Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period

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Tell en-Našbeh and the Problem of the Material Culture of the Sixth Century

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When I first began looking at the material from Tell en-Našbeh fifteen years ago, an international conference on the sixth century or Babylonian period would have been an almost unheard-of event. At that time we had bits and pieces of material scattered over many sites and publications. Stern’s volume (1982) on the Persian period was the only available synthetic treatment to include the sixth century, but of course it canvassed material from subsequent centuries as well. It is gratifying indeed that a variety of important works discussing this period have appeared since that time, including Stern’s new Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, vol. 2: The Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian Periods (732–332 B.C.E.) (Stern 2001).

After the destruction of Jerusalem in 586, the Babylonian appointed ruler Gedaliah established his administrative center at Mizpah (Jer 40:5–6). There he was joined by the prophet Jeremiah, eunuchs, Babylonian soldiers, Judean soldiers and officers still in the field, and the “king’s daughters”/princesses (Jer 40:7–8; 41:3, 10, 16; 43:6). Judeans who had fled to surrounding lands returned to the area around Mizpah (Jer 40:11–12). Apparently the initial stages of this local restoration of civic life went well. Soon, however, Gedaliah was murdered by a disaffected member of the Davidic line, aided and abetted by the king of the Ammonites (Jer 41:1–2). After this crime, most of those caught up in the incident, fearing a Babylonian reprisal, fled to Egypt. Nothing more is heard of Mizpah until the time of Nehemiah, when work detachments from Mizpah, at this time a district capital within Judah, helped in the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem (Jer 43:1–7). This much is what we know of the history of Mizpah in the sixth and fifth centuries.

Tell en-Našbeh, accepted by most as biblical Mizpah of Benjamin (fig. 1), just 12 km north of Jerusalem, is a prime example of what we

1. So far the published material from Nebi Samwil does not support Magen’s identification of this site with Mizpah (Magen and Dadon 1999: 62–65). It seems to lack both
can and cannot learn about the archaeology of the little-known period following the Babylonian destruction and also the problems we face in its investigation.

Tell en-Naşbeh (fig. 2) was excavated over the course of five seasons, between 1926 and 1935, by William F. Badè of the Pacific School of Religion (Zorn 1988; TN I.3–11). Approximately two-thirds of the site was excavated down to bedrock, providing one of our best examples of settlement organization in Iron Age Israel. However, the excavation and recording methods were children of their time. While not up to the standards of Megiddo and Tell Beit Mirsim, they were superior to those at Beth-shean and Beth-shemesh (Zorn 1999: 61–63). Large blocks of contiguous architecture were uncovered. These coherent architectural units, apparent on the unpublished 1:100 site plans, allowed me to arrive at a significant reappraisal of the site’s stratigraphy, which showed that there was a clear, distinct architectural phase that postdated the main Iron Age ring-road phase. I have posited that this stratum belongs to a period spanning the Babylonian exile down to the latter part of the Persian period, from the early sixth century to late fifth century.²

The key problem at Tell en-Naşbeh, which is also an issue at other sites thought to contain sixth-century material, is finding clean deposits that can be used to characterize this period (Zorn 1993c: 70–81;

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Iron I and sixth-century material, which any site equated with Mizpah must possess to be considered a serious candidate for such an indentification.

² Zorn 1993c: 163–85 contains a detailed summary; Zorn 1997b is a briefer, popular account.
Fig. 2. Plan of Tell en-Naṣbeh Stratum 2. Adapted from TN 11:400 Site Plan.
1999: 62–63). There are two primary reasons for this: one methodological, the other a consequence of history.

First, loci, such as they were, consisted of all of the contents of a fill bounded by at least three walls down to a floor, threshold, or the base of the walls (Badè 1934: 16–18, 40–41). The digging was also untidy, meaning that pure dirt loci, such as pits, would have been missed, and floors, unless made of stone, would usually be missed as well. This combination of methods means that unless obviously in situ artifact assemblages were found on a plain dirt floor the laborers would have gone completely through such a floor, mixing material from above and below floor level, and mixing in material from unidentified deposits such as pits. On the basis of a comparative analysis of sherd material recovered from these undifferentiated fills, and the contents of tombs, with stratigraphically secure deposits from other sites, it is possible to see that Tell en-Nâşbeh was inhabited throughout the Iron Age. However, for reasons discussed below, Tell en-Nâşbeh is sorely lacking in in situ deposits. Only two houses were uncovered that can unequivocally be said to contain such material, Buildings 110.01 and 125.01. This makes it impossible to characterize in broad terms the artifactual assemblages from the final phase of any of the Nâşbeh strata. That is, while we may be able to date the strata broadly, it is impossible to say which vessel forms were in use at what times within and between these strata. I can show that Stratum 2 belongs, in part, to the Babylonian period, but I cannot provide a clean assemblage of material from the sixth century.

The second issue we face at Tell en-Nâşbeh is a stumbling block shared by other sites as well. The period spanned by the Babylonian and Persian Empires, while turbulent enough as a whole, seems to have left the hill country of Judah and Benjamin largely unscathed (Stern 2001: 353–60). Our main biblical sources, Kings and Jeremiah, leave off with the flight of a band of fugitive Judeans into Egypt not many years after Jerusalem’s destruction (2 Kgs 25:26; Jer 43:6). The next clear references we have to activities in Judah come in the later sixth century, after Cyrus had allowed the Judean elite to return home (Ezra 1–6; Zechariah 1–8; Haggai). Even these few texts have a limited scope of

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3. The numbering system for buildings at Tell en-Nâşbeh is based first on the section of 1:100 site plan in which the majority of the building is found and second on the order of discussion of the building in the author’s dissertation. For example, 110.01 indicates that this is the first building in map section 110 treated in the dissertation. Note that on all plans solid black indicates existing walls, and gray indicates reconstructed walls.
interest, focusing primarily on Jerusalem and on the rebuilding of the Temple. Similarly, the Babylonian Chronicle is very fragmentary after Nebuchadnezzar's 11th year (593); there are no reports of military campaigns aimed at Israel after the 597 campaign, not even the final destructive campaign of 587–586 (Grayson 1975: 19–20, 99–102 for Nebuchadnezzar II's reign; also pp. 20–22, 103–10 for later monarchs). Moreover, despite the revolts and civil wars that often rocked the succeeding Persian Empire, especially the ones involving Egypt, there are no certain military actions against Judah during this entire era. Known military activities involving the Persians and Egyptians seem limited to the coast and Shephelah (Stern 2001: 576–78). What of more localized conflicts? While Nehemiah may have been concerned with military threats from his neighbors (Neh 4:1–9; 6:1–9), there is no clear evidence for the destruction of settlements at this time.

Thus we are faced with strata that may begin in the sixth century (or perhaps even earlier) but continue after the return from the exile and even beyond the end of the sixth century At Tell en-Naşbeh I can demonstrate that Stratum 2 begins in the early sixth century and thus describe the architecture that characterizes this period, but other material indicates that these buildings continued in use into the later fifth century, meaning that artifactual remains recovered from fills from this stratum are a hodgepodge that cannot be said to characterize any one phase of this approximately 150-year period. Thus, at Tell en-Naşbeh we can achieve some idea of the kinds of buildings in use in the sixth century but little about the other aspects of daily life, unless we have other kinds of data that suggest a sixth-century date.

Before moving on to a discussion of the remains from Naşbeh Stratum 2, we need briefly to summarize the architectural remains of the preceding Iron II stratum, which I have called Stratum 3. This will help establish the distinct nature of the Stratum 2 material.4

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4. Stern (2001: 576–77), on the basis of the presence/absence of imported Greek pottery, suggests that a number of sites in the central hill country (Shechem, Tell en-Naşbeh, Bethel, Tell el-Fül, and Gibeon) were destroyed approximately 475 B.C.E., though he can find no historical agent for these destructions (also Ahlström 1994: 858; Aharoni 1979: 412). Most of these sites were poorly excavated and/or published. The material from Naşbeh, as presented herein and including the Greek wares, demonstrates that at least one of these sites continued to exist until the end of the fifth century.

5. The stratigraphy developed by this author diverges markedly from the stratigraphy proposed by McCown and Wampler in the 1947 Tell en-Naşbeh report (TN I 179–232). In that report the strata were numbered using Roman numerals. The revised stratigraphy employs Arabic numerals to differentiate the new stratigraphic scheme from the old.
Some of the basic characteristics of Stratum 3 have been known for years. The coffin-shaped form of the hill on which the town was constructed dictated its basic outline. The stepped structure of the natural limestone terraces of the hill helped determine the location of roads and the dwellings that faced them. The Iron II settlement’s main constructional phases are relatively clear (Zorn 1993c: 114–62; 1993b: 1099–1101; 1997b: 31–35). The initial phase of Stratum 3, 3C, consists of buildings and roads that followed the hill’s natural contours. The back rooms of the houses along the periphery of the site formed a casemate-like wall, a rudimentary defense system. At some point a massive inset-offset wall was constructed down-slope from the existing town. This is phase 3B. Access to the town was provided through a monumental inner-outer gate complex. The southern intramural area was dotted with stone-lined storage bins, while the lower northern half of the intramural area was crossed by drains used to carry runoff water outside the walls. Phase 3A consists of remodelings of the original 3C houses, most clearly attested when they expanded into the intramural area. The initial phase of construction of Stratum 3C is dated to approximately the tenth century, primarily because a number of house walls are built over the mouths of rock-cut silos containing pottery from the Iron I period. On the basis of 1 Kgs 15:22, which records the construction of fortifications at Mizpah by King Asa of Judah, the offset-inset wall and gate complex are assigned to the ninth century (Zorn 1997b; 1999). The remodelings of 3A span the period from the ninth century down to the construction of Stratum 2 in the sixth century.

Houses of the 3-room type make up almost half of all identifiable buildings in Stratum 3, while 4-room houses amount to only 1/10th of the total. Most buildings range in external size from 44 m² to 86 m², with an average of 65 m²; even the 4-room buildings average only 80 m². Walls of 3C are a single stone in width, while those of 3A are two stones wide. Stone-paved floors were found in approximately 20 of the 73 identifiable buildings, and stone pillars, mostly built of rough stone drums, were found in 38 buildings (Zorn 1993c: 116–30). These statistics are vital when it comes to differentiating the relative quality of construction between Strata 3 and 2.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Stratum 3 is how well the architecture is preserved. Often pillars are found still standing, and there are even lintels still in place; many rooms contained installations such as ovens and olive presses. In contrast to the state of the structural remains is the complete absence of in situ artifactual material. Room after room in building after building across the entire site was found
completely empty. It is important here to note that Badè’s team found no evidence of burning or any other destruction material in these buildings, something that would not have been missed even with the techniques then in use. What are we to make of this lack of in situ material? It seems that the entire population of Mizpah was allowed to collect all of its personal belongings and was then evacuated from the town, which was then demolished.

My suggestion is that this deliberate peaceful destruction of Stratum 3, followed by its replacement with buildings of similar types, though of larger and finer construction and laid out in a completely different settlement plan, represents Gedaliah’s transformation of Mizpah from a fortified town on Judah’s northern border into a new administrative center. Form follows function.

When I first began my work on Naṣbeh, my eye was drawn to the stratigraphic and architectural relations of three large 4-room buildings located along the periphery of the Stratum 3 ring-road settlement. The first structure (fig. 3; Zorn 1993c: 898–901 = Building 194.01), in the southwest corner of the site, is clearly constructed over the line of the walls forming the casemate-like defenses of Stratum 3C, out into the intramural area and over some of the 3B bins. The second structure (fig. 4; Zorn 1993c: 710–14 = Building 145.02) is located just a few meters inside the inner, 4–chamber gate, an extremely awkward
place for a dwelling because it is in the middle of the gate plaza, interrupting traffic flow in the area, and is in the immediate line of attack of any enemy who breeched the inner gate. It is also built over one of the 3B bins. The third structure is just inside the outer, 2-chamber gate (fig. 5; Zorn 1993c: 538–45 = Building 110.01) and is constructed over the wall that once connected the western parts of the inner and outer gates (Zorn 1997a: 60–61). None of these buildings is oriented in accordance with the ring-road. This is an important observation. Once the buildings of Stratum 3 had been filled in and leveled off, they functioned to create broader areas within the settlement than had been available before, when construction was dictated by the presence of the natural terracing of the hillside.

It is thus clear that these three buildings postdated certain elements of the main Iron II stratum; this had already been noted by others.
Fig. 5. 4-Room Buildings 93.03, 110.01, and 127.01 Near Outer Gate. Adapted from TN I 1:400 Site Plan.

These scholars generally dated these houses to sometime in the latter part of the Iron II period, approximately 700 B.C.E. or later (McClellan 1984: 54, Phase D; Branigan 1966: 208; Herzog 1997: 237). What they did not recognize is that these buildings were not an isolated series of
structures along the periphery of the site but were part of a larger, though fragmentary, architectural phase that can be isolated in similar stratigraphic contexts scattered across the site. That is, these three buildings are part of a much more extensive, separate stratum later than Stratum 3 than is usually realized.⁶

First, there are remains of what appear to be three additional 4-room houses, all of approximately the same size as those previously identified, about 12.5 × 10.5 m, and likewise oriented independently of the ring-road. The first of these is located in the north center of the tell; it clearly blocks remains of adjacent 3-room buildings and a transversal road cutting across the ridge of the tell (fig. 6; Zorn 1993c: 568–70 = Building 125.01). The second is located to the east, near what appears to be the intramural area adjacent to the outer gate (fig. 4; Zorn 1993c:

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⁶ The following presentation discusses only the most-significant architectural remains of Stratum 2. Zorn 1993c provides a full discussion of all remains assignable to this phase in the site’s development.
602–5 = Building 127.03). The third is just to the northwest of the inner gate (fig. 5; Zorn 1993c: 501–4 = Building 93.03). Remains of a fourth building of roughly similar proportions, though with little of the interior preserved, or perhaps not excavated, were found between this house and the one just inside the outer gate (fig. 5; Zorn 1993c: 592–95 = Building 127.01).

In the north-central part of the site are remains of a building with double-stone-wide walls that clearly interrupts the flow of Stratum 3 buildings to the west (fig. 7; Zorn 1993c: 173–74, 424–27, 449–50 = Building 74.01). This building was not completely excavated, due to the massive pile of rubble to the south, nor completely preserved on the north and east. However, enough survives to indicate that it was about 18 m wide and well over 15 m long. Two patches of cobblestone paving were found in the large central room. The visible part of this building is over 2.5 times the size of any Stratum 3 building. The surviving remains suggest that this was a courtyard-style building in the Mesopotamian tradition, similar to Buildings 1052 and 1369 from Strata III–II at

Fig. 7. Courtyard Building 74.01 at North End of Tell and Possible Reconstruction. Adapted from TN I 1:400 Site Plan.
Megiddo (Megiddo 1.69–72, fig. 89) though on a smaller scale, more like Building 736 of Stratum I (Megiddo 1.88, fig. 98).

Just to the west of the inner gate are the remains of an approximately 25-m-long wall built over the outer wall of the original casemate-like defenses of Stratum 3C (fig. 4; Zorn 1993c: 694–96). The only preserved corner is on the north, so its full extent is unknown. The majority of remains preserved inside this wall seem to belong to Stratum 3 structures. That there are no interior walls branching off this long wall suggests that this was an enclosure or terrace wall for some other structure to the west.

A 3-room house was sandwiched into the area between the inner gate, the enclosure wall, and one of the 4-room buildings, 127.03 (fig. 4; Zorn 1993c: 686–92 = Building 144.01). Indeed this dwelling is built right against the north face of the gate and would have blocked all access to it if it belonged to Stratum 3.

In the south-central part of the site there are remains of two long rooms connected to each other diagonally at the corner (fig. 8; Zorn 1993c: 785–88 = Building 160.10). The more northern of the two lies
Fig. 9. Stratum 2 Remains in Southwest Corner of Tell. Buildings 159.07 and 177.06. Adapted from TN I 1:400 Site Plan.
over a Stratum-3 road that crosses the center of the town and over what may be remains of a 3-room house. The southern room is built over the back rooms of two 4-room houses. Additional walls to the east and the west are likely also associated with this structure. Such long rooms are often used for storage, which might then be the function of these rooms. Unfortunately the remains are fragmentary, and so the character of these rooms is only conjectural.

Just to the southwest of these rooms is a confusing mass of architecture (fig. 9; Zorn 1993c: 742–47 = Building 159.07; pp. 845–49 = Building 177.06). It is clear that many of the double-stone-wide walls here are constructed over the back parts of at least six houses ranged around the periphery of the Stratum 3C town and into the fill poured up against the massive offset-inset wall of 3B. The remains stretch over an
area at least 44 m long by about 16 m wide. What cannot be determined is whether these remains are part of one extremely large structure (possibly of the open-court variety) or represent two or more buildings.

During the leveling operations that created the surface area for Stratum 2, the old inner-outer double gate complex that defended the entrance to the Stratum 3 down was partially dismantled (Zorn 1997a).\(^7\) The inner, 4–chamber gate went out of use, as did the western

\(^7\) Note that Herzog's contention (1997: 237) that my reconstruction of the inner-outer gate complex at Tell en-Našbeh "is unacceptable because of the long distance separating the units and their almost level topographic position" was written before Zorn 1997a appeared. This article explains in detail the local topographic conditions that necessitated the construction of the system as reconstructed and answers the issues raised by Herzog.
wall that connected the two gates; only the outer, 2-chamber gate remained in use. Evidently this was a prime area for redevelopment in Stratum 2, and the need for building space outweighed defensive considerations under the Babylonian administration.

The broad chronological limits of Stratum 2 are established by the in situ pottery from two of the 4-room houses: 110.01 near the two-chamber gate and 125.01 at the center of the tell. Room 642 in the latter structure produced remains of four huge sack-shaped pithoi (fig. 10). The hole-mouth specimens have good parallels at sites with early sixth-century destructions, such as Lachish II (Zimhoni 1990: 421–24, fig. 31:3) and Jerusalem (Mazar and Mazar 1990: 44; pls. 85–86; pl. 20:6–7). The example with the high raised neck has a good parallel in Arad Stratum VI. In Building 110.01, Rooms 376 and 380 produced a number of storage jars (fig. 11) with good parallels at Tel Michal Strata IX and VIII, dated by the excavators to between 450 and 400 (Tel Michal, 122, 124; figs. 9.3:2–6, 9.5:5–8).

How can two buildings of the same stratum have in situ pottery dating around 100–150 years apart? In her work among traditional potters on Cyprus, Gloria London discovered that massive pithoi, such as those from Building 125.01, once set in place can be in use for decades; in fact, she reported examples from Cyprus that were a century old (London 1989: 44). It is therefore likely that the pithoi on the floor of Building 125.01 were installed when Stratum 2 was constructed near the beginning of the sixth century, whereas the jars found in 110.01 were produced in the latter part of the fifth century and represent the final period of the life of Stratum 2.

Besides these relatively clearly identifiable architectural remains, there are other fragmentary buildings scattered around the site that are obviously later than Stratum 3. Sometimes these are just wall fragments, other times they make up nearly an entire room, but not enough is preserved to suggest a reconstruction.

There are also certain identifying constructional differences between Strata 2 and 3 (Zorn 1993c: 167–71, 173). Stone paved floors were more common in Stratum 2 buildings than in Stratum 3. In buildings containing pillars, all of the Stratum 2 pillars were of the more costly to produce monolithic type. Stratum 2 walls were almost always two stones wide, except often in areas that needed more reinforcement, such as corners or doorways, where single large stones of almost ashlar quality were found. The leveling operations that destroyed Stratum 3 also created broader internal spaces in which the new larger buildings could be erected. The smallest buildings in Stratum 2 are the 4-room
houses. These average approximately 130 m², more than twice the size of typical Stratum 3 buildings, and more than 1.5 times the size of even the 4-room houses of Stratum 3 (Zorn 1993c: 119–20). No doubt the officials now residing at Mizpah did not want to live in the same sort of cramped conditions as the townspeople of Stratum 3 had. Finally, not only were the buildings larger, but they seem more widely spaced. It is clear that buildings of Stratum 2 were universally larger, less crowded, and of better construction than those of Stratum 3.

Joseph Wampler, who published the Naşbeh pottery, identified a number of cisterns that he dated to the sixth century and later (Wampler 1941: 31–42; 1947: 124–25; TN II.129–39). Many of his conclusions about the general dating of these features are still valid. Indeed his “feel” for the dating of the pottery, especially the late forms, was often remarkably sound. These cisterns, though cut earlier in the Iron Age, continued in use into the sixth century and later. Unfortunately, earlier Iron Age material is also found in these features, and they cannot be considered homogenous deposits. Here I want to mention only two of the more important cisterns: 361 and 304.

Cistern 304 was found at the highest point of bedrock in the center of the mound. Fragmentary building remains, including a pillared wall and sections of other single-stone-width walls, suggest that Cistern 304 was initially in the courtyard of a Stratum 3 house that
Fig. 13. Pottery from Cistern 304. Figures not to scale. Adapted from TN I, fig. 26:D. x 11 = 20 cm D, x 21 = 30 cm H, x 22 = 16 cm H.

fronted on a road running perpendicular across the spine of the hill (fig. 12; Zorn 1993c: 679–82 = Building 143.02). The thicker walls in the area that cut across remains of this building, the crossroad, and the contemporary Stratum 3 structure across the road should be assigned to Stratum 2. The cistern contained a mix of Iron Age and later material (fig. 13). Among the later finds are the bottom portion of a
Clazomenian amphora of the second half of the sixth century, a portion of a vessel with wedge-impressed decoration, and a wall-handle fragment of a fifth-century kylix or cup. Another piece of interest is an ostraca (see below) that preserves part of what appears to be a Mesopotamian name (Wampler 1941: 31–36; TN I.135, 141, fig. 26:D).

Cistern 361 was found in Room 604 in the center of a large Stratum 3 building (fig. 14; Zorn 1993c: 644–49 = Building 142.01). This structure is located along the downhill side of the adjacent ring-road. A set of stairs leads up from Room 604 to what would have been the building’s second story. We are thus only dealing with the building’s lower floor. There was no access to Room 604 from the adjoining rooms, only from the upper floor. A large boulder, perhaps a reused stone basin,
pierced through its center, is shown in photographs adjacent to the opening to the cistern, apparently after it had been moved away from the cistern mouth during excavation (fig. 15). It seems that this pierced stone was used to raise the mouth of the cistern so that it was directly accessible from a higher level, something like a well shaft. Most likely this would have been in Stratum 2, after the lower portion of Building 142.01 had been filled in to create a new surface for Stratum 2. Unfortunately, few Stratum 2 building remains were found in the vicinity, so it is impossible to say with what kind of structure the cistern was associated in its latest phase. The cistern contained two M(W)SH impressions, parts of two vessels with wedge-impressed decorations, and a shoulder fragment of a black-figure oinoche of the

8. Note that there are several stones to the left of the cistern mouth. These are not on the architectural plan of the building. They seem to be there as props to help support the pierced stone over the mouth of Cistern 361. The stone was probably braced on the right by the east wall of Room 604.
fifth century (fig. 16). The cistern also contained a nice torpedo-shaped jar of the Persian period, bowls reminiscent of Assyrian palace ware and Persian vessels, and other vessels of the post-Iron Age period (Wampler 1941: 36–42; TN I.137).

Thus far we have examined the major architectural remains from Tell en-Naṣbeh that clearly postdate the Iron Age ring-road phase, establishing their locations on the mound and something of their construction techniques. We have also been able to show that they date to a period spanning the sixth century down into the latter half of the fifth century. The architectural remains of Stratum 2 have the clearest claim to a Babylonian-era pedigree due to the breadth of their exposure, their secure stratigraphic position, and the clear dating material found in situ on the floors of two of the buildings. We now come to the artifactual remains, the smaller objects. The fact that most Stratum 2 buildings are preserved only at foundation level means that virtually none of these pieces comes from a clean stratigraphic context, which, as mentioned in the introduction, is one of the primary dilemmas we face at many sites and which makes establishing the material culture of the sixth century so difficult. The first groups of objects to be examined will be those with the greatest claim to a Babylonian-era provenance.

Tell en-Naṣbeh has produced fragments of three Mesopotamian-style bathtub-shaped coffins (fig. 17; Zorn 1993a). These were all found on the tell itself in areas in which clear building remains from Stratum 2 were located. One fragment was found in the same square that produced a small bronze button base beaker, commonly found in coffin and jar burials in Mesopotamia (Bohmer et al. 1995: 40, pls. 104 and 107; Zorn 1996). It is significant that these coffins were found on the tell. Because corpses were considered a source of ritual pollution, Israelite practice was to inter the dead in extramural tombs. Their presence on the tell shows that the Mesopotamian practice of interring the dead below the floors of their homes was being followed. Were these the graves of Babylonian officials or of Judeans aping Babylonian fashion?

9. In Zorn 1996 the association of the bronze beaker with the coffin fragment found in the same square was not discussed because it did not seem likely that the beaker, found in a cistern, and the coffin fragment, found in the surface fill, could be related, especially since most of the pottery in Cistern 363 is clearly Iron Age. However, fragments of a fairly large Stratum 2 building (Zorn 1993c: 675–76 = Building 142.00) were found immediately east of the cistern, and the mouth of the cistern had been artificially raised by surrounding it with a low stone wall, perhaps not unlike the effort made to raise the mouth of Cistern 361. In light of these observations there may be a relation of Cistern 363 to the early part of Stratum 2 after all, and so the beaker with the coffin.
Fig. 16. Pottery from Cistern 361. Figures not to scale. Adapted from TN 1, fig. 28:B–C. x24 = 65 cm H, x25 = 36 cm H, x71 = 16 cm D.

No doubt the most enigmatic object from Tell en-Naṣbeh is a fragment of a bronze circlet bearing a cuneiform inscription (fig. 19; TN I.150–53, pl. 55:80; Zorn 1997b: 38 is a clearer image). This object was found in Cistern 166, which contained Late Iron Age pottery; unfortunately, the area around it was largely denuded of any architectural
context (Zorn 1993c: 883–84; TN I.130–31, 145, fig. 30:D). The piece is approximately 1.5 mm thick, 11 mm wide, and 16 cm long, suggesting an original diameter of 50 cm. Eleven characters out of what was likely a 30–35-character text are preserved. The shortness of the preserved portion makes translation difficult. In the opinion of Wayne Horowitz and David Vanderhooft, it is clearly a private donation inscription, but their initial readings differ markedly from those in the original publication.¹⁰ Moreover, it is unknown to which deity it was dedicated, to what sort of object it was affixed, or how it was attached to this object.

¹⁰ The interest of both these scholars was drawn to this piece as a result of the public lecture on which this article is based. It is gratifying that this important inscription is being rediscovered by a new generation of scholars. They hope to publish a new edition of this text in the near future.
Cistern 361, as mentioned above, produced an ostracon (fig. 20) that contains an apparently Mesopotamian name written with Hebrew characters (Wampler 1941: 31 and n. 9, fig. 9; TN I.168–69, pl. 57.23). The preserved signs are: נַכְרַּאָר and should be read as: [bē]n mar-šarri-uṣur = ‘[so]n of [?], protect the crown prince’.11 Names compounded

11. I would like to thank André Lemaire for drawing my attention to a photograph of the ostracon in which the sign previously read as zayin is clearly a šadeh. Paleographically, he prefers an eighth/seventh-century date, but the beginning of the sixth century
with šarru or ‘king’ were often the names of Mesopotamian officials (Stamm 1939: 317). It may be that names similarly compounded with mar šarru or ‘crown prince’ were also most often those of officials. The coffin fragments, circlet, and ostracon provide strong evidence of the depth of Babylonian influence at Mizpah.

Ancient Israel has produced 43 examples of stamped jar handles bearing an inscription reading מִזְאַד = MSH or מִזָּד = MWSH (fig. 18; Zorn et al. 1994). Thirty of these come from Tell en-Našbeh, suggesting that Mizpah was the key center in the use and distribution of jars sealed with these stamps. The remaining impressions come from an area defined by Şobah on the west and Jericho on the east, and from Tell en-Našbeh on the north to Ramat Rahel on the south—roughly the area of the tribe of Benjamin. Few of these pieces come from stratigraphically secure contexts, but those that do suggest a date from the end of the Iron II period to the beginning of the Persian period—that is,
the sixth century. Neutron Activation Analysis has shown that the jars themselves were produced in the Jerusalem area. It is likely that they were used to store and transport some product produced at a government estate at the town of Mozah, just west of Jerusalem.

The limited distribution of these stamps to the area of Benjamin and the fact that 70% of such stamps come from Tell en-Naşbeh are significant for our understanding of the post-Babylonian destruction administrative and economic structure of Gedaliah’s territory. As was suggested by Malamat long ago (1950: 227), the Babylonians seem to have left the area of Benjamin relatively undisturbed during their year-and-a-half-long siege of Jerusalem. Certainly it was to their advantage to spare this area, if only to exploit it as a source of supplies during a siege of uncertain duration. This suggests that this was also the core area that Gedaliah could count on for material support at the beginning of his administration. While most of Judah and Jerusalem suffered great devastation as a result of the war, and no doubt many perished in the conflict and in the immediately following period of civil and economic dislocation, some number of people were left to eke out their survival in the gutted areas. These survivors and refugees were in no position to help support the central administration in Mizpah, and we find no real trace of that administration’s presence in those areas.

The next group of artifacts has a somewhat lesser claim to a sixth-century pedigree. They might be earlier (seventh century) or some-
what later (fifth century), but at least a reasonable case can be made for attributing them to the Babylonian era.

Tell en-Naṣbeh produced four examples of bronze, trilobate, so-called “Skythian” arrowheads from fills inside the tell (TN 1.263, 302; fig. 71:9–10; pl. 104:8–11).\(^\text{13}\) Stern (2001: 309, 532) suggests that the introduction of these arrowheads is to be linked with the Babylonian campaigns into the Levant, though they continued in use through the

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13. The report actually states that five such arrowheads were found, but only four are shown in the plate, and only four are listed in the artifact registry.
Persian period. If this is so, and since Mizpah was not destroyed in the Babylonian invasions, and since our biblical text reports the presence of Babylonian soldiers at Mizpah (Jer 41:3), and since the arrowheads were found inside the town, it may be that the arrowheads are evidence of this garrison, or perhaps the adoption of this type of arrowhead by the Judeans.

Brief mention should also be made of the justly famous Ja’azaniah seal (fig. 22; TN I.163, pl. 57:4–5; Badè 1933). The inscription on the upper part of this 19-mm-long stone seal reads: “Ja’azaniah, the servant/
officer of the king." The lower half is decorated with the image of a rooster in a fighting stance. The seal was found in Tomb 19. Unfortunately, aside from a few fragments of pottery, this seal was the only object from the Iron Age found in this tomb, which had apparently originally been a typical Iron Age bench tomb that had been recut and reused in the Byzantine period (TN I.118–20, 122). The question naturally arises whether the individual who owned this seal was the same military officer named Ja'azaniah mentioned in association with Gedaliah at Mizpah in 2 Kgs 25:23 and Jer 40:8. While certainty on the issue is unattainable, it is not impossible that the Ja'azaniah of the biblical text was one of the Judeans who was murdered during Ishmael's attempted coup and who was subsequently buried at Mizpah, along with his seal.

Approximately 160 examples of vessels, primarily hole-mouth jars and deep kraters, decorated with rows of impressed wedges or circles, have been published from ancient Israel; including unpublished material, this figure climbs to over 200 (Zorn 2001). Of the 160 published vessels, 130 come from the area of Judah, and 62 of these specimens come from Tell en-Naṣbeh (fig. 21). Most of the rest come from Jerusalem, Ramat Rahel, Ein-gedi, Tell el-Fül, Beth-Zur, and Jericho, a wider distribution than the MWSH impressions. In addition, 2 examples come from 'Umeiri in Jordan, and 8 are known from sites in north Arabia.

The distribution of this material suggests that Naḥbeh was an important center in the production or trade of these vessels. A source analysis of the clay of these containers is a desideratum. At this stage it is not certain exactly what the find pattern of these vessels signifies. Perhaps the distribution from north Arabia through Jordan and into Judah is connected with the increased interest in the trade in incense that began with the Assyrians and carried through into the Persian period. Perhaps the vessels may be taken as markers indicating trade connections extending from north Arabia through Judah to the coast. Their wider distribution in Judah, as compared with vessels with the M(W)SH impressions, may suggest an initial phase for the production of these
vessels at a time when the economy in Judah had begun to recover from the devastation wrought by the Babylonians, but when Mizpah was still one of, if not the, major center in Judah—perhaps the mid-to-late sixth century.

In general this entire corpus of artifacts is attributed to the sixth century for several reasons. First is that most often they are unknown in the seventh century and seem to be more sparse in the fifth century, suggesting a sixth-century date for their main or initial period of use. Second, while some of them could come from the seventh century or earlier, suggesting a context of a small Judean border town of that era seems less plausible than attributing them to a minor provincial center of the Babylonian Empire. That is, they seem to fit the latter historical/functional category best, though a firm set of chronological boundaries is elusive. For example, what would Mesopotamian-style coffins be doing in the middle of a crowded Judean town of the Late Iron Age? It seems more reasonable to assign them to a period when Mizpah was a known center of a local Mesopotamian installed administration.

A final issue relevant to our understanding of the sixth century is whether Mizpah of the Babylonian period possessed a significant cult site or temple. This is a vexed question and cannot be examined here in depth. Essentially, some see Jer 41:4–5 (assuming that “temple of the LORD” is a reference to a structure in Mizpah, not Jerusalem) and 1 Macc 3:46 (reference to a former place of prayer at Mizpah) as evidence for a temple or cult site at Mizpah in this period (TN I.32), and further see any references to cultic activity at Mizpah in Judges 20–21 and 1 Samuel 7 and 10 as attempts by authors writing in the Persian (or later) period to give Mizpah an older but unwarranted cultic pedigree (TN I.24–28). Most, however, do not accept the Jer 41:4–5 reference to a “temple of the LORD” as relating to Mizpah at all but believe that the pilgrims intended to make their offerings in the ruined Jerusalem Temple (for example, Bright 1965: 254). Some of these scholars, and others, accept the Judges and 1 Samuel traditions as reflecting a genuinely ancient set of cultic associations for Mizpah (for example, Fohrer 1972: 112; McCarter 1980: 143–44; Langston 1998: 148–49) and not as later story-making. In a passage of general condemnation of the cultic practices of the Israelites (Hosea 4–5), mention is made of priests’ and kings’ being a “snare” at Mizpah (5:2), an expression echoed in other biblical passages dealing with improper worship (for example, Exod 23:33; Judg 2:3; and others). Unfortunately, it is unclear which of the several known Mizpahs is meant, though the focus seems generally to be on places in the Ephraim-Benjamin area. If so, this may be one of the

The question of the cultic role of Mizpah is one area to which archaeology might be expected to make a contribution, considering how much of Tell en-Naṣbeh has been excavated. However, while artifactual remains of a cultic nature were recovered (TN I.233–48; pls. 84–90; TN II, pls. 78–79), some of them in significant concentrations (for example, Holladay 1987: 274–75), it is not possible to isolate anything on the scale of the Arad temple at Tell en-Naṣbeh (Langston 1998: 151–54). Surely there were household shrines at Mizpah, as suggested by the scores of female pillar-base figurines recovered, but these do not make a shrine of such significance as to attract pilgrims from the North. On the other hand, given the great number of local shrines and temples in ancient Israel, attested both biblically and archaeologically, there is no a priori reason that Mizpah could not have possessed a small local shrine of its own.14

However, did this picture of Mizpah as a minor, at best, cultic center change after 586? Did the establishment of Mizpah as the new focal point of political life also necessitate the elevation of Mizpah to the position of the region’s cultic center, or were the remains of the Temple complex in Jerusalem still functioning sufficiently for certain rites to be practiced there? If there were sanctuaries or temples still functioning in the old hill country of Ephraim and Manasseh (2 Kgs 17:24–34), it is difficult to believe that pilgrims would journey all the way to Mizpah, only recently transformed into the capital of a minor province and possessing a cult site of no major importance, when they could have gone to their own shrines or temples.15 It seems more likely that only the remains of the old national Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem could elicit such a response from the Northerners (as in the time of Jeroboam I; 1 Kgs 12:26–28) and that Mizpah had no significant national cultic role during the Babylonian period.

Mention should be also be made of certain remains that also help establish the continued existence of Tell en-Naṣbeh to the end of the fifth century. Tell en-Naṣbeh produced 29 pieces, mostly smaller fragments,


15. Josiah reportedly destroyed the temple at Bethel (2 Kgs 23:15), but how far his “reforms” were carried out in the north is uncertain. In any event, given how largely ineffectual they were in his own kingdom, it would not be surprising if cultic activities at Bethel and other Northern sites were renewed following Josiah’s death.
of Attic pottery, mostly of black figure or black slipped variety. These span the late sixth to fifth centuries (TN I.175–178, pls. 59–60). In addition, 18 Yehud stamp impressions, spelling either י”ח = YH (12) or י”ד = YHD (6), were found, confirming Tell en-Naşbeh’s inclusion within the Persian administrative system (TN I.164–65, pl. 57:1–3, 13–19). An imitation of an early Attic bronze tetradrachm was found in square AA24 in the fill of Room 324 of 3-Room Building 114.01 of Stratum 2 described above (TN I.174, 275; pl. 102:1). It is dated to the end of the fifth century. The lack of Greek pottery and coins of the fourth century suggests a gap in occupation from the late Persian period until the early part of the Hellenistic period, when Stratum 1 was founded, which seems primarily to have been an agricultural estate of sorts (Zorn 1993c: 186–99).

The in situ remains in Building 110.01 suggest that Tell en-Naşbeh was destroyed, though not burned, in the second half of the fifth century. The lack of any significant amount of fourth-century or later material from the general debris tends to confirm this date. The fundamental cruxes are: who destroyed Mizpah and when? Unfortunately, the historical data to decide these issues are lacking. Possibly this event should be connected with the successful Egyptian revolt against Persia at the end of the fifth century and the ensuing Egyptian–Cypriote activities in Syria and Israel in the early fourth century (Ahlström 1994: 872–87; Aharoni 1979: 413; Hayes and Miller 1986: 465).

The material presented from Tell en-Naşbeh clearly shows the potential and the limitations that we face in reconstructing the material culture of the sixth century. On the one hand, we have here clear architectural remains of a reasonably flourishing provincial center founded in the sixth century and continuing into the fifth century. The size, nature, and quality of construction of the buildings shows that these were no mean hovels but were the residences of officials and other administrative structures. The coffins, circlet, ostracon, and courtyard building suggest a not-insignificant Mesopotamian influence at the site. The M(W)SH impressions attest to the relatively small resource area that the new administration could effectively draw on. The wedge-impressed pottery, Greek pottery, and Yehud impressions attest to a further, broader revival of Judean society in the latter part of the sixth and fifth centuries. Clearly the Babylonian administration did not collapse after the murder of Gedaliah.

On the other hand we have a stratum apparently established in 586 that continued for approximately 150 years to the latter part of the fifth century. Because there was no destruction during this time, and
because most of the Stratum 2 buildings are so poorly preserved, we
cannot establish a clear idea of the material culture of any single sub-
phase of this period. We are left with a collage of objects mixed to-
gether that covers the entire life of the stratum.

While this is not what we, as archaeologists and historians, might
prefer, it is what the vagaries of excavation have given us and what we
must work with. However, it is not such a bad thing. Fifteen years ago
we could say relatively little archaeologically about the Babylonian pe-
riod in ancient Judah. The curtain has been pulled back just a little now.
Perhaps someday, when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is resolved, we
can return to the area of Benjamin to reexcavate some old sites and ex-
explore some that are still untouched, because it is just in this area that
our greatest hope for material from the early sixth century lies.

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