

HOUSEHOLD AND FAMILY RELIGION IN  
PERSIAN-PERIOD JUDAH

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HOUSEHOLD AND FAMILY RELIGION IN  
PERSIAN-PERIOD JUDAH

An Archaeological Approach

*by*

José E. Balcells Gallarreta

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Atlanta

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
<i>BAR</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BASORSup	Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research Supplements
BCE	Before the Common Era
BibSem	The Biblical Seminar
bldg	Building
ca.	Circa
ConBOT	Coniectanea Biblica: Old Testament Series
CE	Common Era
cx	Complex
diam	Diameter
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
fig.	Figure
fn.	Footnote
h	Height
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>JHebS</i>	<i>Journal of Hebrew Scriptures</i>
JPF	Judean Pillar-Figurine
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
l	Length
LSTS	The Library of Second Temple Studies
m	Meter
mm	Millimeter
<i>NEA</i>	<i>Near Eastern Archaeology</i>
<i>NEAEHL</i>	<i>The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land</i>
<i>NEAF</i>	<i>Near Eastern Archaeology Foundation Bulletin</i>
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDB</i>	<i>New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
o	Outer
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis

OIS	Oriental Institute Seminars
PEF	Palestine Exploration Fund
PIBA	Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association
rm(s)	Room(s)
SHANE	Studies in the History of the Ancient Near East
SMNIA	Tel Aviv University Sonia and Marco Nadler Institute of Archaeology Monograph Series
TEN	Tell en-Naşbeh
<i>Transeu</i>	<i>Transeuphratène</i>

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# INTRODUCTION

## The Need for Research

The Persian period biblical and nonbiblical textual traditions serve as valuable sources to study and understand the religion, or religions, of ancient Judah, especially early Judaism.<sup>1</sup> Among their many valuable contributions, these texts as literary compositions reflect how ancient authors and editors recorded the religious practices and rituals in the Levant during the Persian period. As scholar of ancient religions Rainer Albertz notes, “[the Persian period was] one of the most productive eras in the history of Israelite religion.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, while these texts narrate some of these details, there are still gaps in our understanding of how these ancient societies conceptualized the sacred and incorporated religious practices into daily life. Biblical texts typically provide the story from the viewpoint of what became the desired religious practices of the institutionalized or official religion at the Jerusalem temple through the writing of the elite.<sup>3</sup> Given that the vast majority of ancient populations were illiterate, such written

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<sup>1</sup> Most scholars recognize the dating of the Persian period to be from 539 to 332 BCE. See Mary Joan Winn Leith, “Israel among the Nations: The Persian Period,” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 367. Also, Ephraim Stern, “Chronological Tables: The Historical Archaeological Periods,” *NEAEHL* 5:2126. I use the term early Judaism to highlight the Jewish religious practices and observances specific to the Second Temple period, dating from 587 BCE to 70 CE, rooted in the communities in the region of Judah or with diaspora ties to the region.

<sup>2</sup> Rainer Albertz, *From the Exile to the Maccabees*, vol. 2 of *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 437.

<sup>3</sup> See Aaron J. Brody, “‘Those Who Add House to House’: Household Archaeology and the Use of Domestic Space in an Iron II Residential Compound at Tell en-Naşbeh,” in *Exploring the Longue Durée: Essays in Honor of Lawrence E. Stager*, ed. J. David Schloen (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 45.

sources skew our knowledge towards the elite class of these societies.<sup>4</sup> Individuals and social groups that were not part of this elite class are ignored or marginalized because of their illiteracy, socioeconomic class, location, and possible language barriers. These included women, widows, the poor, et cetera. So while textual information is useful for understanding household and family religious practices and rituals in the Levant during the Persian period, we cannot view these sources as normative as they leave common households and families out of the scholarly picture and overlook the material culture related to ritual and religion. Thus, household archaeology holds much promise in the study of family rituals and religion.

### State of Research

While earlier research tended to reconstruct a monolithic view of Israelite and Judean religion, more recent scholarly inquiry portrays the diversity of religious ideas and ritual practices.<sup>5</sup> This broader perspective provides an opportunity to explore religious practices and rituals at the household and/or family level(s).<sup>6</sup>

More specifically, past scholarship that has researched ancient religious practices and rituals has been limited in two areas. First, these studies have minimally incorporated the data from material culture and relied mostly on

---

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of literacy and schools in ancient times see Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 300–317.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Francesca Stavrakopoulou and John Barton, *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah* (London: T&T Clark, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> See for example Rainer Albertz, “Personal Piety,” in *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*, ed. Francesca Stavrakopoulou and John Barton (London: T&T Clark, 2010). Also, Rainer Albertz and Rudiger Schmitt, *Family and Household Religion in Ancient Israel and Levant* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012). Other authors and works include: John P. Bodel and Saul M. Olyan, eds., *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity*, *Ancient World: Comparative Histories* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008). Karel Van der Toorn et al., “Religious Practices of the Individual and Family,” in *Religions of the Ancient World: a Guide*, ed. Sarah Iles Johnston, Harvard University Press Reference Library (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 423–37. Beth Alpert Nakhai, “Varieties of Religious Expression in the Domestic Setting,” in *Household Archaeology in Ancient Israel and Beyond*, ed. Assaf Yasur-Landau et al., *Culture and History of the Ancient Near East*, 50 (Leiden: Brill, 2011). Carol L. Meyers, “Household Religion,” in *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah* (London: T&T Clark, 2010). Karel Van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria, and Israel: Continuity and Changes in the Forms of Religious Life*, SHANE (Leiden: Brill, 1996).



textual information; and second, the research on household and family ritual and religion has focused primarily on the Bronze and Iron Ages, leaving out the crucial later Persian period.<sup>7</sup> This study therefore particularly addresses these two lacunae as it investigates household and family rituals and religious practices in the Persian period.

How does one then investigate rituals and religious practices with sensitivity to exploring these at the family level? Research in this area since 2000 has broadened its scope to include more interdisciplinary theories and approaches and thus also subfields and criticisms from the social-sciences, such as anthropology, history, sociology, political science, economics, archaeology, cultural studies, and linguistics. In this study, I will draw from some of these methods to the extent that they complement this investigation.

### Project Scope

This study briefly analyzes various Persian period biblical texts to demonstrate that textual evidence provides only a limited view into household and family ritual and religion during the Persian period in Judah. It then presents the contributions of non-textual alternatives. Specifically, this study investigates the ritual artifacts from Persian period Tell en-Naşbeh in their excavated contexts, as a case study by which to understand the religious ideas and practices of households in Persian period Judah. Tell en-Naşbeh is associated with the biblical settlement of Mispah of Benjamin, an important regional center in its Persian period phase mentioned in Nehemiah.<sup>8</sup> Ritual objects in the collection from Tell en-Naşbeh include human and animal figurines, incense altars, stands, chalices, zoomorphic vessels, rattles, and amulets. This study also focuses attention on ritual aspects of stamp seals and scarabs, as well as profane objects that may have had ritual use or significance, such as lamps, iron knives, and

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<sup>7</sup> The Bronze Age dating ranges between circa 3600 to 1200 BCE and the Iron Age between circa 1200 to 586 BCE. This chronology follows Stern, “Chronological Tables,” *NEAEHL* 5:2126.

<sup>8</sup> Aaron J. Brody, “Mizpah, Mizpeh,” *NIDB* 4:116–17. I am utilizing the spelling of Mispah and other archaeological site names as suggested in Society of Biblical Literature, *The SBL Handbook of Style*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 30. For sites not found in this handbook, I refer to the spelling per Michael Roaf, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East* (New York: Facts on File, 1990). For other style matters, see *Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

beads found in ritualized contexts.<sup>9</sup> The study investigates profane objects in their household contexts in order to determine the basic functionality of the rooms in which ritual objects were found. Tell en-Naşbeh, a three-hectare site located twelve kilometers north of Jerusalem, was excavated by William F. Badè of Pacific School of Religion for five seasons between 1926 and 1935, and it provides us with one of the broadest examples of a Persian period settlement in the northern territory of Yehud.<sup>10</sup> This study draws heavily on a contextual analysis of ritual objects from this settlement.

Unlike scholarship that focused on official or state religion, I utilize archaeological evidence from religion and domestic contexts to investigate the existence of household religion and rituals in Persian period Tell en-Naşbeh, along with other contemporary sites in Yehud. This inquiry sheds light on ways in which families engaged in religious practices and rituals at the household level using figurines, altars, and other ritual artifacts. I specifically investigate how individuals and groups that were not part of the elite class participated in such rituals.

Archaeological records and data collection from excavations in the early 1920s to 1930s present limitations and challenges to a modern-day researcher. This is the case with Tell en-Naşbeh, even though its excavation methods received numerous accolades from scholars, as the site followed what were considered cutting-edge techniques for excavation and record keeping in its time.<sup>11</sup> This study points out these limitations and challenges as they become

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<sup>9</sup> See Carol L. Meyers, *Households and Holiness: The Religious Culture of Israelite Women*, Facets (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005). Also, Carol Meyers, "Terracottas without Texts: Judean Pillar Figurines in Anthropological Perspective," in *To Break Every Yoke: Essays in Honor of Marvin L. Chaney*, ed. Robert B. Coote, Norman K. Gottwald, and Marvin L. Chaney, *The Social World of Biblical Antiquity* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> See William Frederic Badè, *A Manual of Excavation in the Near East: Methods of Digging and Recording of the Tell en-Naşbeh Expedition in Palestine* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1934). Also, Chester Charlton McCown et al., *Archaeological and Historical Results*, vol. 1 of *Tell en-Naşbeh Excavated under the Direction of the Late William Frederic Badè* (Berkeley, CA: Palestine Institute of Pacific School of Religion and American Schools of Oriental Research, 1947).

<sup>11</sup> Tell en-Naşbeh research has been updated with the detailed 1993 study by Jeffrey Zorn on the stratigraphy and architecture of the site. He updates the assumptions for the dating of the architecture and facilitates working with the features or architectural elements. See Jeffrey R. Zorn, "Tell en-Naşbeh: A Re-evaluation of the Architecture and

relevant to the analysis of evidence. With regards to the artifacts at the Badé Museum and the accuracy of the original classification on millimeter cards, I have checked whenever possible their attribution and have evaluated them critically in relationship to photographs, drawings, or the artifacts themselves.

Archaeological data presented from Tell en-Naşbeh, and other sites in the Shephelah region of Yehud demonstrates that household religion was practiced in Persian period Judah.<sup>12</sup> This diversifies our understandings of early Judaism in this period, which is typically reconstructed primarily on biblical and other ancient textual data that focuses on official Judean religion practiced in and around the Jerusalem temple.

Chapter 1 suggests that social-scientific methods, specifically the archaeology of ritual and religion, provide a solid academic method for this study. It supports this by reviewing past uses of social-scientific approaches, and in particular those of anthropology and archaeology, and discusses how these have contributed to the field of biblical studies. The chapter explores definitions of key terms such as ritual, religion, family, and household, and opts to side with definitions that remain broad and flexible. I present Bell's six ritual typologies as an investigative framework in textual and archaeological studies.

Chapter 2 introduces the reader to the contextual background of Persian period Judah to provide a historical and cultural base for the study of biblical text and the archaeology of this period. It discusses issues of geographical boundaries in Yehud, Persian methods of administration at the provinces, Persian influences on local religion, language, social and ethnic groups, and the identity of the people in Ezra. These elements contribute to a more complete understanding of the biblical texts and the archaeology of ritual and religion. The chapter selects Ezra as a test case to evaluate how this text can contribute to research in family and household ritual and religion, and it suggests that this text shows minimal data to analyze this type of investigation. Other studies validate this further with similar conclusions.

Chapter 3 introduces Tell en-Naşbeh as a strategic settlement of the Persian period in the province of Judah. It discusses the Persian period material culture of the southern Levant with a focus on the archeology of ritual and religion, as a vehicle to explore the religious practices and rituals at the family and household level. The chapter covers the scholarly literature related to this topic and concludes that there is need to further explore the material culture related to

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Stratigraphy of the Early Bronze Age, Iron Age and Later Periods" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> I discuss my reason for selecting the Shephelah in the introductory paragraphs of chapter 5.

family and household rituals. I suggest some categories and typologies for ritual artifacts after finding gaps with existing ones. I utilize this framework to analyze artifacts of Tell en-Naşbeh possibly related to ritual and/or religious practices. I consider artifacts that have been associated with ritual in the past, but I also search for clues in areas that have been overlooked or ignored. The analysis demonstrates that the collection of Tell en-Naşbeh does include artifacts that have been associated with ritual and religious practices.

Chapter 4 presents in detail the architecture and natural landscapes of Tell en-Naşbeh as potential sources of ritual and/or religious practices. I investigate areas with possible connections to domestic settings, such as houses and household areas. The analysis shows that ritual and religious practices did occur at the family and the household level in Persian period Tell en-Naşbeh.

Chapter 5 briefly discusses ritual and religious archaeological evidence from several sites in the Shephelah during the Persian period as a supplementary study to Tell en-Naşbeh's investigations. It utilizes a similar method of analysis as in chapters 3 and 4. I conclude that other sites in the Shephelah do not offer as wide an array of ritual and religious material culture from the Persian period at the family and household level as Tell en-Naşbeh does, and this makes Tell en-Naşbeh an important contributor to study these types of questions.

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