As someone who has written a book on the exilic period some years ago (Israel in Exile [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004], German 2001) I can imagine the enormous difficulties in reconstructing a period for which we have so little historical data. Oded Lipschits is extremely well trained for this difficult task. He is one of the few scholars who is not only a distinguished expert of Israelite archaeology but also a learned historian of the ancient Near East and even a well-trained biblical scholar who can deal with the biblical text in a sophisticated manner. Thus he is able to offer the reader three different approaches. The book consists of two historical chapters (1–133), two archaeological chapters (134–271), and one exegetical chapter (272–359), each of them showing a high academic standard. With regard to the notes, which often cover half or even more of the page, Lipschits’s book tops even German academic studies, sometimes ridiculed for being too sophisticated.

How happy I would have been if I had received this book ten years earlier, when I wrote the historical chapters of my study! As a biblical scholar, I imploringly looked for archaeological surveys and demographic calculations for Judah in the sixth century, but I was not very successful. In most archaeological reports I read, the Babylonian period was left out. And I am happy to hear now from Lipschits: “Archaeologists generally have not
focused their attention on the period when Babylon ruled Israel” (185). So it was not only my fault. It is now Lipschits who is able to present to us all the material culture and detailed demographic calculations for Judah in the sixth century and beyond. So I think it is the main merit of this book that it draws a much more founded, a much more detailed, and a much more realistic picture of Judah during the exilic period than has ever been possible before.

When I wrote my book, I was confronted with two extreme opposing opinions. One suggested a total destruction of Judah and a high number of deportees, which significantly reduced the population of Judah (W. F. Albright, D. L. Smith); the other minimized the extent and impact of the deportations and stressed the continuity of life for the great majority in Judah (M. Noth, H. Barstad). Lipschits now demonstrates that both were true with regard to different parts of the country. Compared with the Judean settlements of the seventh century, there were heavy population losses in Jerusalem and its environs (nearly 90 percent); strong losses in the southern Judean hills, the Shephelah, and the Negev (about 75 percent); a halving of population in Benjamin; and nearly no reduction in the northern Judean hills. Lipschits reckons with a total loss of 60 percent and estimates the population of Babylonian Judah with 40,000 inhabitants, compared to the 110,000 of the late Judean state (see the table on 269). Thus, according to him the Babylonian invasion had a severe impact on Judah. Judah lost a lot of people through warfare, starvation, and flight; it lost most of its elite through deportations; and, although its new administrative center was established in Benjamin, it lost its large urban center Jerusalem. I am happy that my own calculations, which I did more on theoretical considerations, are not too far away from Lipschits’s results (see Israel in Exile, 81–90).

I am glad that Oded Lipschits and I agree in many details, such as the Babylonian origin of the exilic Deuteronomistic History, the Judean origin of the Gedaliah account and the Jeremiah biography, and the ideological conflict between both literary units. But, of course, I also differ with him over several points. I would like to name five of them.

1. Assyria, Egypt, and Josiah: According to Lipschits, Egypt immediately established its rule over Palestine and Syria when Assyria withdrew from the Levant (since 627 B.C.E.). Following N. Na’aman, he regards Egypt as a “Successor State” of Assyria and its legal heir (27). For some scholars such a view is enough reason to deny the possibility of a reform under King Josiah (e.g., H. Niehr). Nevertheless, Lipschits assumes a “void in the political arena” (361) but stresses that “the ‘intermission’ granted to Judah was brief indeed” (362). So he still reckons with a cultic and a limited national reform under Josiah but thinks that the king was “an Egyptian vassal in his final years” (362). How can we reconcile both views? Were the Egyptians interested only in the coastal plain? If this was the case, when did they interfere into the hill country? How should such an Egyptian rule
be imagined? Lipschits admits: “It is not clear what steps were taken by Psametichus and Necho to solidify their rule in central and southern Syria, but it seems that, after the final disappearance of Assyria, they did not have enough time to consolidate their control all the way along the Euphrates” (362–63). After Nebuchadnezzar’s victory in Carchemish, “Necho was forced to withdraw inside the borders of Egypt” (363). Thus, can we really speak of an established Egyptian rule in the Levant? Not by chance, Lipschits mentions this problem among his open questions (376).

2. Neo-Babylonian Imperial Policy: Lipschits primarily describes the history of the Neo-Babylonians as a rivalry of powers, first with the Assyrians for freedom, then with the Egyptians for ascendancy in Hatti-Land. He mentions the constant Babylonian revolts as the main reasons for Assyria’s decline (361), but he does not take into consideration the ideological background of Babylonian policy. In my view, the “revenge of Marduk” for the total destruction of Babylon by the Assyrian king Sennacherib in the year 689 B.C.E. became a kind of “foundation myth” of the emerging Babylonian state (see P.-A. Beaulieu, *The Reign of Nabonidus*, 1989, 115) and the ideological motor behind the wars against Assyria and its last ally Egypt (Albertz, *Israel in Exile*, 47–60). For example, the Babylonians used one-way deportations in contrast to the two-way deportations of the Assyrians, as Lipschits correctly pointed out (48). What was the reason? Because, in my view, the first aim of the Babylonians was not to stabilize their empire but to compensate the severe losses and destructions they had suffered in the long civil war with the Assyrians. Lipschits can state something similar: “It also appears that the Babylonians use the devastation of this region to leverage the rebuilding of areas in Babylonia that had been laid waste by the Assyrians during their long year of war against Babylon” (365), but he does not link this policy with the Babylonian “foundation myth.” Thus I would like to know whether Oded Lipschits thinks that my thesis is wrong or deliberately avoided such a religious-ideological level in his historiography.

In this connection it is interesting that Lipschits, having noticed an economic decline of Judah and the Levant during the Babylonian rule, gives the following explanation: “In contrast to the Assyrian kings, Nabopolassar and Nebuchadrezzar did not consider themselves rulers of the world and did not develop an imperial ideology like the Assyrian kings [referring to D. S. Vanderhooft, *The Neo-Babylonian Empire*, 1999, 9–59]. The consequence was that they did not invest great resources in establishing their rule in the areas conquered. … This policy led to a drastic decline throughout the Levant in economy and trade” (188). Here Lipschits himself thinks of an ideological background of Babylonian policy. I think he is basically right. As “kings of Babylon” the Babylonian rulers were interested only to win tribute and personnel for the development of Babylonia. Only Nabonidus, who took over the Assyrian title “king of the four world regions,” tried to change this Babylonian policy in order to develop the remote Harran province by using
the resources of the center, but he failed (see Albertz, *Israel in Exile*, 60–70). In my view, this unilateral economical policy of the Babylonians also can be understood from their “foundation myth.” For me, Lipschits’s remark is very interesting that apart from some hints at some Babylonian wine and oil production in Gibeon and Mizpah (*mwsh* seals, *gb’n gdr* inscriptions) there is “no historical or archaeological evidence of any attempt by the Babylonians to develop the region or to establish a logistical scheme to reinforce their control” (366).

Apart from that, Lipschits stresses a change in Nebuchadnezzar’s policy after the anti-Babylonian coalition 594 B.C.E.. After interfering before in the internal political structure of the vassal states as little as possible, the king now decided to make “them provinces under direct Babylonian control. … On the border between the Babylonian and the Egyptian empires, a buffer zone consisting of impaired and weakened provinces was created” (365). I think Lipschits is right, but I do not see here much difference with the imperial Assyrian policy of the three stages of dependency; only the loss of interest in developing well-organized and flourishing provinces is new.

3. The Deportations: Lipschits takes the information of 2 Kgs 24:14 for granted that the deportees of the year 597 consisted of “approximately 10,000 people” (59). Later he regards this verse as a literary intrusion from the early postexilic period, but he thinks that it gives a generalized sum of all other figures named in the texts (7,000 + 1,000 in 25:16 and 3,032 in Jer 52:28). Compared with a loss of 60,000 people, which Lipschits calculated on the basis of the archaeological evidence, the number of 10,000 deportees is very small. Would such a big number of 50,000 people have been killed or lost as refugees? As far as I can see, Lipschits, following the books of Kings, gives no numbers for the deportation of 586. I regard the 10,000 people of the secondary verse 2 Kgs 24:14 as the number of the second deportation, deliberately displaced, because it would interfere with the impression given by 2 Kgs 25:21 that “all Judah was exiled” (see *Israel in Exile*, 90). In this case, we would add the numbers and have approximately 20,000 deportees. For me it remains unclear why Lipschits has chosen the minimalistic solution concerning the extent of deportations.

I think Lipschits is right to state: “Among them [the exiles] were many of the nation’s elite, some of the top military units, and craftsmen with technical skills” (364). But if he concludes that by the deportation of the elite, “for the first time, the nation was split along social and class lines” (367), in my opinion he overstates the social effect of the deportations. He admits himself that a smaller part of the elite, such as the Shaphanides, Jeremiah, and several military leaders, stayed in Judah (102–7). There are clear hints that the Babylonians distinguished between Judeans who had supported the revolt against them and those who were innocent. So they probably deported mainly those elites who
were members of the nationalistic party and in addition to them all others whom they might need for economical reasons. In my opinion, the elite was more affected by the deportations than other groups of the society because it was more involved in politics than the lower social classes.

4. The Reign of Gedaliah: I totally agree with Lipschits that the reign of Gedaliah was a very important factor for the history of Judah in the exilic period (84–102). It constituted a real chance for a nonmonarchic restoration, as the Gedaliah account in Jer 40:7–41:8 points out. Thus I am all the more surprised to notice that Lipschits limits Gedaliah’s rule to “a bit longer than seven weeks after the destruction” (101). Even though one admits that his rule could already have started in Mizpah some months before the final occupation of Jerusalem, it would have been extremely short. How, then, did it gain such importance?

Of course, Jer 41:1 does not mention any year for the murder of Gedaliah, but Lipschits’s conclusion—that the late summer of the same year must be meant, because the harvest of olives, which starts in Benjamin during Tishri (September/October), is not mentioned in Jer 40:12—is not very convincing, since the harvest of olives is not mentioned in any biblical narrative. Because it was not celebrated by a feast, the olive harvest obviously stood more in the mental background.

In my opinion, it is much more realistic to date the murder of Gedaliah in the year 582, when a third deportation took place (Jer 52:30). For this event, Lipschits cannot give any explanation. Likewise he overlooks the fact that Jehoiachin must have been taken into prison before he could be released from it by Amel-Marduk (2 Kgs 25:29). What could be the reason? In my opinion, again the murder of Gedaliah, when at the same time several Babylonian officials were killed (see Albertz, Israel in Exile, 94–95; 103–4).

5. DtrH and the Jeremiah Narratives: I fundamentally agree with Lipschits’s exegesis on the exilic edition of the DtrH (Dtr²), the Gedaliah narrative, and the Jeremiah biography (Jer 37:1–43:7*), apart from some minor differences. And I am glad to see that Lipschits has also discovered the extent of controversy reflected in these literary works in spite of their common Deuteronomistic shape. I do not believe in a late preexilic edition of the DtrH (see Israel in Exile, 276–78); therefore I have my doubts whether a first exilic edition (Dtr²) can be dated in the early exilic period, as Lipschits does (289, 304).

At any rate, Lipschits’s proposal that the two passages on Gedaliah’s reign (2 Kgs 25:22–16) and the release of Jehoiachin (25:27–30) should be seen as later additions (297–98), because the history could well have ended with the final statement that all Judah went to exile (25:21), is a good idea. In addition, his interpretation that the additions show that the basically nationalistic Babylonian exiles became ready to accept the existence of

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those who remained in Judah and wanted to come to terms with the Babylonian authority (298) is supported by good reasons. Still, I already see a similar hope for a better cooperation with the Babylonians in 1 Kgs 8:50. Should we regard this verse as a later addition too? Thus, there are still some open questions.

Lipschits takes 2 Kgs 24:13–14 and 25:12, which consist of the statement that only the “poorest of the land” remained in Judah, as a late “nomistic addition” to DtrH, by which the returnees to Zion wanted “to depreciate the value of those who remained” (302). Admittedly, 24:14 and perhaps also 24:13 are insertions, but not necessary that late. For 25:12, I cannot see any literary-critical indication that this verse was inserted later; rather, 24:13 depends on 25:12, so this last stage of redaction that Lipschits tries to reconstruct is founded on slippery ground.

With regard to the Jeremiah narratives, Lipschits reconstructs in detail how an original account on Gedaliah’s rule (Jer 40:7–41:18) was redactionally inserted in the Jeremiah biography (37:11–21; 38:14–28; 39:3, 13–14; 42–43:7*). Although I see the redactional process a little bit differently (Israel in Exile, 318), I agree with Lipschits’s material statements: “The account of Gedaliah’s time and the biography of Jeremiah reflect a tendency toward reconciliation with Babylonian authority”, they “emphasize the possibility of national rehabilitation under Babylonian rule”; and “their authors opposed all kinds of political activism” (349). I would only like to ask whether the phrase “political activism” is correct; of course, Gedaliah and Jeremiah were politically active too, but in a pro-Babylonian direction. So I would propose “nationalistic activism” instead.

Lipschits wants to date the combined Jeremiah-Gedaliah narrative around 550 B.C.E., where I dated my first edition of the Deuteronomistic book of Jeremiah (Jer 1–25*). On page 335 he is bothered that I date the second edition, to which the narratives belong (Jer 1–45*), a little later (545–540; see Israel in Exile, 318), but that looks to me like a misunderstanding; I spoke of the second Deuteronomistic book of Jeremiah (JerD2), which contained much more than the Jeremiah-Gedaliah narratives. The composition and redaction of the latter could have taken place earlier, of course, whether in 550 B.C.E. or even earlier, after the pupils of Jeremiah probably had come back from Egypt during the Amasis usurpation (571–567; see Jer 44:28).

That leads me to a methodical problem that I see in Lipschits’s exegetical chapter. This chapter is restricted to “Perceptions and Trends in Biblical Historiography,” which means a comparative exegesis of DtrH and the Gedaliah-Jeremiah narrative. But comparing both pieces of historiography in their literary-historical development throughout the period of exile, Lipschits is not aware of the fact that the Gedaliah-Jeremiah narrative already became a part of the larger book of Jeremiah, at least by 540 B.C.E., and thus can no
longer be interpreted as a unit of its own. There are now Deuteronomistic insertions into
the narrative (e.g., 37:1–2; 39:4–10, 15–18*; 40:1–3*; 42:6–10, 16, 18, 22; not noticed as
such by Lipschits), and there are other chapters, such as Jer 18 or 29, belonging to the
same literary level, which supplemented the view of a possible restoration, that went
beyond the older historiographical material. So the restriction on the “Biblical
Historiography” turns out to be problematic. In order to be methodically correct, the later
stages of DtrH should have been compared with JerD (or at least JerD2).

At any rate, I am very thankful that Oded Lipschits included this important sector of
exilic literary production and theological discussion into his book, which is so rich of
archaeological and historical information. At present, many Old Testament scholars tend to
isolate literature and theological thought from political and social history. Oded Lipschits
contradicts this tendency and combines both aspects of ancient Israel’s historical reality
in a sophisticated manner. I congratulate Oded Lipschits for this wonderful book. I am
sure it will become a standard for all further studies on the exilic period.