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The Bible, Archaeology and Politics; or The Empty Land Revisited

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Abstract

Since its inception with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, archaeology in the Middle East has always been involved in politics. Nowhere in the region is this more in evidence than in Palestine/Israel, beginning with the preliminary stage of mapping the land and renaming settlements and physical features taken over from the resident Arabs. A major expression of the political ideology underlying this activity has come to be known as 'the myth of the empty land'. During the Hellenistic period, when interest in ethnic origins was running high, it provided justification for the *initial* Israelite occupation of and exclusive claim on the land. In this form, the myth appears to be a retrojection of the land claims of the dominant Judaeo-Babylonian elite during the early Persian period reflected in certain biblical texts. An examination of some recent writing on the archaeology of the region during the Neo-Babylonian period suggests that the myth still exerts its influence.

I

Archaeologists, in Palestine as elsewhere, like to believe that archaeology and politics don't mix. This is one of the leitmotifs of Philip King's informative history of the American Schools of Oriental Research, summarized in the statement that 'archaeology and politics should never be mixed; when they are, it is always to the detriment of archaeology'.[1] We can

1. Philip J. King, *American Archaeology in the Mideast: A History of the American Schools of Oriental Research* (Philadelphia: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1993), pp. 101, 181 and *passim*.

applaud the sentiment, but would have to add that nowhere in the world more than in the Middle East, beginning with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, has the political dimension of archaeology been so clearly in evidence. The nationalist movements of the nineteenth century, which include Zionism, conscripted the archaeologist in the project of recovering and, where necessary, inventing, a national history. The struggle during the heyday of the European colonial powers to control Palestine, and therefore the Palestinian past revealed by archaeology, has been well documented in Neil Silberman's *Digging for God and Country*.[2] One example presented by Silberman is the three-cornered struggle for possession of the Mesha stele, the first important artifact to be found in the region. The contest involved the Prussian state, represented by the Alsatian missionary Frederick Augustus Klein who discovered the inscription in Dibhon in 1868, the English represented by Charles Warren, and France represented by Charles Clermont-Ganneau. The story is well known. Clermont-Ganneau, the only genuine scholar of the three, outmanoeuvred and outbid the others: the stone ended up in the Louvre, Warren returned to England in disgust (later to play a prominent role in the 'Jack the Ripper' case), the Germans were furious, and the ensuing international incident made its modest contribution to the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war a few months later.[3]

At the founding of the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF), under the patronage of Queen Victoria three years before the discovery of the Mesha inscription, the Archbishop of York, first president of the association, left no one in any doubt as to the proprietary right of Christians, and British Christians in particular, to the exploration of the Holy Land—a right vindicated with reference to the events recorded in the New Testament. He orated as follows:

> This country of Palestine belongs to you and to me… We mean to walk through Palestine, in the length and breadth of it, because that land has been given to us. It is the land from which comes the news of our Redemption… It is the land to which we look with as true a patriotism as we do to this dear old England.[4]

2. Neil Asher Silberman, *Digging for God and Country* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).

3. Silberman, *Digging for God and Country*, pp. 100-12.

4. The speeches delivered at the official opening of the PEF, including Archbishop Thompson's, were published in the *Palestine Exploration Fund Proceedings and Notes*

We may read this as a prime example of religiously sponsored colonialism. With Archbishop Thompsons' statement of intent we can compare the goals of the prestigious Israel Exploration Society, the successor to the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society, as stated in lapidary fashion by Shemuel Yeivin in the third issue of the journal *Eretz Israel*. Its primary aim was to provide 'concrete documentation of the continuity of a historical thread that remained unbroken from the time of Joshua Bin Nun until the days of the conquerors of the Negev in our generation'.[5] On this showing, the function of the Israeli archaeologist is to validate the Zionist political claim to the land on the basis of the biblical account of the origins of Israel and the creation of the Israelite state. Wherever this mandate is taken seriously, there results a positivistic and interested reading of biblical texts and a routine contamination of archaeological with biblical data. As William Dever, by no stretch a hostile witness, put it, Israeli archaeologists tend to read the Bible as a kind of national constitution.[6]

II

Cartography is one of the ways of both furthering a particular political and military agenda and constructing a past consistent with a dominant ideology. The political and military implications of map-making are obvious. The first partial mapping of Palestine was the work of Pierre Jacotin, a colonel in the French Army of the Nile, and was intended as preparation for Napoleon's invasion of Palestine, an attempt thwarted by the British fleet under Commodore Sidney Smith. Charles Wilson's survey of the Sinai in 1869 was not unconnected with British designs on and eventual control of the Suez Canal. The survey and mapping of the Negev by Leonard Woolley and T.E. Lawrence ('Lawrence of Arabia') in 1913–14 was to prove invaluable in Edmund Allenby's defeat of the Turks a few years later. The climax of this cartographical activity was Claude R.

(London: Palestinian Exploration Society, 1865–69), cited in Silberman, *Digging for God and Country*, pp. 86, 99.

5. Cited by Meron Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 20. Yeivin served as director of the Department of Antiquities from its establishment in 1948 to 1961.

6. William G. Dever, 'The Death of a Discipline', *BARev* 21.5 (September–October 1995), pp. 50-55, 70 (52). While this tendency is more clearly in evidence among the older generation of Israeli archaeologists, it is still influential enough to bear repeating.

Conder's Survey of Western Palestine, with its 9000 place names (90 per cent of which were Arabic). The project was carried through between 1871 and 1878 with the assistance of Horatio H. Kitchener ('Kitchener of Khartoum') and under the auspices of the PEF.

But place names also encapsulate, perpetuate, and give body and substance to the history of a land and the collective memory of the people who live on it. By changing names, by selective inclusion and exclusion, by airbrushing the names of settlements and physical features out of the record according to a preconceived agenda, that history can be manipulated and controlled.

The role of cartography in settler/colonial activity has often been in evidence in the modern period (e.g. in North America and Australia), but nowhere more so than in Palestine during the first half of the nineteenth century. In his recently published *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948*, Meron Benvenisti, formerly Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem, tells how, as a child, he accompanied his father, a geographer and cartographer, in his travels around the country. His father's assignment was, in brief, to remove Arab names from the map of Palestine and replace them with Hebrew names. This activity began under the British mandate and was intensified after 1948. Benvenisti demonstrates with detailed documentation how this map-cleansing activity was the first stage in a process of ethnic cleansing (his term), leading to the forcible expulsion of indigenous Arabs (750,000 between December 1947 and July 1949), the erasure of Arab villages (400 between 1948 and 1950 alone), including Christian–Arab villages, the demolition and confiscation of houses, the destruction of crops, and the massive expropriation of land. He recalls with shame and anger witnessing, as a boy, in April 1948, the survivors of the massacre by Jewish irregulars of the inhabitants of the Arab village of Deir Yasin being paraded through the streets of Jerusalem.[7]

The importance attributed to this cartographical work is evident from the speed with which naming committees were set up immediately after the war of 1948–49, culminating in the Jewish Fund Naming Committee chaired by Avraham Biran (formerly Bergman).[8] Though the members of

7. Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape*, pp. 114-17 and *passim*.

8. Biran, a student of Albright, was the second director of the Department of Antiquities and the excavator of Tel el-Qadi, renamed Dan, since 1966. During the summer of 1977, while taking part in the excavation of the 'high place' at the site, I had the opportunity to become acquainted with Biran personally and as archaeologist. On the Naming Committees see H. Bitan, 'The Governmental Name Committee', *Eretz*

the Naming Committee presumably had access to the PEF map of Palestine, they acted as if the land was a *tabula rasa* on which they could practice without let or hindrance. As Benvenisti put it, 'There are few examples elsewhere in the world of such radical alteration of the map'.[9]

III

'The myth of the empty land', as it has been called, has a long pedigree.[10] The prominence of the conquest narrative in the book of Joshua did not prevent alternative accounts of Israel's origins in the land of Canaan from being proposed, beginning with the more realistic version in the early chapters of the book of Judges. Later renderings can be found in rabbinic writings. According to one of these, Joshua gave the Canaanites three options: they could make peace, they could fight, or they could leave:

> Joshua sent three proclamations to the Canaanites: He who wishes to leave may leave, he who wishes to make peace may make peace, and he who wishes to fight may do so.[11]

Another version has it that the Canaanites and Amorites voluntarily surrendered the land to the Israelites, and their extraordinary generosity was rewarded by the gift of another and equally pleasant land, to wit, Africa:

> The Canaanites merited having the land named after them. What had they done to merit this? When they heard that Israel was entering the land, they made way for them. God said to them: 'Since you made way for my children, I will name the land after you, and give you a land as lovely as this one'. Which land was it? Africa![12]

Israel 23 (1992), pp. 366-70 (Hebrew); N. Kadmon, 'The Conferring and Standardizing of Geographical Names at the National and International Level', in the same volume, pp. 377-82 (Hebrew).

9. Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape*, p. 53. See also Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Facts on the Grounds: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), pp. 73-98.

10. The expression has been much in use of late, following on Robert P. Carroll's paper of that title published in David Jobling and Tina Pippin (eds.), *Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts*, *Semeia* 59 (1992), pp. 79-93, and Hans M. Barstad's brief monograph *The Myth of the Empty Land* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996).

11. *Leviticus Rabbah* 17.6, quoted in Moshe Weinfeld, *The Promise of the Land* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 211.

12. *Mekhilta Pisha* 18. The idea that the indigenous peoples voluntarily surrendered the land to Israel also appears in Philo, *Hypothetica* 6.5. See Weinfeld, *The Promise of the Land*, pp. 210-11.

This rather radical deviation from the biblical account may have been based on the tradition, still alive in the Byzantine period, that the Carthaginians were descendants of fugitives from Palestine after the Israelite entry into the land. There is also a tradition, recorded by Tacitus, that the Jewish people originated as exiles (*profugi*) from Crete to the remote parts of Lybia.[13]

Neither of these versions assumes that the land was uninhabited, but they do evince a readiness to take the broad view on the biblical traditions about Israelite origins. Much earlier, the author of the book of *Jubilees*, in his revised version of the national history, relates how Canaan disrupted the divinely ordered allocation of territory by presumptuously occupying Palestine, and thus bringing on himself and his descendants a curse which would result in their extermination (*Jub*. 10.28-34). This *apologia* had the advantage of providing historical justification for both the original Israelite conquest and the Hasmonean wars of conquest. The capacity for generating such myths is not, however, confined to the ancients. Yitzak Ben-Zvi, later President of Israel, held that the Palestinian Arabs were descendants of the Jews who did not go into exile after the fall of Jerusalem but changed their religion.[14] The motive behind this kind of mythopoesis is evident: the avoidance at all costs of having to conclude that the land had always been shared with others.

The earliest allusion to the myth of the *original* Israelite entry into a land that not only ought to have been empty but actually was empty is to be found in the *Aegyptiaca* (*History of Egypt*) of Hecataeus of Abdera, an account that comes to us via Diodorus of Sicily and the Byzantine polymath Photius. According to Hecataeus, writing in the early decades of the Hellenistic period, the Egyptians took the occasion of a pestilence to expel their resident aliens. Most of these, he tells us, settled in Judaea, 'at that time completely uninhabited' (παντελῶς δὲ ἔρημον οὖσαν κατ' ἐκείνους τοὺς χρόνους).[15] Going back even further into the past, the histo-

13. *Histories* 5.2.1, on which see Louis H. Feldman, 'Pro-Jewish Intimations in Tacitus' Account of Jewish Origins', *REJ* 150 (1991), pp. 339-46. Ironically, one of the places suggested for a Jewish homeland in the early days of Zionism was Uganda.

14. Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape*, pp. 62-63. Compare the opinion expressed by contributors to the Survey of Western Palestine that the Palestinian peasants were descendants of the pre-Israelite peoples, and could be described as Arabs only on account of the language. See the section on 'race memory' in Abu el-Haj, *Facts on the Ground*, pp. 35-38.

15. M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1976), I, pp. 20-24.

rian Apollonius Molon (preserved in Eusebius, *Praep. Evang.* 9.19.1-3) states that Noah came from Armenia to the hilly part of Syria which was then desolate (οὖσαν ἔρημον, the same terminology as Hecataeus).[16] Somewhat along the same lines, Strabo (*Geographica* 16.2.36; cf. 16.4.21) records that Moses led his followers into Judaea, a rocky, barren place that no one else wanted to inhabit.[17] Needless to say, none of these authors was well informed on early Palestinian history, but they testify that this alternative version of the Israelite occupation of the land was in circulation in the Hellenistic period, and there can be no doubt that it originated in a Jewish milieu.

Before pursuing this tradition any further, it is worth noting that it corresponds to a well-attested *topos*. Herodotus (*Histories* 4.11) explains the settlement of the Scythians in Cimmerian territory, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus explains the Greek settlements in Sicily (1.22.2), in the same way. It seems that YHVH was not the only deity who promised new land. According to Callimachus, a North African poet, Apollo swore with an oath that he would establish the Greek settlers in Cyrene.[18] A more recent and accessible example would be the early Puritan settlements in the New World. Speaking of his own group of immigrants, William Bradford records that 'the place they had thoughts on was some of those vast and unpeopled countries of America, which are fruitful and fit for habitation, being devoid of all civil inhabitants'. As he went on to note, what inhabitants the settlers found did not qualify as 'civil inhabitants', being 'savage and brutish men…little otherwise than the wild beasts'. An anonymous pamphlet from about the same time presents a variation on this theme. As the first of several divinely bestowed mercies, the author mentions 'God's providence in sweeping away great multitudes of the natives by the smallpox…that He might make room for us'.[19]

To come back to the Israelite version of the empty land myth: Doron Mendels argued that Hecataeus' version draws on Jewish apologetic of

16. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, I, pp. 150-51.

17. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, I, pp. 294-304; cf. 16.4.21 (p. 312) where the territory in the direction of Judah is described as ἔρημος.

18. Reference from Weinfeld, *The Promise of the Land*, p. 36.

19. Quoted in Alden T. Vaughan (ed.), *The Puritan Tradition in America 1620–1730* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2nd edn, 1997), pp. 43-44, 65. A similar point about America being a mere potentiality to be actualized by European values and ideals is stated in E. O'Gorman, *The Invention of America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1861), p. 139. I owe the reference to Keith Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 70.

the Persian period, according to which the land was uninhabited and therefore open for recolonization by diaspora Jews who returned to it from Babylon in the early Persian period.[20] One indication of dependence on a Jewish source is the use by Hecataeus of the geographical expression 'Judah and Jerusalem', a term of frequent occurrence in Ezra–Nehemiah.[21] The same apologetic note appears in the book of Judith where the Ammonite Achior, later a convert to Judaism in spite of the law excluding Ammonites from membership (Deut. 23.4), tells Holofernes how those who returned to the homeland after the fall of Jerusalem found the hill country, which included Jerusalem, uninhabited (Judg. 5.19). This suggests that the story in circulation in the Hellenistic period about the *original* occupation of an empty Palestine is a retrojection from the time of the 'return to Zion', therefore a reflection of the ideology of the dominant immigrant group during the early decades of Persian rule.[22]

That ideology is inscribed in the idea, expressed in Chronicles and Leviticus, that after the fall of Jerusalem the land observed its sabbaths for 70 years as it lay desolate and unpopulated (2 Chron. 36.20-21; Lev. 26.34-35). It also draws on the threat of total deportation directed at the population of a country in international vassal treaties and presented as a *fait accompli* in royal inscriptions, as it is in biblical narrative. Thus, Tiglath-pileser III declares that he exiled all the men (*puḫur nišešu*) of the house of Omri,[23] and the biblical historian records that after the fall of Samaria none was left but the tribe of Judah alone (2 Kgs 17.18). Likewise, we are told succinctly that after the fall of Jerusalem 'Judah went into exile out of its land' (2 Kgs 25.21; Jer. 52.27), with the clear implication of a total or near-total emptying of the land.

The empty land myth is displayed somewhat less consistently in Ezra–Nehemiah. In the introductory section (Ezra 1–6), some 50,000 immi-

20. Doron Mendels, 'Hecataeus of Abdera and a Jewish "Patrios Politeia" of the Persian Period (Diodorus Siculus XL,3)', *ZAW* 95 (1983), pp. 96-110; see also his *The Land of Israel as a Political Concept in Hasmonean Literature* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1987).

21. Ezra 4.6; 5.1; 7.14; 9.8; 10.7; Neh. 1.2; 7.6; 13.16.

22. Several aspects of Mendels' overall thesis have been questioned by Eric S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 54 n. 46. Gruen is surely right to question the Jewish origin of Hecataeus' presentation of Moses as founder of Jerusalem and the temple, but there is nothing implausible about the empty-land connection.

23. B. Oded, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 1979), p. 22.

grants return to Judah with the support of the imperial authorities, settle in their towns, and restore a rudimentary cult in Jerusalem (Ezra 2.64–3.1). As is the case throughout Nehemiah, opposition comes from external sources, especially from the mixed population in and around Samaria (Ezra 4.1, 6-23; 5.3-17; Neh. 2:10, 19, etc.). But we also hear of non-immigrants admitted to the celebration of Passover after renouncing idolatry (6.21), and elsewhere it is rather a question of the myth of the *emptied* land,[24] that is, a land ready for occupation after being purged of its idolatrous inhabitants (e.g. Ezra 9.1-2, 10-12; Neh. 9.2). This is the version which reflects the xenophobic ideology of Deuteronomy and informs the conquest of Canaan narrative in the book of Joshua.

IV

The myth of the empty land is therefore the creation of the Judaeo-Babylonian immigrant community which achieved social, economic and religious dominance in Judah during the first century of Iranian rule. The idea that these diaspora Jews returned to a land emptied of inhabitants by the Babylonians had the advantage of obviating embarrassing questions of legal ownership of real estate. This 'return to Zion' is a defining moment in the consciousness of the Jewish people, and it was inevitable that it would be seen as an anticipation of and model for the Zionist settlement in Palestine in modern times. With equal inevitability, the question would arise whether this empty land myth could find support in the archaeological record of the last phase of Iron Age Palestine, corresponding to the last half-century of the Neo-Babylonian period (586–539 BCE). This issue calls for a little elaboration.[25]

More than half a century ago William Foxwell Albright, one of the icons of biblical scholarship in the twentieth century, gave a characteristically categoric answer to the question. Between the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and the fall of Babylon in 539 BCE, 'All, or virtually all, of the fortified towns in Judah had been razed to the ground. There is not a single known case where a town of Judah was continuously occupied

24. Carroll, 'The Myth of the Empty Land', p. 81.

25. What follows is a more expanded account of what I was able to say under the title 'The Babylonian Gap Revisited' in *BARev* 28.3 (May–June 2002), pp. 36-38, 59. My views inspired a dismissive and uninformative reply from Ephraim Stern in the same volume, pp. 39, 55.

through the exilic Period.'[26] We can hardly avoid a sense of *déjà vu* (or *déjà lu*) on reading the opinion of Ephraim Stern, one of the leading Israeli authorities on the archaeology of the period (Iron IIIB), stated in the November–December 2000 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review* and more fully in the second volume of his *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*.[27] He concludes as follows: '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'.[28] Or, again: we are told that the archaeological data attest to 'the *total* destruction and devastation of *all* the main cities that had flourished during the Assyrian period… *All* its cities lay in ruins by the end of the Babylonian period'.[29] Hence the title of his *BARev* article, 'The Babylonian Gap'.

It will not be difficult to demonstrate that Stern's conclusions are often at variance with the more nuanced and informed opinions of other archaeological specialists, including in several instances the excavators of the sites in question, and that time and again he states as certain what is at best doubtful. Reflection on what happened to similar claims for the 'conquest of Canaan', and the shrinkage over time of the alleged database for a theory of conquest, might have counseled caution. But the coincidence between Stern's single-minded insistence on total or near-total destruction and depopulation and the 'empty land' myth as described above should not pass without comment. Given the limitations of space and time, my critique will concentrate on sites assumed to have been destroyed during the Babylonian punitive campaign of 588–586 BCE. This is only one aspect of a larger complex of linked issues which cannot be dealt with thoroughly in this place but which should at least be briefly referred to.

The problems begin with the presuppositions guiding the selection of data and the privileging of certain kinds of evidence. Selectivity is essential but inevitably problematic since it tends to dictate interpretation

26. W.F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine* (Baltimore: Penquin Books, 1949), p. 142; cf. his *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra* (New York: Harper & Row, 1949), p. 86.

27. Ephraim Stern, 'The Babylonian Gap', *BARev* 26.6 (November–December 2000), pp. 45-51, 76; *idem*, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible* (4 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 2001), II, pp. 304-31. Unfortunately the book has no notes and no references.

28. Stern, *Archaeology*, II, p. 323 (emphasis added).

29. Stern, *Archaeology*, II, p. 309 (emphasis added).

and predetermine conclusions. There is also the danger, often verified in the region, that levels or types of data not selected will be irreparably damaged or destroyed. For a long time North American and Israeli archaeologists have tended to privilege the period of the 'conquest' and the kingdoms (Iron I and II) and, to a lesser extent, the Hasmonean and Roman periods. Only in relatively recent times, with the increased interest of biblical scholars in the post-exilic period, has the archaeology of the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods caught up to some extent, but by that time many of the relevant sites had suffered considerable damage in the haste to get down to earlier levels. There has also been a marked preference in Syro-Palestinian archaeology for monumental architecture and public buildings, with a corresponding neglect of data relevant to everyday cultural and economic life and the skills necessary to interpret such data. Only quite recently has an awareness of these limitations begun to emerge.

Another problem arises out of the practice of archaeological periodization. Since no significant technologies are available for naming purposes after passage from bronze to iron and before the introduction of concrete by the Romans, archaeologists fell back on non-archaeological points of reference. Fixing the end of Iron II, or Iron III, or Iron IIIb, at the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE is understandable but has the effect of focusing on one quantitatively minor part of the Syro-Palestinian region. It also insinuates a cultural hiatus which may or may not have been the case, or may have been the case to a greater or lesser extent, and tends to leave most of the Neo-Babylonian period (586–539) in a kind of limbo. Moreover, it is rarely possible *on purely archaeological grounds* to give as precise a date for a destruction level as 586 (rather than, say, 597), or to assign to a stratum as precise a date as 630–604 BCE, as Stern does in the case of Esdud (Ashdod). Another example is Benjamin Mazar's claim that Tell el-Jurn/En-Gedi stratum V was completely destroyed by fire in 582 BCE. Since this date does not seem to have been chosen on purely archaeological grounds, at least not on any published by the excavator, it appears that it was suggested by Jer. 52.28-30 which reports a deportation in the twenty-third year of Nebuchadrezzar II.[30]

A further consideration is that claims for or against the destruction of individual Judaean sites are part of the larger issue of continuity in material culture and administrative organization during the period in question.

30. B. Mazar, 'En-Gedi', in Ephraim Stern (ed.), *New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), II, p. 402.

On the latter point, it appears that the Babylonians, having neither the time nor the experience to create their own administrative system, simply took over the Assyrian provincial system with adjustments dictated by circumstances.[31] Continuity in material culture is the norm, and could have persisted in spite of the frequent and violent military incursions into Judah by Assyrians, Babylonians, Edomites and others throughout the seventh and sixth centuries BCE.[32]

Of obvious relevance to the debate about the empty land is the demographic issue, on which we are as yet not even close to a consensus. The more realistic biblical figure for the number of those deported by the Babylonians between 597 and 582 is 4600 (Jer. 52.28-30; cf. the larger and more schematic figures in 2 Kgs 24.14-17; 25.11-12 = Jer. 52.15-16). But this figure would be significant for the present discussion only as a percentage of the total population. Since the data necessary for coming up with even an approximate total (e.g. carrying capacity of individual environments, residential floor space, average family size, etc.) are either inadequate or unobtainable, results have been too divergent to inspire confidence. Moreover, most people did not live in towns,[33] and many will

31. The Akkadian scholar Ronald H. Sack even claims that 'the so-called Neo-Babylonian empire was, at best, nothing other than an Assyrian ideological substructure with a Chaldean veneer' (quoted from the author's summary of a paper delivered at a Tel Aviv University conference on 'Judah and Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian period', 31 May 2001). Stern agreed with this majority view in *Dor, Ruler of the Seas* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1994)—'The Babylonians adopted and perpetuated the organizational structure of the Assyrian empire' (p. 147)—and rejected it in *Archaeology*—'The Babylonians created a new administrative organization, different from that of their predecessors' (II, pp. 307-308)—but without giving reasons in either instance.

32. The point is, perhaps inadvertently, conceded by Stern: 'It [is] almost impossible to determine if a certain artifact with Babylonian parallels should be dated to the late Assyrian period, to the Babylonian period, or even to the early Persian period' (*Archaeology*, II, p. 308). On cultural continuity see Gabriel Barkay, 'The Iron Age IIIb, the Babylonian Period', in Amnon Ben-Tor (ed.), *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 372-73. Continuity was also affirmed by most of the participants of the 'Judah and Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period' conference (see n. 31). The papers will be published by Eisenbrauns in the near future.

33. This can easily be verified by scrutinizing the floor plans from several excavated urban sites in which most of the area is taken up with administrative and ceremonial buildings and storage areas. As Gloria Anne London put it, 'Large residential populations were not the norm for the major tell sites of the Bronze and Iron Ages'

not have left their signature on the archaeological record. Also, we should not underestimate the resilience of a population under severe stress to restore some semblance of normality in a fairly short time. At times of military conquest population levels can fluctuate significantly. As happened during the numerous campaigns in Syria-Palestine under Ptolemaic, Seleucid and Roman rule, many would have retreated to one or other of the numerous places of refuge with which the country is liberally provided, to emerge once the dust had settled.[34]

V

Claims of almost total destruction of urban settlements throughout Judah and neighbouring lands are therefore only part of a larger and more complex picture, and the only part dealt with directly in this article. But they can provide clues to the ideological basis on which the history of Judah in the Neo-Babylonian period is constructed. Professor Stern is not the only archaeologist who has advanced such claims, but he is more often quoted than most and his work merits close attention. His conclusions are set out in the chapter on the Babylonian period in his *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible* to which we now turn.

Stern begins his survey with the former Assyrian province of Megiddo (Magiddu). He concludes that stratum III of Tell el-Mutesellim/Megiddo itself was destroyed at the end of the seventh century, and that both levels II and I date to the Persian period, a conclusion which he admits to being controversial.[35] In his summary of the archaeological evidence for Megiddo, David Ussishkin records no destruction for either level III or II, and Yigal Shiloh associated what he took to be evidence for destruction in stratum II with the encounter between Pharaoh Necho and Josiah in 609 BCE.[36] Evidence for destruction by the Babylonians is therefore at best

('Tells: City Center or Home?', *Eretz Israel* 23 [1992], p. 72*). In the Attica of Cleisthenes, also basically rural in character, only about six per cent of Athenians actually lived in Athens (*CAH*, IV, p. 302). Apart from one or two surveys, not much attention has been given to rural communities; but see Avraham Faust, 'The Rural Community in Ancient Israel during Iron Age II', *BASOR* 37 (2000), pp. 17-39.

34. This is in fact what we are told happened after the appointment of Gedaliah (Jer. 40.7, 11-12; 2 Kgs 25.23).

35. Stern, *Archaeology*, II, pp. 313-15.

36. D. Ussishkin, 'Megiddo', in E.M. Myers (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East* (5 vols.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), III, p. 468; Y. Shiloh, 'Megiddo', in E. Stern (ed.), *New Encyclopedia of Archaeological*

doubtful. The destruction at the same time of Tel Qiri and Yoqneam a few kilometers to the north is affirmed by Stern but not supported by Amnon Ben-Tor, who excavated both sites. Ben-Tor found no evidence for destruction at the Neo-Babylonian level at Tel Qiri, and concluded that at Yoqneam the only destruction occurred at the end of Iron I (c. 1000 BCE).[37]

Moving on to Phoenicia and the former Assyrian province of Dor (Duru): Stern maintains that Akko was also destroyed by the Babylonians, contrary to the conclusions reached by Moshe Dothan, the excavator of the site, who placed the limited evidence for burning in the late Assyrian period.[38] On the basis of disputed dating of Greek imported ware, Stern also rejects without supporting evidence the Neo-Assyrian date for the destruction of the Phoenician settlement at Tell Keisan east of Akko advanced by the excavators, Jacques Briend and Jean-Baptiste Humbert, in favour of destruction by the Babylonians.[39] In his account of his own excavation at Dor, he noted that the city fortifications remained in place from the Assyrian to the Persian period,[40] but in *Archaeology* this conclusion is described as merely hypothetical, since 'these fortifications could have been reconstructed during the Persian period, after a relatively short gap'.[41] Once again, the reader is given no reason and no argument. A final example before leaving this region: Stern states that Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Tyre after a long siege, a claim for which there is no evidence—archaeological or literary.[42]

Excavations in the Holy Land (4 vols; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), III, p. 1023. Further relevant bibliography can be found in these encyclopedias, hereafter referred to as *OEANE* and *NEAEHL*, respectively.

37. A. Ben-Tor, 'Yokneam', in *NEAEHL*, III, pp. 807-11; 'Qiri, Tel', IV, p. 1228; 'Qiri, Tel', in *OEANE*, IV, p. 338; 'Yoqne'am', V, pp. 382-83.

38. Dothan found evidence of burning in two buildings from Iron IIB-III. He dated the lower phase to the reign of Sennacherib and the upper to that of Ashurbanipal: 'Tel Acco', *NEAEHL*, I, p. 22. Dever agrees: 'The site was destroyed by fire, probably by the Assyrians in the late eighth century BCE' ('Akko', in *OEANE*, I, p. 55). The reader should note that Stern (*Archaeology*, II, p. 315) misquotes Dothan, giving the impression that the latter affirmed the destruction of the last Iron Age settlement of the Babylonian period. Dothan did nothing of the kind.

39. Jacques Briend and Jean-Baptiste Humbert, 'Tell Keisan', in *NEAEHL*, III, p. 867; their dating is accepted by W.G. Dever, 'Tell Keisan', in *OEANE*, III, p. 279.

40. Stern, *Dor, Ruler of the Seas*, p. 147.

41. Stern, *Archaeology*, II, p. 316.

42. Our principal source, Josephus, *Apion* 1.144, 156, 159, reports the 13-year siege but says nothing about the capture and destruction of the city. Ezekiel 29.17-18, the

Stern's survey of destruction levels in Philistia provides further illustration of the problems involved in inserting archaeological data into existing ideological schemata.[43] Since control of the Philistine region was contested between Babylonians and Egyptians (the rulers of the 26th Saite Dynasty) during most of the reign of Nebuchadrezzar II (604–562), the practical impossibility of assigning precise dates to destruction levels makes it difficult to identify the destroyer. This is also the case with several of the major sites with clear evidence of destruction by burning: Esdud/Ashdod; Khirbet el-Muqanna'/Tel Miqne/Ekron; and Tell Batashi/Tel Batash, by some identified with Timnah. In the case of Tell esh-Shari'a/Tel Sera and Tell Abu Hureireh/Tel Haror in the western Negev, Stern's Babylonian option is contradicted by Eliezer D. Oren, who excavated both sites.[44] Moreover, both of these sites, together with Tell el-Hesi, where the sixth century stratum was covered with a thick layer of ash and destruction debris, were well within both the Edomite sphere of infiltration and the destructive capacities of the Edomites. The same holds for Arad at the eastern end of the Negev, to which we shall return.[45]

We may omit from consideration the province of Samaria since, as Stern notes, no destruction remains have been found there.[46] The region immediately to the north of Jerusalem, corresponding to Benjaminite

latest-dated prophecy in the book, revises earlier prophecies of doom against Tyre, stating that neither Nebuchadnezzar nor his army got anything from Tyre to pay for their labour. See also H.J. Katzenstein, *The History of Tyre* (Jerusalem: Schocken Institute for Jewish Research, 1973), pp. 330-37; Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 465.

43. Stern, *Archaeology*, II, pp. 316-19.

44. According to Oren, Tel Sera could have been destroyed either by the Egyptians or Josiah ('Sera', Tel', in *NEAEHL*, IV, pp. 1329-35; 'Sera', Tel', in *OEANE*, V, pp. 1-2), while the defence complex of Tel Haror was destroyed in the second half of the seventh century 'probably by an Egyptian military expedition of the Saite kings to Philistia' ('Harror, Tel', in *NEAEHL*, II, p. 584).

45. On Edomite infiltration into Judah see the recent accounts of Itzak Beit-Arieh, 'New Data on the Relation Between Judah and Edom Towards the End of the Iron Age', in S. Gitin and W.G. Dever (eds.), *Recent Excavations in Israel: Studies in Iron Age Archaeology* (AASOR, 49; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989), pp. 12-31; also *idem*, 'Edomites Advance into Judah', *BARev* 22.6 (November–December 1996), pp. 28-36.

46. Stern, *Archaeology*, II, p. 319, notwithstanding which, he goes on to note, in the same section, the evidence for destruction at Tell Jezer/Gezer datable to the Neo-Babylonian period. On this see W.G. Dever, 'Gezer', in *NEAEHL*, II, pp. 496-506 and 'Gezer, in *ABD*, II, pp. 998-1003.

territory, also escaped the attention of the Babylonian army probably because these 'Benjaminites', including the distinguished Shaphanite family and Jeremiah their protégé, belonged to the anti-war or appeasement party. But even here Stern states quite gratuitously that major Benjaminite towns were 'partly ruined by the Babylonians in 586 BCE'.[47]

Coming finally to Judah, Jerusalem is a clear and well-documented case. The destruction of 'that rebellious city hurtful to kings and provinces' (Ezra 4.15) was a deliberate, ideological act,[48] and its effects are clearly inscribed in the archaeological record. But perhaps even for Jerusalem the evidence is not so clear-cut and definitive. The tombs excavated by Gabriel Barkai at Ketef Hinnom southwest of Mount Zion, and dated by him to the Neo-Babylonian period, suggest that the city was either not completely depopulated or partially repopulated shortly after the destruction.[49] The reduction and destruction of Tell ed-Duweir/Lachish, the most important fortified city after Jerusalem, is also well documented. But the 30 or so other Judaean and Edomite sites listed by Stern would need to be reviewed individually in order to determine (1) whether they were destroyed at all, and (2) if so, when, and by whom. I can present only some of the more instructive examples.

Beginning east of Jerusalem, Stern states that both Jericho and En-Gedi were destroyed by the Babylonians.[50] The pottery finds at Jericho suggest that the history of Tell es-Sultan effectively came to an end in the Neo-Babylonian period, but, according to Kathleen Kenyon and others, provide no evidence for destruction.[51] The case of En-Gedi (Tell el-Jurn) illustrates the problems created by archaeological periodization using biblical

47. Stern, *Archaeology*, II, p. 322. See the recent survey of Oded Lipschits, 'The History of the Benjamin Region under Babylonian Rule', *Tel Aviv* 26 (1999), pp. 155-90.

48. On the deliberate nature of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in the context of Babylonian policy see O. Lipschits, 'Nebuchadrezzar's Policy in "Hattu-Land" and the Fate of the Kingdom of Judah', *UF* 30 (1998), pp. 467-87.

49. G. Barkay, *Ketef Hinnom: A Treasure Facing Jerusalem's Wall* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1986); *idem*, 'Excavations at Ketef Hinnom in Jerusalem', in Hillel Geva (ed.), *Ancient Jerusalem Revealed* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1994), pp. 85-106. Barkay writes, 'The evidence from the burial caves of Ketef Hinnom points to continuous settlement in Jerusalem throughout the 6th century B.C.E. and until the return to Zion and the days of Persian overlordship' (p. 106).

50. Stern, *Archaeology*, II, p. 324

51. Kathleen M. Kenyon, 'Jericho', in *NEAEHL*, II, pp. 680-81; T.A. Holland, 'Jericho', in *OEANE*, III, p. 224.

data. According to the excavator Benjamin Mazar, stratum V, which he dates c. 630–582, was completely destroyed by fire. But since (as noted earlier) an event of this kind can scarcely ever be dated *archaeologically* with such precision, it seems that the date is based on Jer. 52.30, which speaks of a third deportation in the twenty-third year of Nebuchadrezzar's reign, that is, in 582 BCE.[52]

To the south of Jerusalem, Khirbet Salih/Ramat-Rachel may have shared the fate of Jerusalem though the archaeological evidence is not unambiguous.[53] But the same cannot be said for other sites listed by Stern. After excavating at Khirbet et-Tubeiqa/Beth-Zur in 1931, O.R. Sellers and W.F. Albright claimed that it was destroyed in 586, but this conclusion was not supported by the re-excavation carried out in 1957.[54] There is a destruction level at Khirbet el-Qôm consistent with a Neo-Babylonian date, but no indication as to who was responsible.[55] Stern tells us that Tell Beit Mirsim, excavated by Albright in 1926–32, suffered 'a complete and final destruction in 586 BCE',[56] but without mentioning the strong contrary opinion that Albright's stratum A_2 must be dated about a century earlier.[57] The same appears to be the case with Khirbet Rabud (Tell Rabud) a few

52. The most recent statement on the excavation I have found is in B. Mazar, 'En-Gedi', in *NEAEHL*, II, pp. 399-405. On the problems involved in marking the end of the Iron Age at the fall of Jerusalem see G. Barkay, 'The Redefining of Archaeological Periods: Does the Date 588–586 B.C.E. Indeed Mark the End of the Iron Age Culture?', *BAT*, II (1993), pp. 106-109.

53. Y. Aharoni, 'Ramat Raḥel' in, *NEAEHL*, IV, pp. 1261-67. If I read Aharoni's reports from the 1960s correctly, evidence for the burning of the late Iron Age II citadel was confined to the stone paving of the gate passageway leading from the inner citadel. Unfortunately I have not been able to lay my hands on the recent issue of *Tel Aviv* in which Professor Nadav Na'aman argues that the citadel was Assyrian and was destroyed shortly after the Assyrian withdrawal from the region. (I owe this information to Oded Lipschits.)

54. R.W. Funk, 'Beth-Zur', in *NEAEHL*, I, p. 261; B.A. Nakhai, 'Beth-Zur', in *OEANE*, I, p. 314.

55. W.G. Dever, 'Qom, Khirbet El-', in *OEANE*, IV, p. 392; *idem*, 'Qôm, Khirbet El-', in *NEAEHL*, IV, p. 1234. Stern's statement that settlement was not renewed on the site even as late as the Hellenistic period (*Archaeology*, II, p. 324) is contradicted by rooms, ostraca and a rebuilt gate from the fourth–third centuries.

56. Stern, *Archaeology*, II, pp. 324-25

57. R. Greenberg, 'Beit Mirsim, Tell', in *NEAEHL*, I, pp. 177-80; *idem*, 'Beit Mirsim, Tell', in *OEANE*, I, pp. 295-97; W.G. Dever, 'Beit Mirsim, Tell', in *ABD*, I, pp. 648-49.

kilometers south of Hebron.[58] Leaving aside Lachish and Azekah, of the remaining sites south and southwest of Jerusalem that were allegedly destroyed by the Babylonians, perhaps the most important are Tell Sandakhanna/Maresha near Hebron and Tell Judeideh in the Shephelah. I have found no other archaeologist who claims that the former was destroyed by the Babylonians,[59] and no assured conclusion is possible on the basis of the published results of the Macalister–Bliss excavation of 1899–1900. At Tell Judeideh, by some identified with Moresheth-Gath, home of the prophet Micah, there is some evidence of burning which however cannot be dated.[60] The reader will be surprised to learn that Tell Burnat is one of the excavated sites in western Judah totally destroyed by the Babylonians after reading earlier that the site has not yet been excavated.[61]

We come finally to sites southeast of Jerusalem, a region which even before the disaster of 586 was increasingly subject to Edomite infiltration. Tell 'Arad/Arad is the first of Stern's 'totally destroyed' sites.[62] Traces of burning on the floors of the citadel in stratum VI (Iron II-C, early sixth century), if dated correctly, would more likely have resulted from an Edomite rather than a Babylonian attack, especially since the ostraca found *in situ* testify to hostile Edomite presence in the region. But there are so many problems with the stratigraphy of this site that no reliable conclusions for the Neo-Babylonian period are at present possible.[63] The Edomite ostracon discovered in the fortress of Horvat 'Uza in the eastern Negev, not far from Arad, likewise suggests that this strong point was captured by Edomites.[64] Y. Aharoni, principal excavator of Tell es-Seba'/Beersheba, connected the destruction of his stratum II with Sennacherib's campaign in 701. Others have argued for a later date, either in the later Neo-Assyrian

58. See the summary statements of M. Kochavi, 'Rabud, Khirbet', in *NEAEHL*, IV, p. 1252; *idem*, 'Rabud, Khirbet', in *OEANE*, IV, p. 401.

59. M. Avi-Yonah and A. Kloner, 'Maresha', in *NEAEHL*, III, pp. 948-57; A. Kloner, 'Mareshah', in *ABD*, IV, pp. 523-25.

60. M. Broshi, 'Judeideh, Tell', in *NEAEHL*, III, p. 838, and 'Judeideh, Tell', in *OEANE*, III, pp. 259-60.

61. Stern, *Archaeology*, II, p. 325; cf. p. 148.

62. Stern, Archaeology, II, p. 325

63. M. Aharoni, 'Arad', in *NEAEHL*, I, pp. 82-87; D.W. Manor and G.A. Herion, 'Arad', in *ABD*, I, pp. 331-36. Substantial doubts about Y. Aharoni's stratigraphy have been registered by several archaeologists, including D. Ussishkin, 'The Date of the Judaean Shrine at Arad', *IEJ* 38 (1988), pp. 142-57.

64. I. Beit Arieh, 'Uza, Horvat', in *ABD*, VI, pp. 771-75.

period or as a result of the Babylonian punitive campaign of 588–586. The issue is still undecided since the ceramic evidence is ambiguous.[65]

VI

A more balanced assessment of the archaeological and literary evidence would be that the Babylonian punitive expedition of 588–586 certainly caused significant loss of life, destruction of property, temporary interruption of economic activities and considerable ecological degradation, as had previous military incursions, but the destruction was neither indiscriminate nor total. In both Judah and Philistia, Babylonian punitive expeditions were directed at the central foci of revolt, and it is difficult to see what point would have been served by wholesale devastation of the country. Stern's version of the 'Babylonian gap' does not represent a consensus among Israeli archaeologists, much less among historians of the period in general. It was nevertheless worth the trouble to examine his conclusions in some detail since they provide a recent illustration of the ways in which archaeology can serve to substantiate a national–territorial agenda.

I have tried to show that what has become known as 'the myth of the empty land' originated with the dominant Judaeo-Babylonian elite in Judah under Persian rule, and is inscribed most clearly in the book of Chronicles (דברי הימים) composed either shortly before or shortly after the conquests of Alexander. During the Hellenistic period, at a time when interest in national and ethnic origins was running high, the myth then instigated one of several accounts of the *initial* Israelite occupation of the Palestinian hill country supposedly empty of inhabitants. Together with the alternative version represented in the book of Joshua, and corroborated by a number of subsidiary myths (e.g. about the ethnic origins of the indigenous peoples), it served in due course as historical legitimation for an exclusive claim to territory, at least in the sense that others could share space only on conditions established by those who claimed to be the original settlers. Our survey, finally, raises the question whether archaeology should allow itself to be co-opted into this process, or whether its task should not rather be that of contributing to the dissolution of false understandings of the past.

65. See most recently Z. Herzog, 'Beersheba', in *NEAEHL*, I, pp. 167-73; D.W. Manor, 'Beersheba', in *ABD*, I, pp. 641-45.