The Great Wall of Tell en-Nasbeh (Mizpah), The First Fortifications in Judah, and 1 Kings 15:16-22*

Israel Finkelstein  
Institute of Archaeology  
Tel Aviv University  
fink2@post.tau.ac.il

Abstract
The article proposes that the Great Wall at Tell en-Nasbeh was built by King Jehoash in the second half of the 9th century BCE. It then sets this city-wall on the broader background of the construction—at the same time—of the first system of fortifications in Judah, a system that also includes Lachish and Beth-shemesh in the west and Beer-sheba and Arad in the south. Finally, the article suggests a scenario that attempts to clarify the tradition in 1 Kings 15:16-22.

Keywords
Tell en-Nasbeh, Mizpah, Asa, Jehoash, Hazael, Judahite fortifications

Introduction
1 Kings 15:16-22 narrates how King Baʿasha of Israel attacked Judah in the days of King Asa and built Ramah so that “he might permit no one to go out or come in to Asa king of Judah”. Asa reacted by paying tribute to Ben-Hadad king of Damascus, who assaulted the Northern Kingdom and weakened its pressure on Judah. Asa then used the stones and timber of Ramah to build Geba of Benjamin and Mizpah. Scholars saw this as a reliable account of events in the early 9th century BCE and identified the massive Great Wall unearthed at Tell en-Nasbeh north of Jerusalem, the location of biblical Mizpah,1 with

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1) Summary of the identification in J. R. Zorn, Tell en-Nasbeh: A Reevaluation of the Architecture and Stratigraphy of the Early Bronze Age, Iron Age and Later Periods (Ann Arbor, 1994), pp. 34-46. I see no reason to change the identification of Mizpah from Tell en-Nasbeh to en-Nebi Samwil (Y. Magen, “Nebi Samwil, where Samuel Crowned Israel’s First King”, BAR 34/3 [2008],
the building activity of King Asa. Yet, modern archaeology seems to negate the dating of this wall to the first half of the 9th century BCE.

In this article I wish to: 1) suggest a different dating for the Great Wall of Tell en-Nasbeh; 2) put the Great Wall into the context of the earliest fortifications in Judah, which date to the late Iron IIA; 3) propose a new interpretation for 1 Kings 15:16-22.

The Finds at Tell en-Nasbeh

The 1927-1935 excavations at Tell en-Nasbeh uncovered important architectural remains dating to the Iron Age. The main elements are briefly described here, from the heart of the settlement to its periphery (Fig. 1):

1. Typical to hill country sites, bedrock is exposed in the heart of the settlement, with no remains preserved there. Most of the remains of the town feature a system of three- and four-room houses, many of the pillared type, which create a belt of dwellings facing the slope, with the broad-rooms of those located in the outer belt creating a defense feature that looks like a casemate fortification (known as the Inner Wall).

2. A 4-10 m broad belt outside the Inner Wall was found empty of buildings around almost the entire circumference of the site. A large number of stone-lined silos were unearthed there, mainly in the south and southwest. They were cut into earth debris, which can be interpreted as either a fill intentionally deposited inside the Great Wall (3 below) in order to level the sloping bedrock, or as an accumulation inside the Great Wall amassed over many decades of habitation. In both cases, most of the silos located in this belt probably postdate the construction of the Great Wall.

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pp. 36-45, 78-79, following W. G. Albright, “The Site of Mizpah in Benjamin”, JPOS 3 [1923], pp. 110-121 [and Robinson before him]).
2) C. C. McCown, Tell en-Nasbeh I: Archaeological and Historical Results (Berkeley, 1947).
4) See McCown, pp. 190-191; McClellan. The possible existence of an ‘Early Gate’ at Tell en-Nasbeh (McCown, pp. 199-201; J. R. Zorn, “An Inner and Outer Gate Complex at Tell en–Nasbeh”, BASOR 307 [1997], pp. 53-66 with bibliography), its stratigraphic affiliation and possible relation to the Inner Wall, is beyond the scope of this paper.
5) See, e.g., section in McCown, fig. 55.
3. An impressive solid, stone city-wall (known as the Great Wall), 3.5-4 m in width, was uncovered on the periphery of the site. It is equipped with nine or ten rectangular towers and an elaborate gate in the northeast. At the time of the excavations the Great Wall was still standing up to 8 m high. In one place the 5-to-6 m lower part of the inner face of the wall was found plastered. A stone revetment supported the wall on its outer side. Evidence for the existence of a moat was detected in four places. The Great Wall encircled an area of 3.2 hectares.

Most scholars see the Great Wall as an addition to an existing town which had been encircled by the Inner Wall. In other words, they see the Inner Wall as the early fortification at the site and the Great Wall as the later one. The excavators dated the Inner Wall to the 11th century BCE and identified the Great Wall with the activity of King Asa at Mizpah, reported in 1 Kings 15:16-22. Starting in the 1980s, some scholars diverted from this conventional wisdom. McClellan, on the basis of ostensible (wrong in my opinion—below) similarity to other Judahite towns, such as Beer-sheba II and Tell Beit Mirsim A, dated the Inner Wall to the 8th century BCE; Katz proposed a similar dating. Na’aman suggested that the Great Wall was built by the Babylonians in the

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6) McCown, pp. 191-199.
7) Zorn, 1994, p. 320; see pictures in McCown, Pl. 66: 1-2. Theoretically, if the plaster is original, it would mean that the debris inside the wall is a long-period accumulation rather than a construction fill. But the fragmentary evidence is insufficient for drawing conclusions.
11) Ibid.
6th century BCE. Zorn\textsuperscript{14} defended the dating of the Great Wall to the time of King Asa.

The excavations at Tell en-Nasbeh were conducted in the early days of field exploration in Palestine, when archaeological method and technique were still in their infancy. Two specific issues stand in the way of whoever attempts to deal with the Tell en-Nasbeh remains: 1) The hilly nature of the site probably required terracing before construction; no attention to this point was paid during the excavations. 2) The settlement was inhabited continuously for several centuries with relatively small changes in its layout and hence pottery found in the buildings dates only to their latest phase of occupation; also, the site was never attacked and destroyed, which leaves it with no secure chronological anchor. As a result of all this, it is impossible to date the various elements uncovered at Tell en-Nasbeh according to stratigraphic and ceramic standards of our own days. No clear stratigraphic connection can be established between the fortifications and the dwellings inside the settlement, and no assemblage of pottery can be securely associated with the fortifications. Consequently, the reconstruction of the history of Tell en-Nasbeh in general and its fortifications in particular is a matter of circumstantial evidence and broader archaeological and historical considerations.

\textbf{A Short History of Tell en-Nasbeh in the Iron Age}

Looking at the pottery plates, it is difficult to decide whether Tell en-Nasbeh was inhabited in the early phase of the Iron I, which is represented, for example, at the site of Giloh\textsuperscript{15}. Strong activity at the site is evident in the middle Iron I\textsuperscript{16}, in parallel to Stratum V at Shiloh. The settlement probably kept on developing in the late Iron I and Iron IIA. Contrary to the neighboring settlements of Khirbet Raddana, Khirbet et-Tell (“Ai”) and Khirbet ed-Dawwara, which were deserted some time in the early Iron IIA, possibly as a (delayed?)

\textsuperscript{14} J. R. Zorn, “A Note on the Date of the ‘Great Wall’ of Tell en-Nasbeh: A Rejoinder” \textit{Tel Aviv} 26 (1999), pp. 146-150.
\textsuperscript{16} For this term and its meaning see I. Finkelstein and E. Piasetzky, “The Iron I-IIA in the Highlands and Beyond; \textsuperscript{14}C Anchors, Pottery Phases and the Shoshenq I Campaign”, \textit{Levant} 38 (2006), pp. 45-61.
result of the Sheshonq I campaign, the settlement at Tell en-Nasbeh continued to grow without interruption.

Over 20 years ago I suggested dating the beginning of the core of the settlement at Tell en-Nasbeh, including the Inner Wall, to the Iron I. Taking into consideration later developments in archaeological research, it seems reasonable to propose that this settlement layout achieved maturity in the late Iron I and early phase of the Iron IIA. First, another site in the vicinity, Khirbet ed-Dawwara, which dates to the late Iron I and the early Iron IIA, though smaller, features a somewhat similar plan. Second, similar settlements are known in other parts of the region west of the Jordan; I refer to the early Iron IIA Beer-sheba VII, Tel Esdar and some of the Negev Highlands settlements. Third, the casemate-like wall at Tell en-Nasbeh is irregular—very different from the far more developed late Iron IIA casemate walls in the north (e.g., Hazor and Jezreel) and from the Iron IIB casemate systems in the south (e.g., Beer-sheba II, Tel Ira, Tel Halif and Tell Beit Mirsim Stratum A); from a strictly architectonic point of view the Inner Wall of Tell en-Nasbeh represents a stage before these sites.

21 Finkelstein, 1988, pp. 250-254; for the relative date of these sites/strata see Z. Herzog, L. Singer-Avitz, “Redefining the Center: the Emergence of State in Judah”, Tel Aviv 31 (2004), 209-244.
22 Contra McClellan.
The settlement at Tell en-Nasbeh continued in essentially the same layout, until the end of the Iron Age and beyond. In a few places elaborate pillared buildings replaced old structures. One of them (in the eastern sector of the site) yielded late Iron II restoration assemblage. The large number of LMLK seal-impressions found at Tell en-Nasbeh attest to the site’s importance in the Iron IIB. Burial caves to the north and west of the site indicate strong activity in the late Iron IIA; no elaborate tombs of the Iron IIB-C, such as the ones found near Gibeon are known around Tell en-Nasbeh.

One important question remains to be addressed: When was the Great Wall, which “wrapped” the site beyond the line of the settlement, built?

Date of the Great Wall

As I have already mentioned above, there is no clear-cut stratigraphic-ceramic evidence for the dating of the Great Wall: Pottery extracted from a section in the wall by Badè has apparently been lost; the empty space between the Great Wall and the Inner Wall was not excavated in a stratigraphic manner and hence the pottery found there has no chronological value; the olive presses argument has no value either, as there is no architectural relationship between the houses of the settlement and the Great Wall. This leaves us with the place of the Great Wall in the typology of Iron Age fortifications; parallels to the Great Wall can be found at the sites listed below.

In the north:

• Tel Dan: a 3.5 m wide massive wall equipped with towers. The stratigraphic affiliation of the wall is not clear. It dates to either Stratum IVA

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24) Picture in McCown, Pl. 74:4.
26) 8th century and beginning of the 7th century BCE—for the latter see O. Lipschits, O. Sergi and I. Koch, “Royal Judahite Jar Handles: Reconsidering the Chronology of the Lmlk Stamp Impressions”, *Tel Aviv* 37 (2010), pp. 3-32.
27) McCown, e.g., Tomb 32, Pls. 29-34.
30) Katz.
31) Parallels are given only for the territorial kingdoms, not the southern coast city-states or coastal and desert forts.
or Stratum III, that is, to the very late Iron IIA in the late 9th century BCE, or to the Iron IIB in the first half of the 8th century BCE.33

- Hazor: a 3 m wide offsets-insets solid wall,34 dating to Stratum VIII, in the second half of the 9th century.35
- Bethsaida: a 6-8 m wide offsets-insets wall, dating to the Iron IIA.36
- Megiddo: offsets-insets Wall 325 of Stratum IVA, 3.3-4 m wide, dates to the Iron IIB in the first half of the 8th century BCE.
- Rehov: 9.5 m wide, offsets-insets brick wall, dates to the Iron IIB in the 8th century BCE.
- Dor: an offsets-insets wall that probably dates to the Iron IIA.37
- Gezer: the Outer Wall, 3.5-4 m wide, with rectangular towers, dates to the Iron IIB in the 8th century BCE.38

In the south:

- Jerusalem: a solid ca. 7 m wide wall on the southwestern hill39 and up to 5 m wide in the City of David40 dates to the Iron IIB in the late 8th century BCE.
- Lachish: the Level IV bricks on stone foundation, ca. 6 m wide wall, dates to the late Iron IIA, in the late 9th century BCE.41

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33) E. Arie, “Reconstructing the Iron Age II Strata at Tel Dan: Archaeological and Historical Implications”, *Tel Aviv* 35 (2008), pp. 6-64.
41) Herzog and Singer-Avitz.
• Beth-shemesh: a 2 m wide solid wall, connected to a section of a casemate wall,\textsuperscript{42} dates to the late Iron IIA.\textsuperscript{43}
• Beer-sheba: the Stratum V brick on stone foundation wall, 4 m wide, apparently with offsets, dates to the late Iron IIA.\textsuperscript{44}
• Arad: the solid offsets-insets wall of the Stratum X fort, ca. 4 m wide, dates to the 8th century BCE.\textsuperscript{45}

This brief review shows that solid walls with towers or offsets and insets were built in the north and south during both the Iron IIA and the Iron IIB. In the Northern Kingdom they were popular mainly in the Iron IIB. In Judah they appear in several central late Iron IIA sites, and in Iron IIB Jerusalem.

Six circumstantial considerations for the dating of the Great Wall should be mentioned:

1. Steep stone- or brick-made revetments (depending on the availability of construction material) are a feature known in Iron IIB-C forts in the region. They are especially common in Assyrian, or Assyrian-influenced forts, such as Tell Qudadi at the mouth of the Yarkon River,\textsuperscript{46} Blahiya near Gaza,\textsuperscript{47} Tell Abu Salima in northeast Sinai,\textsuperscript{48} Kadesh-barnea\textsuperscript{49} and Tell el-Kheleifeh at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba.\textsuperscript{50} A stone revetment that probably dates to the early 7th century BCE can be found at nearby Tell

\textsuperscript{44} Y. Aharoni, Beer-Sheba I (Tel Aviv, 1971), p. 9; Herzog and Singer Avitz.
\textsuperscript{49} Cohen and Bernick-Greenberg, p. 10, Plan 1.2 on p. 11, 123 Fig. 9.7, 325 Section 27-27.
\textsuperscript{50} G. D. Pratico, Nelson Glueck’s 1938-1940 Excavations at Tell el-Kheleifeh: A Reappraisal (ASOR archaeological reports 3, Atlanta, 1993).
Yet, this feature is usually associated with a fill that creates a podium/platform for a fort and is not common in Iron IIA-B solid town fortifications; in any event, with the data at hand it is impossible to decide whether the Tell en-Nasbeh revetment belongs to the original construction of the Great Wall or was added in order to reinforce it in later times, possibly in the Babylonian period. The latter possibility may be indicated by the perfectly finished face of the original wall and by the fact that the northern and southern sides of the fortification had no revetment (there was no need to retain the wall there?). In other words, the revetment cannot be used as the sole argument for dating the construction of the Great Wall.

2. Cistern 285 in Square P22 and Cistern 231 in Square AF27 were cut in the rock under the fortification and hence one could argue that the city wall must postdate them. Both cisterns produced Iron IIA and Iron IIB pottery finds. Yet, Persian-Hellenistic pottery found in Cave 285 above Cistern 285 indicates that this cavity was accessible until a very late date and Cistern 231 too continued to be accessible after the construction of the fortification. Moreover, the construction around the latter seems to indicate that the fortification was built when the cistern was still in use, that is, no later than the Iron IIB.

3. There are no such fortifications, neither in Israel nor in Judah, in the early phase of the Iron IIA; in fact, for the time being no early Iron IIA wall—of any type—is known in Judah. This negates the identification of the Great

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52) Since there is no construction of a podium at Tell en-Nasbeh, the need to support the wall from the outside must have become essential only with the thickening of debris inside the fortification; this debris seems to have accumulated gradually during generations of habitation at the site.
53) E.g., McCown, Pl. 66:2.
56) Zorn, 1994, pp. 459, 800.
57) A casemate wall which probably dates to the late Iron I has recently been uncovered at Khirbet Qeiyafa in the Valley of Elah in the Shephelah (for the wall, see Y. Garfinkel and S. Ganor, Khirbet Qeiyafa Vol. 1, Excavation Report 2007-2008 [Jerusalem, 2009]); for the relative date, see L. Singer-Avitz, “Relative Chronology of Khirbet Qeiyafa”, Tel Aviv 37 [2010], pp. 79-83. But
Wall as the fortification erected at Mizpah by King Asa, who ruled from 911-870 BCE, that is, in the early Iron IIA (see more below).

4. If the construction of the Inner Wall is ascribed a late Iron I or, better, an early Iron IIA date, then the Great Wall cannot antedate the late Iron IIA.

5. The Tell en-Nasbeh gate is peculiar in that it provides direct access to the city along the fortification, through a gap in the course of the wall. The gate has one chamber on each side. The only somewhat similar (but not identical) structure is the outer four-chambered gate at Tel Dan in the north. This gate too is reached along the city wall and entered in direct axis. The stratigraphic affiliation of the Dan gate is not clear—it dates to either Stratum IVA of the late Iron IIA, in the late 9th century BCE, or to Stratum III of the Iron IIB, in the first half of the 8th century BCE.\(^58\)

6. Another clue may come from the biblical description. If 1 Kings 15: 16-22 preserves a memory in Judah of major construction activity at Mizpah (see below), this memory can hardly relate to periods close to the compilation of this text in the late 7th century. Had the wall been built in connection with the Syro-Ephraimite war, in preparation for Sennacherib’s invasion, or immediately after the withdrawal of Assyria in ca. 630 BCE, the story in 1 Kings 15 would be in danger of being discredited, as it would go against memories of events that took place in the not-so-distant past.

Taking all the above into consideration, it seems to me that the most logical date for the construction of the Great Wall is the late Iron IIA. This date is supported by broader historical considerations.

**Who Built the Great Wall?**

The first issue that requires clarification is the territorial affiliation of Tell en-Nasbeh. The answer is not trivial. There can be no doubt that Mizpah was in Judahite hands in the days of Hezekiah, as it produced a large number of LMLK seal impressions\(^59\) and in the days of Josiah, in whose time Judah expanded to the north at least as far as Bethel.\(^60\) It is also clear that Mizpah

\(^{58}\) Arie.

\(^{59}\) Vaughn, p. 190; Lipschits et al.

\(^{60}\) N. Na‘aman, “The Kingdom of Judah under Josiah”, *Tel Aviv* 18 (1991), pp. 3-71; for the archaeological evidence see also J. M. Cahill, “Rosette seal stamp impressions from ancient
belonged to the exilic Babylonian province. But whom did it belong to before the fall of the Northern Kingdom? As far as I can judge, in the Iron I and the early phase of the Iron IIA Mizpah in particular and the land of Benjamin in general were in the hands of the Northern Kingdom. But what about the late phase of the Iron IIA, when the Tell en-Nasbeh wall was apparently constructed?

The late Iron IIA is dated by recent radiocarbon studies between the middle of the 9th century (or just a bit earlier) and the early 8th century BCE. This means that the beginning of the late Iron IIA could have coincided with the later phase of the Omride dynasty rule in Israel. Yet, the typical fortification system of all main Omride sites—Samaria, Jezerel, Hazor, Jahaz and Ataroth—was the casemate wall, not a massive solid wall. This puts the spotlight on Judah, in the second half of the 9th and early 8th centuries BCE.

Erection of such a massive Judahite fortification on the border of Israel in periods of north Israelite domination in the region is unlikely. This argument excludes the days of the Omride dynasty until 842 BCE and the days after the accession of King Joash, that is, after 800 BCE. Erection of Israelite fortification on the border of Judah in a period of Israelite decline under Aramean Judah, IEJ 45 (1995), pp. 230-252; R. Kletter, “Pots and Polities: Material Remains of Late Iron Age Judah in Relation to its Political Borders”, BASOR 314 (1999), pp. 19-54; I. Yezerski, “Burial Cave Distribution and the Borders of the Kingdom of Judah toward the End of the Iron Age”, Tel Aviv 26 (1999), pp. 253-270.


pressure is also unlikely. Taking all the above into consideration, the most likely solution would be to affiliate the construction of the Great Wall at Tell en-Nasbeh with Judah in the days of King Jehoash, who ruled from 836-798 BCE.

Turning to the broader perspective of the situation in the Levant in the second half of the 9th century BCE, the pressure applied by Hazael king of Damascus on the Northern Kingdom (starting in 842 BCE) relieved Judah from Omride domination. This is the time slot that best fits a northward expansion of Judah in the highlands, possibly under Damascene hegemony. The erection of the Great Wall at Mizpah in the second half of the 9th century BCE fits what we know about the western and southern flanks of Judah. In the Shephelah, the first Judahite fortifications appear in Level IV at Lachish and in Stratum 3 at Beth-shemesh; both were built in the late Iron IIA, probably following Hazael’s destruction of the strong Philistine city-state of Gath that faced Judah in the west. The construction of the first Judahite fortified sites in the Beer-sheba Valley—the administrative town of Stratum V at Beer-sheba and the fort of Stratum XI at Arad—also date to the late Iron IIA. Their construction may be related to Damascene interest in replacing copper production at Khirbet en-Nahas with a renewed flow of copper from Cyprus.

Hazael’s rise to power and Israel’s and Gath’s decline therefore signaled a “window of opportunities” for Judah, a window that closed with the decline of Damascus as a result of Assyrian pressure and the consequent re-emergence of Israel in the days of Adad-nirari III. Judah constructed, for the first time, fortifications on all of its territorial flanks: at Mizpah (and possibly Geba if 1 Kings 15:16-22 preserves a genuine memory of the past—below) in the north, facing the Northern Kingdom; at Lachish and Beth-shemesh in the
west, facing the Philistine city-states after the demise of Gath; and at Beersheba and Arad in the south, facing the desert and along the copper route from Khirbet en-Nahas to the Mediterranean ports.

Back to 1 Kings 15:16-22

Scholars tended to accept 1 Kings 15:16-22 as genuinely recording events in the early 9th century BCE. Yet, the lack of evidence for widespread scribal activity in Judah until the late 8th century minimize the possibility that original materials from the very early phase in the history of the kingdom were kept in a late monarchic archive in Jerusalem. Hence for early times the Deuteronomist must have relied on memories, traditions, tales and myths that were cited by the people of Judah in his time. The story in 1 Kings 15:16-22 probably preserves such an old tradition. But if the main construction activity at Mizpah is dated to the reign of King Jehoash, why did the author connect it to King Asa?

The existence of an etiological story related to Mizpah and the struggle between Asa and Ba‘asha is evident from Jeremiah 41:9:

Now the cistern into which Ishmael cast all the bodies of the men whom he had slain was the large cistern which King Asa had made for defense against Ba‘asha king of Israel; Ishmael the son of Nethan‘iah filled it with the slain.

The story must have been related to a prominent old cistern or pit/depression that was known in late 7th century Mizpah. When these verses were written

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72 The Hebrew says bwr—‘cistern’, ‘pit’. One could wonder if this etiological story is not related to the moat that surrounded the site (McCown, pp. 191, 193-194, Figs. 45, 59, Pls. 66/4, 5, 67: 1-3; Zorn, 1994, p. 327). The problem is that in Hebrew and other Semitic dialects bwr (‘cistern’ or ‘pit’) is carefully distinguished from ‘trench’ or ‘ditch’—hwrw, hrys (I am grateful to Ran Zadok
the memory must have already been blurred, corrupted and confused. This is so because of the long time that had passed and because of the similarity between the story regarding the campaign of the Damascene king in 1 Kings 15:20 and the description of the closer-to-the-time-of-compilation campaign of Tiglath-pileser III in 2 Kings 15:29. The two accounts, though not completely similar from the place-names viewpoint, are very close from the geographical perspective. In addition, both repeat the narrative of Judah buying its rescue by bribing a northern power. This narrative could have stemmed from a negative tradition against Judah brought to the south by northern refugees after 720 BCE,\textsuperscript{73} which condemned the treacherous cooperation of the southern kingdom with the enemies of Israel. It is thus reasonable to suggest that the events in the 730s BCE influenced the description of the alleged events in the time of King Asa. The vagueness of the story in 1 Kings 15:16-22 is also clear from naming the Damascene king Ben-hadad, probably referring to the historical Ben-hadad, son of Hazael. Ben-hadad lived about a century after King Asa; his reign could have coincided with the end-days of Jehoash.

There may be other reasons why Asa was the king whose name was connected to Mizpah. The north Israelite tradition brought to Judah after 720 BCE could have claimed that in one point in the past—probably in the days of the Omrides—an Israelite command post had been erected at Ramah, and that Judah managed to take it over as a result of its treacherous behavior. A counter tradition in Judah could have been cited in order to negate this tradition, arguing that Mizpah was in Judahite hands even before the Omrides. Such a story could have been based on a local tradition at Mizpah that linked Asa to certain building activity at the site, such as construction of the Inner Wall.

Figure 1: Plan of Tell en-Nasbeh, indicating the layout of the settlement with emphasis on the Inner Wall and the Great Wall.