creating regional-periodic maps for examination of the settlement and demographic changes among the different periods. The data from the salvage excavations are of great importance for the research of the rural settlements and supply an option for greater depth into viewing specific rural sites. They can also be used as an important tool for checking the accuracy of the surveys, and the results of both methods of archaeological research should be combined in regional research to serve as basic data for the investigation and understanding of the settlement and demographic processes (Lipschits 1997, 171–330; in press c).

However, the tendency expressed by Faust (2003) to base the understanding of the rural settlement in large areas on the salvage excavations and the use of these data as the main source for understanding geopolitical and demographic processes is methodologically unsound and can lead to mistaken conclusions. One should remember that salvage excavations are coincidental, without an advance plan, and often due to chance discoveries. The excavation, conducted in a very restricted area, could be at the margins of a larger site, without wider knowledge of the situation outside the limits of the squares that were excavated. In many cases, the salvage excavations are conducted under time constraints, in

a very limited and, usually, very short time period, just before the site is destroyed or covered, without the chance to re-examine the results or solve problems that occur when processing the data and summarizing the conclusions. Furthermore, most of the salvage excavations are not spread equally over the land but concentrated in specific regions experiencing an exceptional process of modern development. Their location is thus seriously problematic from the statistical point of view. Geo-politically and demographically, it is difficult to compare the results of such excavations with those from broader and systematic archaeological surveys, unless one can combine the results of both methods and use the results in a wider scope.

Most of the sites discussed by Faust (2003, 39–42) from the environs of Jerusalem and the other rural sites in Judah have been discussed already by the current author, together with the broader picture that emerged from the different surveys that were conducted throughout the kingdom of Judah (Lipschits 1997, 171–330, and see there also the detailed lists of sites from the end of the Iron Age and from the Persian period; 1999a; 2003). The results of this discussion were totally different from those reached by Faust, not only because of the much broader detailed and regional discussion, but also because of the serious limitations of Faust's approach: (a) the discussion of all the territory of the kingdom of Judah as a single region, without any attention to the differences among the different regions; (b) the emphasis on regions in which one can find a lot of salvage excavations, which do not represent the overall geopolitical and demographic process; and (c) the focus on regions known to have been destroyed at the beginning of the sixth century B.C.E. and that had had no settlement continuation in the Persian period (the Jordan valley, the Negev, the southern Shephelah, etc.), combined with only a minor representation of the areas where, according to the excavations of the main sites (e.g., the region of Benjamin) and the surveys (e.g., the northern Judean hills), there is a clear continuity.<sup>3</sup>

There is here a clear misrepresentation of the archaeological facts. The strong and solid data of continuity between the end of the Iron Age and the Persian period is 'swallowed' by data from other regions. Only if one accepts Faust's presentation of the archaeological picture, in spite of the well known fact of destruction in some regions in Judah during the Babylonian period, as well as the continuity in other regions, can one say that 'it is quite clear that the rural sector cannot carry the burden assigned to it recently by some scholars' (Faust 2003, 46).

Furthermore, one cannot accept such a methodology, in which, against the background of this over-wide discussion of all the territory of the kingdom of Judah, without division of the different regions and without discussion of the different fate of those regions, Faust (2003, 43–44) chose, as a control group, a very limited and defined area — the Samaria foothills. It is well known that, in this area, there is continuity between the end of the Iron Age and the Persian period. Additionally, it is widely accepted that this region was part of the Samaria province beginning at approximately 720 B.C.E., and it was one of the most demographically and politically stable regions.

One should also note Faust's deliberate focus on Barstad's discussion, which is not basically archaeological, and his failure to use better-based archaeological discussion and more balanced results, which establish that during the Babylonian period there was a demographic and settlement crisis — a decline of approximately 70% in the size of the population (Lipschits 2003, 356). The sharpest decline occurred in Jerusalem and its environs (around 90%), which were the focus of the Babylonian activities (Lipschits 2001, 129–42). A similar rate of decline also took place in the Judean desert, Jordan valley, the western littoral of the Dead Sea, and in the Shephelah (Lipschits 2000, 31–42; 2003, 334–46). However, in the Benjamin region, there was a more moderate decrease (approximately 60%) in the size of the settled area between the end of the Iron Age and the

Persian period. As will be discussed further, to judge from the results of the excavations of the main sites in this region, one may assume that this decrease took place gradually at the end of the sixth and the beginning of the fifth centuries B.C.E. (Lipschits 1997, 196–245; 1998, 8–32; 1999, 155–90; 2003, 346–51). Furthermore, throughout the region between Jerusalem and Beth-Zur, there is marked settlement continuity, with an impressive increase in the number of small sites, as can be concluded from comparison between settlement patterns of the end of the Iron Age and those from the Persian period (Lipschits 1997: 276–99; 2003: 351–55).

THE RURAL SETTLEMENT IN THE REGION OF BENJAMIN AND IN THE NORTHERN JUDEAN HILLS —  
A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

From the methodological point of view, the region of Benjamin and the northern Judean hills offer two different examples of research on the continuity or discontinuity in the rural settlement. In each case, one should check the continuity and discontinuity of the rural settlement according to the correspondence of the pattern of the rural settlement from both the end of the Iron Age and the Persian period. The basic assumption is that cities were usually erected at the same site, one level above the other. However, villages, hamlets, and farms were, in many cases, located in different places during different periods. The rural settlement tends to change its settlement pattern after gaps in the settlement periods. One should always consider the possibility that a new farm or a village was built on the site where an ancient farm or a village had existed some decades earlier, but in the case of an entire array of villages or farms, the chances for such a coincidence is very small (Faust 2003, 38–39). Thus, when one can find identity patterns in a specific region in two different sequential periods (such as the end of the Iron Age and the Persian period), it is reasonable to assume continuity. In the case of the region of Benjamin, one should also interpret the results of the survey according to the more accurate results of the excavations of the main sites.

In the northern part of the Judean hills, only one major site was excavated — Beth-Zur (Kh. et-Tabaqa). However, because the information about the history of the site between the end of the Iron Age and the Persian period is not clear (see the summary of Lipschits 2003, 351–52 and notes 110–11), discussion must be based on the data from the surveys. According to these data (Ofer 1993), the pattern of the rural sites at the end of the Iron age and during the Persian period is almost identical — a sign of continuity between the two periods and through the sixth century B.C.E. (Ofer 1993, 2.131; Lipschits 1997, 291–99; 2003, 352–55). In each period, there is also approximately the same number of sites (63 in the Iron Age as opposed to 56 in the Persian period) and settled dunams (305 in the Iron Age and 299 in the Persian period) (Lipschits 2003, 353). Full continuity appeared in the northern part of the area — in the region close to Bethlehem, where one can see the same number of sites, the same number of settled areas, and the same settlement pattern at the end of the Iron Age and in the Persian period. Nevertheless, there is a marked change in the area around Tekoa, where many sites that existed in this region during the Iron Age no longer existed during the Persian period; most of the Iron Age sites were located east of the watershed. It may well be that this settlement pattern collapsed owing to changing economic, military, and political conditions, thus eliminating the economic base on which most of the settlements relied. During the Persian period, this area saw renewed settlement activity, and a totally different pattern of settlement came into existence.<sup>4</sup> The settlement in the Tekoa area ‘moved’ westward during the Persian period and developed in more densely packed concentrations near the watershed line. South of the area of Tekoa, mainly at the watershed line, the total

number of sites increased from 16 at the end of the Iron Age to 21 in the Persian period, and the total settled area in this region increased from 81 dunams at the end of the Iron Age to 104 dunams in the Persian period (Lipschits 1997, 291–97; 2003, 354). This increase is at the expense of the area south of it, toward Beth-Zur, whose importance shrank considerably, perhaps because it was a frontier area opposite the southern Judaeen highland and the Negev (Lipschits 2003, 352–55).

In the region of Benjamin, there were four important, central cities that were not destroyed by the Babylonians and that even flourished during the sixth century B.C.E. (Lipschits 1999a, 155–178; 2003, 346–48; Carter 2003, 307–10): Mizpah (Tell en-Nasbeh), Gibeah (Tell el-Fûl), Bethel (identified in the village of Beitin), and Gibeon (identified in the village of el-Jib). At the end of the sixth century B.C.E. and during the Persian period, there is a marked process of depopulation and settlement decline in those four sites (Zorn 1993, 184–85; Stern 2001, 321–22; Lipschits 2003, 348–49).

With reference to the unique fate of the Benjamin region during Babylonian rule, the survey's finds must be treated with caution, and be interpreted on the basis of excavation data: settlement continuity in the transition from the Iron Age to the Babylonian and Persian periods, as well as a gradual settlement decline in the beginning of the Persian period. This means that, from the survey point of view, the finds from the sixth century B.C.E. are included in the broad definition of Iron Age II. Additionally, the Persian period finds in the survey of this region largely reflect the fifth century B.C.E., when the Benjamin region was in the middle of a process of settlement decline, and reflect a low demographic point, rather than a peak in settlement activity or a stage of rebuilding (see the note in Magen and Finkelstein 1993, 27).

Analysis of the data of the surveys in light of the excavation results shows that there was a sharp drop (60%) in the number of all sites, and a parallel drop is estimated in the number of settled dunams (Lipschits 1999a, 180–84; 2003, 349). These findings suggest that the state of settlement in the sixth century B.C.E. was better than that of the Persian period (*pace* Finkelstein, in Magen and Finkelstein 1993, 27).

In this area, too, one should examine the overlapping of the patterns of settlement in both the Iron Age and the Persian period, to see the measure of continuity and discontinuity. In the central and western parts of the region, especially around the main cities, there is a drop of approximately 30% in the number of the sites between the end of the Iron Age and the Persian period. However, the pattern of settlement is quite the same, and most of the rural sites from the Persian period are located exactly where settlements existed during the Iron Age period (Lipschits 1997, 227–37, list of sites in the region of Benjamin, and Figs. 4 and 5; 1999a, 180–84). In the eastern part of Benjamin region, especially the northeastern sector, between the Iron Age and the Persian period there is a drop of approximately 80% in the number of sites and a change in the pattern of settlement (Milevski 1996–97, 18–19; Lipschits 1999a, 181–82).<sup>5</sup> A marked reduction in the scope of settlement and a change in its pattern was also noted in the northern part of the Benjamin region (the area of today's Ramallah).

The conclusion from these data is that, in the Benjamin region, there is clear continuity from the end of the Iron Age to the Persian period, especially around the main economic and administrative centres.<sup>6</sup> Apparently, by the sixth century B.C.E., the settlement in Benjamin had withdrawn to the core of the region, and the gradual impoverishment of the settlement in this region took place at the end of the sixth and the beginning of the fifth centuries B.C.E.. This can be explained as a result of the renewed status of Jerusalem and the reduced status of Mizpah, as well as the change in economic and security conditions in the region during the Persian period (Lipschits 1998, 17–31; 1999a, 182–85; 2003, 350–51).

## CAN THE RURAL SETTLEMENT CARRY THE BURDEN? OR, BETWEEN THE 'EMPTY LAND' AND 'THE MYTH OF THE EMPTY LAND'

Even the most enthusiastic supporters of the 'empty land' and the 'Babylonian gap' thesis do not assume that Judah was a truly vacant area (Vanderhooft 1999, 104–10, 206; Stern 2000, 51; 2001, 321–26; Oded 2003: 66–71). From this aspect, the 'ultra-conservative thesis' presented by Faust (2003) carries many problems and does not stand the test of the historical, archaeological, and biblical critiques.

Even according to the Bible there is no indication of an empty land, and there are different and opposing statements and descriptions. Further, we do not have any examples from other areas in the Babylonian empire for such a complete and comprehensive deportation. Furthermore, if there was a large-scale deportation, one would also expect to see a large-scale return at the end of the sixth and the beginning of the fifth centuries B.C.E. In such a case, there is a problem in explaining the continuity in the local material culture between the end of the Iron Age and the Persian period. It looks as if the comparison with the settlement and the demographical processes in Ammon can strengthen the assumption that Nebuchadrezzar adopted a policy of a selective and focused deportation, with the rural settlements surviving in the region of Benjamin and the northern area of the Judean hills.

It appears that between the 'black' and the 'white' — the 'empty land' and the 'myth of the empty land' — there is a middle line.

The Babylonians gave a harsh blow to the kingdom of Judah, the hardest blow in the history of the kingdom. They destroyed Jerusalem, exiled the king and all the religious, economic, social, and political elite; the kingdom ceased to exist. From the demographic point of view, based on all the available archaeological data, one can assume that, as a result of the long war and as part of its effect and outcome, there was an approximately 60% decline in population. During the sixth century B.C.E., and up to the middle of the fifth century B.C.E., the tendency toward a population decline continued. During all the period following the destruction of Jerusalem, through the Hellenistic period, nearly all the population (90% and more) lived in rural settlements.

So can the rural settlement carry the burden? It seems to me that with the right methodological attitude, taking into account all the different kinds of archaeological data, together with the relevant historical and biblical research, the answer to this question is 'definitely yes'.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Malamat 1950, 227; Wright 1957, 199; Lapp 1965, 6; Weinberg 1969, 206; Weinberg 1972, 47–50; Stern 1982, 229; 2000, 51; 2001, 321–23; Barstad 1996, 47–48; Milevski 1996–97, 7–29; Lipschits 1999a; 2001, 131–35; 2003, 346–51; in press a; Oded 2003, 71.

<sup>2</sup> On this subject, see Carter 1994, 106–45; Milevski 1996–97, 7–29; Lipschits 1997, 171–336; 1999; 2003, 326–55; in press a; in press c; Na'aman 2000, 43. It is

difficult to understand either the archaeological or historical basis for Barstad's conclusions (1996, 47–48) regarding the difference between the area north of Jerusalem and the area south of it.

<sup>3</sup> In his discussion, Faust (2003) did not mention the data from the excavations in the region of Benjamin and did not deal with the problems connected to his idea from the results of the survey in Judah, apart from noting that it 'will be conducted elsewhere' (note 11,



p. 49). See further discussion on the importance of these data.

<sup>4</sup> The survey data indicate that in 21 sites, pottery shards from the Persian period were uncovered, without any evidence of Iron Age pottery shards (or at least not from the end of the period).

<sup>5</sup> These data agree with existing information about the complete cessation of settlement that took place

throughout the Jordan Valley and the western littoral of the Dead Sea. It would seem that this, too, was related to the collapse of the economic, military, and political system of the kingdom of Judah.

<sup>6</sup> See, on this subject, the description and model presented by Magen and Finkelstein (1993, 20–21), and see on p. 138, the assessment of the surveyors as cited there.

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