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The present volume is an expanded and supplemented project based on a Ph.D. dissertation supervised by Prof. N. Na’aman and submitted to Tel Aviv University in January 1997. It was completed in 2002, and a Hebrew version appeared in 2004. The present English version has some additional changes and bibliographical updates that distinguish it from the Hebrew version. Various sections of the manuscript have been published elsewhere, in Hebrew and in English.

The project focuses on understanding the period of Babylonian rule over the territory of Judah. It does so by analyzing the perceptions and biases embedded in biblical historiography, especially 2 Kings and Jeremiah, addressing the time, place, goals, and target audience of these compositions, as well as the available archaeological evidence from limited excavations and extensive surveys, which are used to project demographic and geopolitical trends. Since so little direct evidence is available, Lipschits contextualizes the Babylonian period by looking at the situation that prevailed before and after: the political set-up during the late Judahite monarchy, and provincial rule under the Persians, seeking to attribute intervening changes to the Neo-Babylonians.
This is a well-researched study that brings attention to a long-neglected topic: the province of Yehud in the Neo-Babylonian period but also the impact that the exile had on the editing of some of the biblical literature, which, in the case of 2 Kings and Jeremiah, Lipschits thinks was supplemented primarily outside the province of Yehud. The investigation is tackled in five chapters, plus an introduction and summary: (1) “The End of the Kingdom of Judah: The Geopolitical Background”; (2) “Judah under Babylonian Rule” (including characteristics of the policy of Nebuchadnezzar II in Hatti-Land, a historical synthesis of the fall of Jerusalem, and an analysis of the biblical account of the history of the province of Judah); (3) “Changes in the Borders of Judah between the End of the Iron Age and the Persian Period”; (4) “The Significance of Material Culture for Understanding the History of Judah under Babylonian Rule”; and (5) “Babylonian Rule, the Destruction of Jerusalem, the Exile, and the ‘Remnant’ in Judah,” which addresses perceptions and trends in 2 Kings and Jeremiah, including dates, locations, sources, redactional layers, purposes, and targeted audiences.

Lipschits concludes from the biblical texts that the Neo-Babylonians established Mizpah as the new provincial seat of Yehud prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and suggests the possibility that they deliberately prohibited the resettlement of Jerusalem and environs (218) as a way to account for the failure of farmsteads around the former capital to have been used until the rebuilding of Jerusalem under the Persians. He also suggests as an alternative that without the urban center there was no economic basis for such villages and farms in the immediate environs. An interest in extracting taxes in kind for imperial use would have provided an economic basis for farmsteads to have been located anywhere in the province. Thus, his first alternative is better, or a third proposal he did not entertain: the population of the Jerusalem hinterland was exiled along with the urban population, and, otherwise, the undisturbed population elsewhere in the province remained on their ancestral estates, accounting for the failure of squatters to take over these abandoned farms. In chapter 5 Lipschits argues that the claim in Jer 39:10 that Nebuzaradan gave some of the poor who had nothing vineyards and fields is a later expansion dating from after the return to Zion (302–3) of limited historical value, so the latter would be a possible alternative explanation. However, he also asserts that Gedaliah made land grants to soldiers who had been in the field at the fall of Jerusalem and who had returned after the deportations (Jer 40:10; p. 106), so his first option becomes the only viable one within his larger argument for why none were assigned to the devastated region as a way to begin its recovery. He seems to be splitting hairs to say that Gedaliah, rather than Nebuzaradan, made land grants; either would have been acting as an agent of the Neo-Babylonian regime. In fact, in Gedaliah’s speech to the soldiers in Jer 40:10, he does not claim to have granted them land; instead, he refers to towns that they have “seized” (tapaštem; root וַיְשַׁבֵּץ, “to lay hold of, wield, deal with”).

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Perhaps as a result of translation into English, Lipschits gives an impression that Gedaliah was spearheading a movement for national restoration and revival that was somehow undermining the Babylonian regime while seeming to work within it in a spirit of cooperation. Maybe this impression was unintentional, but if not, then more clarification of how he is reconstructing Gedaliah’s intentions, especially in contrast to the rather obvious bid to restore a Davidide to leadership in the province in Ishmael’s assassination of Gedaliah, perhaps with an eye to future revolt and the restoration of the kingdom of Judah, was needed. His decision as a modern historian to adopt the biblical rhetoric and call the Persian period “the return to Zion” is most unfortunate and detracts from his reconstruction.

For Lipschits the mwsh-stamped jars relate in some way to the Neo-Babylonian administration but do not help define the provincial borders. On the one hand, he argues they contained produce from a crown estate that was used to supply the governor (151); on the other, he seems to imply that they were used to collect taxes (366, 371). Curiously, in discussing the provincial borders of the Neo-Babylonians, Lipschits does not heed his own warning concerning the western border of Yehud under the Persians vis-à-vis the late monarchy that “any reconstruction must assume that borders remained stable throughout the period” (173). Arguing that the southern border of the former kingdom of Judah was the Beersheba-Arad Valley, he concludes nevertheless that the status of the southern hills of Judah and the southern Shephelah remained undefined within the new province. The effective sphere of influence ended at Beth-zur. It was only in the Persian period when the southern boundary came to be defined as a result of border disputes among neighboring provinces (183–84), and, in Lipschits’s opinion, the Persians marked the southern border of Yehud by a row of forts: Beth-zur, Khirbet el-Qatt, Khirbet es-Zawiyye, Khirbet Shana, and Khirbet Um et-Tala‘ (257). It is hard to believe that the Neo-Babylonians would not have defined all the borders of the new province so that they could register the local population for purposes of taxation and conscription.

Lipschits has not adequately explained why the Neo-Babylonians would have changed the southern border of the former kingdom of Judah. The presence of Arab and Edomite, Aramean, and Hebrew populations in this region in the fourth century in the Idumean ostraca does not require that their ancestors had arrived already at the end of the sixth century B.C.E., nor does it preclude the inclusion of some such populations within the province of Yehud after 586 B.C.E. if they were already settled there or arriving to settle under the Neo-Babylonians. At the same time, it is not likely that the Persians would have needed to establish border forts between provinces; they were all part of the larger empire. Forts were put at regular intervals along major roads to monitor the movement of people, goods, and mail. The placement of forts in the Judean hill county and Shephelah needs another explanation, however, since they are not located along such major roads. In
addition, Lipschits needs to account for the Persian-era forts of Khirbet Rasm Shu‘liya, Khirbet Umm el Baqar, Tel Haraqim, Tel Sera‘, Tel Arad, Harei ‘Anim, Tell Beersheba, and Nahal Yattir, all of which lie south of his alleged boundary but north of the Beersheba-Arad Valley. If these were within unclaimed land, or within the emergent province of Idumea, why were they needed? Were tensions so high within the area that so many forts were needed to control the sparse local, mixed population? They did not all mark boundaries, as proposed for the five cited above by Lipschits. And what about the other Persian forts in Yehud proper, at Khirbet Kabbar, Giv‘at Shappira, Horvat Zimri, Khirbet Nijam, and Rujm Abu Hashabe? They cannot be marking boundaries, so why did the five he identified do so?

Lipschits accepts the historicity of Cyrus’s decree to allow Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple in Ezra 1 (122–23, 372) and argues that a few thousand, mostly priests, returned to Yehud at the end of the sixth or the beginning of the fifth century B.C.E. and resettled in Jerusalem and its environs (125, 267, 271). Yet he notes twice that this alleged return left no imprint in the archaeological data or in demographic evidence (267, 271), and in fact, as he well knows, there is no way to establish a date for the renewal of settlement in Jerusalem and its environs based on pottery chronology alone; the pottery could be placed under Cyrus or Darius or Artaxerxes. It is unclear to me why he does not follow the logical lead of his own archaeological observations and see the alleged edict in Ezra 1 to be an ideologically motivated fulfillment of the prediction in Isa 44:28 that Cyrus would rebuild the temple, especially since he accepts that Ezra 1–6 is the latest segment of Ezra-Nehemiah and so is not likely to be contemporary with the actual rebuilding.

Chapter 4, dealing with the significance of the material culture, has strengths and weaknesses. Lipschits has done an excellent job demonstrating how there is no clearly identifiable pottery that typified the Neo-Babylonian period of administration in Yehud. This was a time of transition, when Iron II pottery forms continued in use alongside a few new shapes that would come to dominate the repertoire in the Persian period. It is only possible to identify Neo-Babylonian occupational levels at excavated sites when the relative proportions of these two types of pottery can be determined.

Having been meticulous in laying out these distinctions and our limited knowledge of excavated sites, however, Lipschits goes on to create population estimates in various geographical regions for the Neo-Babylonian period from survey results that do not permit the clear identification of Neo-Babylonian occupation from a random collection of sherds lying on the surface. The presence of late Iron II forms and typical Persian forms at a given surveyed site might mean: (1) the destruction or abandonment of the site in 586 B.C.E. until its resettlement in the Persian period; (2) the destruction of the site in 586 and
its resettlement in the Neo-Babylonian period and continued occupation into the Persian period; (3) the destruction of the site in 586 and its resettlement in the Neo-Babylonian period but its subsequent abandonment in the Persian period; or (4) the continuous occupation of the site from the end of the monarchy through the Neo-Babylonian period and then its abandonment or its ongoing occupation into the Persian period. It seems presumptuous to present figures of the number of dunams occupied and the likely total population at the end of the monarchy, during the Neo-Babylonian regime, and under the Persians within Yehud based on the uncertainties inherent in the survey data.

In addition, it is unfortunate that the site names and relevant data were not included in an appendix. The book is already quite long, which may have been the determining factor for their exclusion, but the summary figures do not allow the reader to work independently with the information to see if she or he agrees with the results or interpretations made by Lipschits. He refers readers to his Ph.D. dissertation for this information. However, Israeli dissertations are notoriously hard to access or even acquire copies of for university library collections or personal use, so this is not an adequate dissemination of the information. Moreover, an explicit methodological description of how he determined how many dunams of a particular site’s size were to be included in each of the three periods needed to be given in the body of the text. The problem of determining what percentage of a site was occupied in a given period was acknowledged in footnote 218 on page 246, but even then no presentation of how he has proceeded was given. This is particularly critical for sites that had been towns or large urban centers, and the results can influence the total dunam and population figures significantly.

The organization of the present volume is odd; it is unclear why all the issues surrounding the biblical textual evidence were not dealt with together but split between chapters 2 (4) and 5. The present arrangement results in the annoying feature of asserting conclusions in chapter 2 that will only be fully argued on the basis of evidence later presented in chapter 5. Arguments for the compositional history and ideology of relevant texts form a necessary precursor, it seems to me, to any attempt to analyze what might constitute reliable historical information contained therein. There is also a tendency in chapters 1–4 to dismiss views proposed by others on disputed points without giving an adequate summary of their arguments and/or adequate—or sometimes any—counterargument. A typical example is found on pages 171–72 in note 133: “The main opposition to dating the list [in Neh 2–4] to Nehemiah’s time, by those who redate it to the preceding period (Heltzer and Kochman 1985:112), relies on arguments that are not convincing and that are unable to justify taking the list out of its present placement.” What are these arguments, and why are they unconvincing? “As most scholars have emphasized (see, e.g., Myers 1965a: 112–13), the list does not relate the entire building process; it has a specific goal, and we should not draw conclusions from the list based on
information it does not contain.” Has that clarified matters any? Not really. While it is hard to strike a balance between giving adequate discussion and evaluation to disputed issues and maintaining the momentum of argument for an important trajectory under examination, I found myself regularly writing “elaborate,” “proof,” and “why?” in the margins of chapters 1–4.

The first chapter that sketches the geopolitical background to the end of the kingdom of Judah makes unsupported assertion after assertion. This chapter was necessary to set the scene, but the embedding of direct references to the sources being relied on in the main text would have inspired more confidence in the statements and conclusions being made, and the acknowledgement of disputed points on a regular basis in footnotes would have helped point out where potential problems lie. This sort of summarizing is always very difficult to do well, especially when one is eager to move on to the in-depth analysis of a specific issue. But historians in particular need to maintain the standards of the profession and not succumb to oversimplified presentations that reinforce a comfortable status quo that passes as accepted convention, by default, because scholars are uneasy about challenging hypotheses that have become virtual “fact” or about opening what is known to be a can of worms because it could lead to the loss of a comfortable working hypothesis.

As a final small point to raise within the space limitations, the volume has no general subject index. There are indexes for authors, scripture, and ancient places and sites, but given the detailed nature of the present work and its size, the decision to omit a general subject index was a poor one. Whether motivated by lack of time or energy to undertake the thankless task personally, the lack of funds to pay someone else to do it, or because of space concerns, this has limited the user-friendliness of the volume considerably.

I disagree with a number of the conclusions in this volume, but I respect the abilities of its author as a historian, with reservations about his choice of terminology. I recommend the book to anyone interested in the impact the exile of a portion of the population of the kingdom of Judah had on biblical historiography, as well as to anyone interested in the creation of the province of Yehud by the Neo-Babylonians and the life of those who never experienced exile. My drawing different conclusions on a number of points highlights the ambiguous nature of the limited sources available; as always in the history of the ancient southern Levant, it is a matter of making a convincing argument based on what is deemed relevant data from the little that is extant. The present volume represents a serious attempt to control both the textual and archaeological data currently available, and many will find its arguments persuasive and convincing. The author presupposes the historical reliability of most of the biblical texts he uses, although he also acknowledges that all the texts reflect particular ideologies and sometimes contain competing
ideologies, due to later editorial work. He spells out which claims within the text he does not think are historically accurate and why, in most cases. The volume belongs in all university libraries and will undoubtedly become the main study on Yehud in the Neo-Babylonian period for decades.