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Filip Čapek and Oded Lipschits, eds.

The Last Century in the History of Judah: The Seventh Century BCE in Archaeological, Historical, and Biblical Perspectives

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Tony W. Cartledge
Campbell University Divinity School

This collection of eleven essays is designed to expand on what we know – or do not know – about the history of Judah during its last century of existence, roughly coinciding with the seventh century, BCE.

After an introduction titled “The Last Century in the History of the Kingdom of Judah: New Data, New Queries, New Interpretations,” authored by editors Oded Lipschits and Filip Čapek, the first section turns to “Judah in Extended Perspective,” in which Lipschits and Čapek review the period from archaeological and literary perspectives. In “The Long Seventh Century BCE: Archaeological and Historical Perspectives,” Lipschits argues for a broader definition of the seventh century with respect to Judah and for reconfiguring the chronological framework of Iron IIB–C. Iron IIC is traditionally delineated by the Assyrian campaigns of Sennacherib in 701 BCE and the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586 BCE. For Lipschits, those events should not be seen as end points but as “spotlights” on Judah’s material culture that had begun before and continued after the destruction events. He thus proposes to mark the transition between Iron IIB and IIC with the end of Assyrian hegemony around 630 BCE and to split Iron IIB and IIC into two subphases each. In this reframing, the campaigns of Sennacherib and the destruction of Jerusalem are midpoints between Iron IIB1 (734–701 BCE) and Iron IIB2 (701–630 BCE), followed by Iron IIC1 (630–586 BCE) and Iron IIC2 (586–539 BCE). Lipschits’s terminology can be confusing, as he refers to 734 BCE as both the beginning of Iron IIB and the beginning of “late Iron IIB,” yet he offers a helpful

new perspective on the period, though the traditional Iron IIB–C framework is unlikely to be abandoned.

In “King Josiah between Eclipse and Rebirth: Judah of the Seventh Century BCE in History and Literature,” Filip Čapek discusses various problems with getting a clear picture of Josiah, who is portrayed in the Bible as a near David-redivivus, while his name remains absent from any extant Assyrian, Babylonian, or Egyptian records. Similarly, although 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles credit Josiah with widespread religious reforms, there is little support in the archaeological record. Čapek seeks to “unweave” the strands of the biblical narrative while “embroidering and weaving” a fabric from material artifacts in order to explain, with considerable caution, how a king largely forgotten in international history could emerge in Judah’s later literature as a “semimythical paradigmatic king” (58).

The second section turns to archaeology. David Ben Schlomo’s “New Evidence of Iron Age II Fortifications at Tel Hebron” reports on renewed excavations at Hebron in 2014 that exposed nearly 70 m of a cyclopean fortification wall dated to Bronze Age IIB–C. Schlomo describes evidence that the wall was still in use during Iron IIB–C, when a variety of additions were made, including a buttress or tower attached to the city wall, and a reinforcement wall supporting a stone glacis between it and the Middle Bronze wall. Schlomo suggests that the findings support the identity of Hebron as a Judahite administrative center whose walls may have been reinforced by Hezekiah as a defense against the Assyrians and later used to guard against Egyptian encroachment.

“What Kind of Village Is This? Buildings and Agro-economic Activities Northwest of Jerusalem during the Iron Age IIB–C Period,” a joint effort by Yuval Gadot, Sivan Mizrahi, Liora Freud, and David Gellman, reports on the excavation of several rural buildings northwest of Jerusalem dating to the Iron IIB–C period. The authors describe the buildings primarily as storerooms, some of which contained large numbers of holemouth jars, with little evidence of food preparation or domestic activities. The authors postulate that the cluster of buildings was “part of an estate established in the area during the Iron Age that may have continued to be in use during the Persian period” (117). They suggest that such utilization of marginal agricultural land was characteristic of Assyrian practices and may reflect cooperation between elite landowners and Assyrian officials during the Iron IIB–C period.

Liora Freud follows with “The Widespread Production and Use of Holemouth Vessels in Jerusalem and Its Environs in the Iron Age II: Typology, Chronology, and Distribution,” which characterizes the production, typology, chronology, and distribution of holemouth jars. Freud identifies six different types (including various subtypes) and suggests a range of dates for each. Her distribution chart supports the thesis that large numbers of holemouth jars are generally associated with administrative centers and the agricultural areas that supported them.

The book's third section turns to issues of iconography and cult. In "Pictorial Novelties in Context: Assyrian Iconography in Judah," Ido Koch examines two examples of Assyrian iconography in Judah, the common rosette-stamped jar handle and a few scattered images often associated with the moon god of Harran. The adoption of Assyrian symbols should not be seen as evidence of a top-down "Assyrianization" of the populace, Koch says. Rather, he follows a postcolonialist argument viewing them as the usurpation of an oppressor's symbols or language "as a means of resistance to colonial domination and its cultural influence" (159). In Neo-Assyrian pictography, the rosette commonly appeared as a symbol of Ishtar. In Judah, the rosette replaced earlier designs as a royal stamp on Judahite jar handles, probably during the time Assyrian power began to weaken and in the days after its collapse. Koch contends that "the Assyrian symbol was transformed to represent the reclaimed Judahite sovereignty following the collapse of the empire" (164). His view of the rosette as an act of resistance would be stronger if its use had begun when Assyrian hegemony was still present to resist.

In "Hezekiah's Cultic Reforms according to the Archaeological Evidence," David Rafael Moulis surveys archaeological evidence for the historicity and timing of Hezekiah's reforms. He points to what some see as the "controlled decommissioning" and ritual burial of sacred sites and furnishings at Tel Moza and Tel Arad, compared to the less respectful dismantling of an altar at Beersheba and the aggressive desecration of a gate shrine at Lachish as evidence that centralized instructions for abolishing cult shrines would have been interpreted differently by local officials. At the same time, a small domestic shrine at Tel Halif was allowed to function until its destruction during Sennacherib's campaign of 701 BCE. Moulis acknowledges that the earlier decommissioning of a possible temple in Lachish and some prior changes at Tel Moza could have preceded Hezekiah's rule. Still, he identifies Hezekiah as the most likely common denominator in the elimination of cultic sites outside of Jerusalem, a strategy that had political and economic as well as religious aims.

The third section closes with a nonconventional take on Judean pillar figurines. In "Through a Glass Darkly: Figurines as a Window on the Past," an essay punctuated by detours into arcane aspects of semiotics, Josef Mario Briffa examines a data set of 3,099 figures and fragments from Late Iron Age contexts. Pillar figurines often occur in contexts that also include human and animal heads or body fragments, horses, horses with riders, other quadrupeds, birds, and couches. Thus, Briffa questions whether they should be assumed to have cultic functions related to female fertility or protection, as generally thought. Briffa further asks whether figurines with no male markings should be presumed female, seeing this as a reminder that gender is a cultural construct not subject to easy binary categories. Readers may question to what extent contemporary gender theory can be applied to the ancients. Briffa contends that all of the figurines should be seen as members of a miniature world whose function is largely lost to us but that can still be valued as a window into the past, however obscured it might be.

The fourth section, “Judah in the Seventh Century BCE, Reflected Not Only in Biblical Texts,” considers how seventh-century events are treated in both biblical and postbiblical texts. In “Prophetic Books as a Historical Source for the Monarchic Period: The Problem of Historical Reliability,” Adam Mackerle examines the historical reliability of preexilic prophetic texts and finds them wanting. Mackerle offers a sharp critique of three writers who argue that some aspects of the preexilic prophets can be traced to the prophets’ own time. For Mackerle, designating a preexilic date for any part of the books grows from a preconceived view that some traditions must have originated with the named prophet, and any historical information gleaned from the books depends on circular arguments. He concludes that we cannot be sure about the date of the books or how accurately they depict the period in which they are set, nor can we understand the prophets’ highly metaphorical language. Thus, in his view, they are of little value for historical reconstruction of the period.

In “The Seventh Century in the Book of Kings and the Question of Its First Edition,” Jan Rückl examines the dating of the books of Kings. Many consider the earliest version of Kings to be a product of the late monarchic period, the presumed heyday of Deuteronomistic writings. Rückl argues for an exilic or postexilic date, supporting his contention by examining texts from the accounts of Manasseh, Amon, and Josiah. Even the most basic elements of the accounts, he argues, show evidence of an exilic or postexilic perspective.

The book concludes with David Cielontko’s “Two Faces of Manasseh: The Reception of Manasseh in Early Jewish Literature,” an examination of how the story of King Manasseh was told in biblical narratives and then retold in early Jewish and Christian texts. In 2 Kings, the Deuteronomist portrays Manasseh as Judah’s most wicked king, the culmination of a sinful heritage that led to the punishing exile. In contrast, 2 Chronicles portrays Manasseh as a wicked but repentant cypher for the people of Judah who were sent to Babylon but given the opportunity to repent and return to Jerusalem. Cielontko describes how the Animal Apocalypse from 1 Enoch, the Apocalypse of Abraham, 2 Baruch, and the Martyrdom of Isaiah all portray Manasseh negatively, in the pattern of 2 Kings. In contrast, the Greek Prayer of Manasseh, the Prayer of Manasseh in 4Q381, and another prayer in the Apostolic Constitutions all claim to reflect the prayer of repentance that 2 Chronicles attributes to the king during his captivity in Babylon (2 Chr 33:12–13). Negative presentations notably appear in texts informed by an apocalyptic worldview, where good and evil appear in sharp contrast. Positive presentations are all in the form of prayers. Perhaps they were intended, Cielontko surmises, to show that, if someone as evil as Manasseh could repent and be forgiven, others might find grace through repeating his prayer and reminding God of past pardons.

As a whole, the book is an obvious melange of disparate disciplines and perspectives in service to a common theme that makes helpful contributions. Those whose interest is drawn to Judah’s final century will find it to be fascinating reading.