

INTRODUCTION

THE “RIDDLE OF RAMAT RAḤEL” AND THE PROBLEM OF IDENTIFYING THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF THE BABYLONIAN AND EARLY PERSIAN PERIODS

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From the very beginning of the excavations at Ramat Raḥel there was a contradiction between the dating of the palatial compound to the Iron Age, with its destruction in 586 BCE, and the presence of hundreds of lion- and *yhwd*-stamped jar handles, together with many other finds, dated mainly to the 6th–3rd centuries BCE, with no apparent architectural context. This is the well-known “Riddle of Ramat Raḥel” (Lipschits, Gadot and Langgut 2012).

Yohanan Aharoni, the first excavator at Ramat Raḥel, noted the many finds from the Persian period but expressed frustration at his inability to relate them to any notable architecture (Aharoni 1962: 4–10, 27–34; 1964: 17–23, 42–48). In his final conclusions he stated (1964: 120):

This latter citadel and its date are still extremely problematic. The main evidence for its existence is the unusually high number of seal-impressions from this period, including stamps of the governors of the province of Yehud. It is clear that the original inner citadel was left in ruins and was apparently used as a dump for the refuse from the Persian citadel. This seems to have been built further to the south, but we were not able to come to any certain conclusions about it.

Thus, from the very first excavations at Ramat Raḥel and from the earliest publications written about the site, the “riddle of Ramat Raḥel” was lurking in the background. No one, however, verbalized this riddle, and consequently, no solutions were ever posited. It was only with the study and republication of Aharoni’s excavations and the Renewed Excavations project at the site that this question was made explicit.

The renewed excavations, conducted by Tel Aviv University and the University of Heidelberg, and the final publication of the architecture and finds from Aharoni’s excavations have made it possible to reevaluate the archaeology of the site and its significance vis-à-vis the political history of Judah for the roughly six centuries during which it was under the rule of great empires—first as an Assyrian, then Egyptian and later Babylonian vassal kingdom (from 732 to 586 BCE), and following that as a Babylonian, Persian, Ptolemaic and Seleucid province successively (from 586 until the mid-2nd century BCE, when the Hasmonaean state was established) (Lipschits 2011a; 2011b; 2018). Research has demonstrated how Ramat Raḥel reached its zenith during the Persian period, serving as an imperial administrative center and probably also as the residence of the governor of the province (Lipschits 2015: 248–250, 257–258; Lipschits *et al.* 2017: 98–117).

Furthermore, the characteristics of the pottery from the end of the Iron Age in Judah are well known and clearly defined, having been recovered at Lachish Level II, City of David Stratum 10, Tell Beit Mirsim Stratum A3, Tel Arad Strata VII–VI, Tel ‘Ira Stratum VI and En-Gedi (Tel Goren) Stratum V, and usually dated to the period between the mid-7th and the early 6th centuries BCE. The Judahite pottery assemblage from the Persian period—as known from En-Gedi Stratum IV, the City of David

Area E Stratum 9, Jabel Nimra and sites in the region of Benjamin—is also well known and defined, and most scholars agree that the distinctive shapes and characteristics of the Persian period were already present by the mid-5th century BCE (Lipschits 2005: 192–206). There is a gap of 150 years between the destruction levels from which the typical pottery vessels of the late Iron Age were excavated and the appearance of the pottery vessels typical of the Persian period. The material culture from this intermediate period—which, from the historical perspective, includes the “Babylonian exile” and the first decades of the “return to Judah”—has never been defined or recognized as a distinct episode—even if scholars discerned an uninterrupted tradition of pottery production in Judah from the end of the 7th to the 5th and 4th centuries BCE (Stern 1982: 103; 1994; Lipschits 2005: 192–206, with further literature). Until now, there has been no clear-cut definition of the characteristics of the “post-586 BCE” material culture, its connection to the preceding late Iron Age material culture, or the development of the pottery types, stamp impressions and other aspects of material culture that are so familiar in the Persian period.¹

In my 1997 Ph.D. dissertation, as well as in my 2004 (Hebrew) and 2005 (English) books titled *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, I claimed that following the 586 BCE destruction of Jerusalem, a large rural Judean population remained in the north Judean highlands and in the Benjamin region in the close periphery to the north and south of Jerusalem. This population continued to preserve the nature of its material culture—and therein lies the great difficulty posed to archaeological research in discerning this culture and defining it. I have argued for continuity between the pottery assemblages familiar to us from the end of the Iron Age and those of the Persian period and have demonstrated that most vessel types characteristic of local manufacture in Judah during the Persian period are in fact a development of typical Iron Age forms. Furthermore, I have suggested that this theoretical discussion could be harnessed to support the continued existence of pottery traditions between the end of the Iron Age and the Persian period.²

This notion has remained a theoretical one since no clear stratified assemblage of pottery could be used to prove it; until now there has been no archaeological means to differentiate between the pre-586 BCE and post-586 BCE material culture in Judah. In many respects, since archaeologists never expected to find material culture from the 6th century BCE, this material culture was not discovered, located, or identified. To a certain extent, this stems from its close similarity to the pottery assemblages that preceded and followed it. Another factor, however, may be that scholars assumed that life ceased to exist in Judah during the “exilic period” and hence that pottery production and other manifestations of economy and administration could not have developed in Judah during this period (Lipschits 2011b: 64–66). This underlying assumption led archaeologists to identify the “intermediate” material culture of the 6th century BCE as representing the late Iron Age, even in places where there was a scholarly consensus that life continued in Judah in the 6th century BCE (Magen and Finkelstein 1993: 27).

Barkay (1998) was right to claim 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.” Indeed, it would appear that scholars in general and archaeologists in particular adopted the clear-cut biblical description of the “Empty Land” after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the notion of a “Mass Return” during the early Persian period. Consequently, they viewed the material culture of these two periods as disconnected, while dismissing the possibility of a strong and well-established culture in Judah during the 6th century BCE.

1 The first description and analysis of this material culture in Judah was conducted by Freud (2018); see also below, Chapter 4.

2 Other scholars, such as Stern (2001: 516), Lapp (2008: 29–30), Berlin (2012: 7) and Bar-Nathan (2002: 22–23) have demonstrated this continuity (and see below, Chapter 4), but none have characterized or defined the material culture of this intermediate period.

A direct link can be drawn from Albright's 1949 statement that "there is not a single known case where a town of Judah was continuously occupied through the exilic period" (1949: 142) to the assessments of Jamieson-Drake (1991: 75, 146) concerning "a complete societal collapse" and "almost complete dissolution" and to the title of Stern's 2000 and 2004 papers, dealing with "the Babylonian Gap," and the title of Faust's 2012 book dealing with the "archaeology of desolation." Further evidence of this approach can be seen in Stern's conclusion in the chapter on the Babylonian period in his 2001 book: "A review of the archaeological evidence from sixth-century BCE Judah clearly reflects the literary (i.e., biblical) evidence for the complete destruction of all the settlements and fortified towns by Nebuchadnezzar II's armies in 586 BCE" (Stern 2001: 323).

Archaeologists have claimed that "this view is based upon purely archaeological considerations and is not motivated by hidden ideological considerations" (Stern 2004: 273) and commonly used these archaeological "facts" as grounds for a historical reconstruction of the "Babylonian Gap" and the "Empty Land" during the 6th century BCE (cf. Faust 2012). It seems to me, however, that the archaeological "fact" of total destruction at the beginning of the 6th century BCE is in fact the outcome of historical preconceptions about this period, based on a traditional interpretation of the biblical description.³ Furthermore, no archaeologist has been able to, or even tried to, demonstrate from the archaeological perspective any kind of "Mass Return" at the beginning of the Persian period, as described in the first chapters of the book of Ezra. One would expect this "Mass Return" to be well attested in the archaeological record in the event of a "Mass Deportation" and an "Empty Land," as suggested by the claim made in Ezra 1–6 for the return of some 40,000 exiles to Judah at the very beginning of the Persian period with the support of the imperial authorities.

The indications of continuity in material culture, economy and administration, not only from the late Iron Age to the "exilic period" but to the Persian period as well (Lipschits 2011b), compel us to view the 6th century BCE as a period when Judahite life continued in Judah, and in many aspects continued in a manner very similar to prior to the 586 BCE destruction—despite the destructions and deportations, despite the gap in the history of Jerusalem and the Temple, and despite the move of the social and religious center of gravity from Judah to Babylon.

Formulating an historical picture that is independent of the Bible and is as unfettered as possible by historiographical and theological preconceptions is a privilege of modern research and is of prime importance even for an examination of the biblical descriptions themselves. The archaeological record may release us from religious, political and ideological conceptions that characterize the research of the biblical period in general and the exilic and post-exilic periods in particular, and may pave the way for new questions and put us on a firm footing for understanding this period in a much more neutral way. The archaeological finds from the Babylonian-Persian Pit at Ramat Raḥel are of major importance in the historical, administrative, economic and even biblical perspectives of this formative period in the history of the land.

3 See, e.g., Stern 1994: 56–58; 2001: 353, 581; Oded 2003: 59–66. Oded was correct in claiming that scholars supporting the "Myth of the Empty Land" as a byproduct of the thesis of "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 (2003: 57–58). He is right in his attempt to demonstrate to what extent their thesis on the creation of the "myth" is unacceptable and ill founded—both on archaeological grounds and even on biblical grounds. However, it seems to me that just as in the case of the different emphases in 2 Kings 25:12 and 22 on the "empty land" and on the "people who remained," the "school" of scholars supporting the "Babylonian Gap" and reconstructing a "real" empty land in Judah during the "exilic period" are doing the same thing—they are studying the archaeological finds and interpreting the texts with common presuppositions, focusing on the general political-theological-polemic statements made by exiles and returnees in order to base their right on the land, rather than using the more nuanced research on the various voices and descriptions of this period.

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