Twenty years ago almost nothing was known about the Babylonian period in ancient Israel (ca. 604/586–539 BCE). Since then, there have been conferences on the subject, and many articles and even books, such as the one being reviewed here, have been published that have sought to bring greater clarity to this long neglected era.


The book pulls together the author’s views on sixth-century Judah that have appeared in numerous articles over the last decade, and expands and updates some of them. Hence it is a useful compilation of Faust’s previous work. As the introduction (and chapter 8) makes clear, it is primarily a rejoinder to what is usually called the “continuity” school of thought, which sees significant continuity in Judean society, primarily in the rural sector, following the destructive Babylonian invasion of 587–586 BCE. The more extreme proponents of the continuity school are biblical scholars, such as Barstad (e.g., 1996) and Blenkinsopp (e.g., 2002), while a far more moderate position has been adopted by the archaeologist Lipschits. Few scholars, especially archaeologists, follow the positions of Barstad and Blenkinsopp; thus the present work, arguing for “discontinuity,” is often Faust’s response to critiques of his earlier studies touching on this period, especially by Lipschits in *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem* (2005a). It should be noted, however, that the positions of these two scholars are not actually very far apart, as Lipschits himself has noted (2005a: 42). Their debate centers primarily on the methodology used in evaluating the data that have emerged from the survey and salvage projects available for studying the rural community in Judah from the end of the Iron Age through the Persian period. For example, both agree that large areas of Judah were devastated, including major tell sites and the rural sector, but that pockets of settlement continued in certain regions, and even among the ruins of major sites (p. 235; Lipschits 2005b: 366–67). Whereas
Lipschits sees a decline in settlement occupation of 60–70 percent (depending on the region [some were hit more severely]; 2005b: 211–71), Faust sees the decline as more severe, in the range of 80–90 percent (pp. 119–47). Their main differences primarily involve the evaluation of data from the regions of Benjamin and the area south of Jerusalem between Bethlehem and Beth Zur. Because of the difficulty in identifying the remains of those survivors squatting among the ruins, or living in ephemeral habitations (such as tents), a higher figure than what Faust suggests may be advisable. Both also agree that the Babylonians were not interested in setting up a provincial system in the southern Levant; rather they stripped it bare of resources in order to rebuild Babylonia, leaving the area a devastated buffer zone against Saitic Egypt (pp. 188–94; Lipschits 2005b: 369; 2011a: 167–68).

Faust argues that even those in the “continuity” school agree that there was major destruction of the main tells during the Babylonian attack. Those in the “continuity” school believe that the Babylonians largely spared the rural sector, and that society continued there much as it had before. The major focus of Faust’s book is thus on tracing the fate of the less archaeologically explored rural community following the invasion (chapters 1 and 2, though he revisits aspects of this in chapters 5–7).

The key point in the debate over the end of both the urban and rural sectors is that no pottery-type fossils or clean assemblages are known for this relatively short period. This makes dating strata found on tells, and especially the remains found in site surveys and salvage projects, extremely problematic (pp. 14–15). Faust lists various tell sites said to have been destroyed by the Babylonians (pp. 23–32). Since there are no texts which describe the scope of the Babylonian invasion, it has generally been assumed that any site with pottery similar to Lachish Stratum II and City of David Stratum 10, followed by some sort of a gap, must have been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. However, it is impossible to say how long the terminal Iron Age II ceramic culture persisted, and thus to date remains belonging to the sixth century. For this reason, one can never be certain if sites (especially those in areas perhaps more peripheral to Babylonian interests like the Negev and Judean wilderness) containing such material were destroyed by the Babylonians in the early sixth century, or came to an end due to attacks by other entities at some other point in that period. Indeed, as some scholars have noted, a number of excavated sites that do not continue into the Persian period do not show evidence of destruction, but rather of abandonment (Dever 2009: 31“–32”).

Especially in regards to the rural sector, Faust understands this methodological problem and argues that the solution is to examine demographic trends from the end of the Iron Age through the Hellenistic period, which show a steep drop off from the Iron Age into the Persian period, and a recovery in the latter part of the Hellenistic period (chapters 2 and 5). This is something with which most archaeologists would agree. Faust argues that this decline was a direct and mostly immediate result of the invasion and destruction of the countryside by the Babylonians. Methodologically, the immediacy of the collapse of the rural sector is a more problematic stance. It is important to remember that there are no textual sources that directly support such a claim. There are no Babylonian accounts of this campaign (unlike for Sennacherib’s invasion of 701 BCE), the Lachish letters are narrowly focused on activities in the Shephelah, and the focus of the biblical accounts in 2 Kings 24–25 and Jeremiah 39 and 52 is on the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile of its elite, and activities apparently undertaken in the environs of Jerusalem. The account in Jer. 7:34 reports that the Babylonians were fighting against Lachish and Azekah because they were the only fortified cities that remained. This text does not say whether other cities surrendered or were destroyed. Given the lack of texts to support his argument for immediate, kingdom-wide destruction, Faust relies on the general treatment of regions and settlements undergoing attacks and sieges as a basis for his claim (pp. 64–66, 140–43, where he documents the executions, famines, and epidemics that could accompany such an invasion). He argues that such campaigns of terror, reprisal, and plunder were a standard operating procedure for the Assyrians and Babylonians and that Nebuchadnezzar would have followed such a policy. However, this tends to undercut his position because he also argues that the Assyrians limited their destructive activity in 701 BCE predominantly to the
Shephelah (chapter 6). He even argues that the following seventh century was one of relative prosperity for the rest of Judah (which is the general consensus of scholars, who see it as a period of weakness and diminished resources in much of the country). If the Assyrians did not totally destroy Judah, why did the Babylonians? Of course Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar may have had different agendas, but if they did, it is important to offer suitable explanations for them. Given the lack of textual data documenting a country-wide campaign of destruction, other scenarios are possible. For example, one might envision a more sporadic and also gradual decline in settlements during the sixth century. This could have been brought about by a combination of Babylonian destructions (perhaps focused on the Shephelah, the gateway to Jerusalem, and the environs of Jerusalem itself), attacks by other outside forces (e.g., Edomites in the Negev) which could no longer be resisted by a central government, and the abandonment of other sites due to security concerns, economic decline, and cessation of governmental support (e.g., military forts/outposts). Some sites (and the areas around them) even persisted through the Iron Age into the Persian period, such as Rogem Ganim (Greenberg and Cinamon 2006: 229–31; contra pp. 45–46 n. 12) and Ramat Rahel (Lipschits 2011b: 61–63), as attested by a series of administrative stamp impressions. Such a reconstruction may be closer to the truth (Lipschits 2005b: 69; 2011b: 67).

The fact of settlement decline is not at debate here, only its mechanisms and timing. Chapters 3 and 4 do not relate closely to Faust’s main thesis regarding the decline in the rural sector; instead, they provide additional documentation on the collapse of the elite, largely urban, sector of Judean society. While these discussions are useful, it is important to remember that the collapse of this sector of society is not part of the core debate between the “continuity” and “discontinuity” schools. All agree that much of the Judean elite was either carried off to Babylonia, or killed during the invasion or as a part of Babylonian reprisals (Jer. 52:10). In chapter 3 Faust emphasizes the lack of Greek pottery dateable to the sixth century in the southern Levant. However, such a decline is entirely expected. When not used by Greeks settled in the area, such pottery would have been used by local elites (pp. 86–87). Since the Babylonian attacks removed or killed a large number of these elites, it is not surprising that the number of imports of such luxury goods dwindled. This lack of imported luxury goods only points to the collapse of the elite buyers’ market and the date of that collapse; it says nothing about the state of Judean society (or southern Levantine society in general) outside of that elite orbit, nor provides a firm date for the decline of the non-elite segment of that society.

Chapter 4 is devoted to Faust’s discussion of Judean tombs. Only a few from the Iron Age seem to have continued in use through the sixth century, and the form was abandoned at some point in the Persian period. However, as Faust himself notes, these were the tombs of the Judean upper class (pp. 94–95). Since this is exactly the group that was exiled, it is to be expected that the use of this type of tomb would decline in the sixth century. They were not the tombs of the “average” Judean (p. 245). The decline in use of this tomb type says nothing about continuity/discontinuity in regards to the rural lower class, who, as Faust notes, would have been buried in largely unidentifiable simple inhumations (p. 99). It is not evidence of a general population decline, but only of a decline in the elite segment of society (p. 99).

Faust then continues chapter 4 by examining the decline in use of the Israelite four-room house (pp. 100–105). It is clear that this house type ceased to be used during the Persian period. However, the evidence from Tell en-Naṣbeh suggests that such houses continued to be built, at least at the beginning of the Babylonian period, and could have remained in use into the fifth century (see below). Data on domestic architecture in the Persian period are fairly meager, which makes dating the final disappearance of this house form difficult. Faust also acknowledges that the loss of social templates, such as tomb forms and presumably house types, probably occurred over at least two generations (pp. 105, 239).

Faust’s arguments (pp. 106–8) that a change in post-exilic kinship terminology is reflected in the abandonment of the four-room house type (and Judean tombs) may actually say more about the impact on Judah of those returning from the exile than on what was happening in Judah during the exile. Similarly, the marked lack of figurines in Persian-period Jewish sites, as compared to their abundance in Iron Age sites, says...
nothing about the size of the surviving population following the Babylonian invasion (pp. 109–10), only that the religious world view of the biblical writers, that "idols" were inappropriate for the Israelite cult, had taken hold. Again, since the exact nature of material culture of the Babylonian period is unclear, we cannot be sure if their absence in the Persian period is due to internal changes in Judah, changes imposed by the those returning from exile, or a mix of both (for the continuation of Iron Age religious practices following the Babylonian attack, see Jer. 7:18 and 44:15–19).

Faust closes chapter 4 by briefly discussing the change from Classical Hebrew to Late Biblical Hebrew (probably introduced by the returning exiles) and argues that the most likely context in which such a change could occur is during a period when a society’s cohesion has been weakened. He suggests that the demographic collapse during the sixth century created such a context. Since the exiles made up the bulk of the literate elite of ancient Judah, it is likely that once they returned their form of literary Hebrew would have become dominant in any case.

In chapter 5 Faust examines the data from excavations, surveys, and salvage projects in more detail in order to paint a picture of demographic trends in Judah from the end of the Iron Age through the Persian period and ending in the Hellenistic period. As noted above, his analysis posits a somewhat more severe decline than that accepted by Lipschits, but the two agree that there was a steep drop off. Nonetheless, there is a methodological concern. Faust correctly notes that survey data for the Persian period overestimates settlement and population sizes because all sites in this period, which contain contemporary pottery, were not occupied at the same time. He does not, however, follow his own methodological standard for the late Iron Age. In other words, the settlement survey data for the late Iron Age represents a maximal estimate for that period as well, and it is impossible to actually know how many of those sites were settled at a given moment. Thus it is impossible to estimate the true drop in population, only to measure the difference between maximal populations.

As noted above, in chapter 6 Faust attempts to contrast the state of Judah after the Assyrian invasion of 701 BCE and the Babylonian assault of 586 BCE in order to emphasize its greater devastation after the latter’s attack. He argues that the seventh century for Judah was largely marked by growth and prosperity, except in the Shephelah. However, it is difficult to quantify the loss of total settled area and population in the Shephelah versus gains in other parts of the kingdom. The areas which did experience growth, such as the Negev and Judean wilderness, were marginal agricultural zones. Could growth there have compensated for the loss of the Shephelah?

Chapter 7 examines sixth-century Judah in the context of other post-collapse societies. Many of the traits enumerated by Faust as signs of collapse, such as a lack of monumental architecture, a lack of trade, and literature which sees the past as a golden age, are a result of the exile of the old Judean social elite (pp. 170–71). This is not unexpected; the issue is how did this collapse affect non-elite segments of society? This hinges on the level of complexity within Judean society. For example, the dependence of agriculturalists in some significant way on social elites yields a more significant rural sector collapse than in a society where agriculturalists are less dependent. Faust seems to assume a certain level of interrelated complexity in Judean society, and that the collapse of the central bureaucracy in Jerusalem somehow affected the ability of subsistence farmers to support themselves, causing famines (pp. 246–47). However, this level of interrelated complexity should be documented either in primary sources or the archaeological record (which it is not), rather than assumed.

Chapter 8, which might have been incorporated into the introduction, covers the origins of the “continuity” school. It is a useful review of the debate and rightly calls into question some of the more extreme views of the degree of continuity following the Babylonian campaign. Faust claims that members of the “continuity” school set up an “empty-land” straw man in order to make their own arguments for some degree of continuity seem more reasonable. Nonetheless, Faust needs to be careful. As mentioned above, his views and those of Lipschits are often very similar, yet when Faust places him in the same category as the more extreme members of the “continuity” school, it sets up a greater divide between the two than actually exists. For example, he quotes Lipschits as claiming that there was no decrease in
Judean productivity following the Babylonian attack and that the Babylonians intended to exploit Israel agriculturally (pp. 189, 192). However, it is clear that Lipschits is primarily arguing that the Babylonians were interested in exploiting the area of Benjamin, not all of Judah, during their lengthy siege of Jerusalem and to support the remaining administration afterwards (2005b: 104–5).

In chapter 9 Faust attempts to revise the consensus which has emerged that the area of Benjamin was largely spared devastation by the Babylonians. He prefaces this chapter by saying that it is not crucial for the general acceptance of his theory involving the collapse of Judean society. This is a puzzling claim since Benjamin was part of Judah and according to the biblical text was the center of life following the Babylonian attacks. If society survived there to some extent that does have some bearing on his views regarding the lack of societal continuity in the sixth century.

The main issue in this chapter is Faust’s understanding of the material from Tell en-Naṣbeh Stratum 2 (largely found in n. 19 on pp. 233–34). The difficulties with Faust’s appraisal of the site relate both to the site’s architecture and small finds (see Zorn 2003 for a full review). The architecture of Stratum 2 is found across the site and consists of four large and finely constructed four-room houses (and two more fragmentary versions of such houses), along with other, even larger, though more fragmentary structures; there are other scattered remains as well. The remains indicate a less densely packed settlement than in the previous Stratum 3. The inner–outer gate complex of the Iron Age II Stratum 3 ring-road settlement was partially dismantled, leaving only the outer two-chamber gate to protect the town (this is contra Herzog 1997: 237, who did not understand how the local topography necessitated the form the Iron Age II inner–outer gate complex took, and that there was indeed an inner–outer gate complex; the buildings of Stratum 2 clearly are built over part of that complex). Form follows function and Tell en-Naṣbeh’s architecture obviously underwent a significant improvement indisputably showing that its role had also changed. The best historical context for such a site-wide redevelopment project, especially when taken together with the other data below, is the period of Babylonian rule when a new administration would have needed suitable quarters. Faust suggests that it is “fantastic” that the Babylonians built a new “city” and that Stratum 2 must have been built at some other point during the Iron Age. However, the reconstruction of a modest Iron Age town into a minor administrative center is only fantastic if one a priori assumes that the immediate Benjaminite area was in ruins. The very use of the word “city” implies a scale that is simply not there; the area under consideration is less than three hectares, whereas Jerusalem in 586 BCE was about thirty times as large.

Faust also doubts the dating of Stratum 2 to the Babylonian–Persian periods. This reviewer noted that two of the four-room buildings contained in situ pottery, one with parallels to sixth-century assemblages, the other to those of the fifth century. Faust argues that buildings of Stratum 2 (built at some undefined time) were destroyed at the beginning of the sixth century, and then apparently one (only?) was reused over 100 years later. The far simpler solution that is advanced by this reviewer is that the room with the huge pithoi dated to the sixth century represents the date when the stratum was founded, while the building with the fifth-century pottery dates the final period of use (Zorn 2003: 428). Because large storage jars are much less susceptible to breakage once set in place, it is not surprising that such jars were still in use much later (and such longevity for storage jars is based on well-established anthropological parallels). If the room was used only for storage it is not surprising that in situ Persian-period forms were not recorded from it, especially considering the excavation and recording methods used at the time. Only the in situ jars are relevant. The time range of the jars in the two buildings thus fits within a Babylonian context quite well.

In his chapter on Greek pottery (chapter 3) Faust himself acknowledges the presence of a small amount of imported Greek pottery from the sixth to fifth centuries at Tell en-Naṣbeh (p. 87). This is significant for two reasons. First it shows the site’s importance at the time. If Greek imports had ceased elsewhere in the southern Levant because there were no longer elites to demand them, what are such vessels doing at Tell en-Naṣbeh? The obvious answer is that there was an elite class there to use them. Of course, the presence of Greek pottery also bolsters
the notion that there was a settlement at Tell en-Naṣbeh in the sixth to fifth centuries, which in turn provides an example of continuity from the Iron Age into the Persian period (p. 216). The wedge-and-circle impressed pottery found at the site is not mentioned by Faust (Zorn 2001). Pottery with this type of decoration may be dated as early as the sixth century and is certainly present in the fifth. Approximately one-third of all the vessels with this type of decoration known from Israel come from Tell en-Naṣbeh, again attesting to the site’s significance at that time. Such pottery has also been found in Jordan and northern Arabia, perhaps suggesting some sort of trade network. Tell en-Naṣbeh thus has international trade connections both to the east and the west at a time when trade to the southern Levant had mostly ceased.

The detailed study of the M(W)ṢH impressions and the affirmation of their assignment to the Babylonian period was undertaken by this reviewer along with Yellin and Hayes (1994). While, of course, some have doubted the proposed dating and historical context of the impressions, an equal number have accepted them (e.g., Stern 2001: 335–36). Faust himself is indecisive about whether he accepts a sixth-century date for these symbols of governmental authority found almost exclusively in the old tribal area of Benjamin, but he seems to lean in that direction (p. 204). He does not mention that over 70 percent of these impressions come from Tell en-Naṣbeh itself, indicating that it was the most important center for the distribution of jars so stamped. In other words, the civic administration that employed these stamps was most likely located at Tell en-Naṣbeh and the resource area it could draw upon was largely limited to the area of Jerusalem and to the north. As others have recognized, the concentration of these stamp impressions in Benjamin, and within Benjamin at Tell en-Naṣbeh, correlates well with Gedaliah’s administration there. Furthermore, the discovery of 18 Yḥd and five Lion impressions (usually dated to the early Persian period, but see now Lipschits 2011b: 62–63) at Tell en-Naṣbeh not only attests to the site’s continued existence in the Persian period, but also that it continued to have a role in the administrative system of the area (Zorn 2003: 444).

Also not mentioned is the material found at the site with clear Mesopotamian connections, including burial remains and inscriptions. Fragments of as many as four ceramic bathtub-shaped coffins were found on the tell (Zorn 1993). The existence of such coffins within the settlement clearly indicates that those buried in them were following Mesopotamian practices, not local Judean ones. It is difficult to imagine a timeframe other than the Babylonian period when such burials could have occurred. There are also two inscriptions with Mesopotamian associations. One was a fragmentary bronze circlet, containing a type of dedication written in cuneiform; the other was a Mesopotamian name incised on an ostracan in Hebrew characters (Zorn 2003: 434–37). The most satisfactory dating for these written remains is also the Babylonian period.

When one takes all the available archaeological evidence, including a stratum with larger and finer buildings; the concentration of materials with elite or administrative associations such as Greek imports, wedge-and-circle pottery, and M(W)ṢH, Lion, and Yḥd impressions; artifacts with Mesopotamian associations; and the dating provided by ceramics (including the in situ jars, Greek imports, wedge-and-circle pottery, and Yḥd impressions), and evaluates them as a unit, a coherent picture emerges. In contrast to Faust’s view, Tell en-Naṣbeh was a modest administrative center of the sixth and fifth centuries. It was not Jerusalem before its fall, but it was hardly a ruin either.

This analysis of the Tell en-Naṣbeh material has implications for Faust’s understanding of the general situation in Benjamin. As both Faust (pp. 210–11) and Lipschits (2005b: 246–48) agree, there was decline and abandonment in Benjamin. Faust dates the beginning of this decline to the period immediately after the assassination of Gedaliah, which he assigns to 586 BCE, and claims that this should be the default time (p. 217). Is this warranted? Faust faults archaeologists for looking to texts (e.g., Jer. 40–41) for data to support continuity in Benjamin throughout much of the sixth century, but Faust also uses the biblical text as the basis for his reconstruction. He uses the general biblical narrative of a Babylonian invasion to explain the decline in rural settlement. Without textually based knowledge of the campaign could such a claim be made? Without such texts and given the uncertainties surrounding the ceramics of
the sixth century, would archaeologists instead speak of a long period of decline at the end of the Iron Age? Faust also looks to texts to explain the reason for the abandonment of the major sites (the assassination of Gedaliah) and the date (586 BCE). The text of Jer. 42–44 does not say how many people fled the area following the assassination of Gedaliah; it is only an assumption that this flight involved a large enough number to lead to significant depopulation. Instead, as the above archaeological data from Tell en-Naṣbeh show, an administrative center of some local significance existed during this entire period. Thus the officials there must have administered something. Lipschits’ model, that the major Benjaminite sites and rural settlements suffered decline more likely in the fifth century, when Jerusalem began to regain its importance, seems a more likely “default” scenario given all the available data (2005b: 237–48).

Chapter 10 offers what seems a largely realistic appraisal of life in Judah after the Babylonian invasion, except for the area of Benjamin and its administrative center at Mizpah. However, this is to be expected since Faust argues that this area also suffered a severe decline and contained no administrative center during the sixth to fifth centuries. This reviewer would thus add a few paragraphs describing how Mizpah served as such a center for the region, but could only draw on resources from the surrounding area of Benjamin due to the devastation elsewhere. Some members of the Judean elite, along with some Babylonians apparently, were quartered there in a newly constructed town with access to limited international trade. The town continued to have some importance down into the first part of the Persian period, though eventually declined and was finally mostly abandoned. Faust notes that much of the change in Judean society that occurred as a result of the Babylonian invasion would have happened over many years, even over generations (p. 116). Some of these changes were due to societal collapse in Judah itself, while other changes were imposed as the elites exiled to Babylonia gradually returned and reasserted their control.

There is much that is useful and of value in Faust’s volume, especially the discussion of the surveys and salvage projects in chapters 1–2 and 5. While some of the material included does not bear directly on the book’s main focus as stated in the introduction, the degree of continuity in the rural sector, it does flesh out the picture of the overall nature of Judean society in the sixth century and actually matches well the book’s title. There are some methodological concerns and interpretations with which this reviewer cannot agree. Taken together with Lipschits’ 2005 magnum opus, certain basic traits of the Babylonian period are now better documented archaeologically than they were only twenty years ago and the history and culture of the era are now much clearer.

References


