

Preliminary Observations about Method

By the rivers of Babylon -- there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. . . . If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

--Psalm 134:1, 4-6



In the age of empires following the traumatic exiles of the northern and southern Jewish kingdoms each successive shift in foreign power renewed threats to Jewish survival that in turn required conscious, innovative efforts to moderate *amnesia* and preserve ancestral ways. What a people recollect, in which contexts, and for what purpose provides a glimpse into the

discursive dynamics taking place during the Second Temple era, conversations that would eventually include the early Church. Such discussions draw attention to what was considered essential for continuity and identity. By listening to the kinds of conversations taking place around the central institutions of Judaism—God, temple, and Torah—during the vicissitudes of Roman rule it is possible to orient the early Church within a larger socio-cultural context rich in diverse points of view and commitments. Those responsible for shaping the traditions in the New Testament may then be viewed as conversation partners in the on-going Jewish discussions that were shaping identities as “us” and “other-than-us” toward the end of the first century. The seeds of these negotiations, however, began centuries earlier with the post-exilic return of the Jews to Judea and their subsequent conquest by Alexander the Great.

Four Preliminary Observations

Four preliminary observations set the parameters of our investigation and assist in identifying the relevant data that will be used to control inquiry into the Greco-Roman era.

First, ***no social, cultural, or historical context is neutral***. Social theorists recognize an active interconnectedness between people and their social contexts, each influencing the other in countless direct and indirect ways. Communities become the collective environments where specific

social frameworks are constructed and essential memories are shaped and embedded, thereby enabling meaning-making to take place.¹ This becomes the shared knowledge that allows communication to take place and the lens through which interpretation is made. Without these social frameworks informing the intersubjective interactions of the Second Temple era, collective identities would not have been possible.

For example, the belief that God is living, sovereign creator and redeemer is presupposed in Jewish literature and liturgy. This understanding shared by all Jews belongs to a larger mnemonic frame narrated in the Torah. But God is also a multifaceted concept that invited reinterpretation as life situations changed and different contexts fostered other points of view. For some Jews, such as those associated with Qumran and the early Jesus movements, their nuanced focus on eschatology balanced a just, sovereign God with an unjust, insecure world and became the impetus for adapting behavior as befits the chosen recipients of redemption.² On the other hand, Philo of Alexandria drew from rich ancestral traditions of God's transcendence and added different strains of pagan intellectualism, using Greco-Roman philosophy to interpret God in terms of an ordered cosmos.³ Jewish worship and Halakhic behavior, informed by the teachings of Moses, had to make sense within the greater realities of the Greco-Roman milieu. That environment opened up a variety of possibilities by which to reimagine one's group identity and interpret the experiences of everyday life.



Secondly, ***the material world with its physical landscapes was an essential part of the ancient Greco-Roman social***

Remembering (Maidenhead, England:

is concerned with “patterns and structures” between past, present and future. . . . Temples and structures are used to express not only future hopes but also the reality of human life and community, which are shaped and sustained, grew out of belief. John J. Collins,

“Patterns of Eschatology at Qumran,” in *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith. Festschrift Honoring Frank Moore Cross* (ed. Baruch H. Halpern and Jon D. Levenson; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1981), 352. Similarly, the out-pouring of the Spirit upon Jesus’ disciples at Pentecost served as evidence of the last days in which salvation accompanied God’s visitation (Acts 2:14-21; cf. Joel 2:28 [MT 3:1]). As a result, those who heard the gospel and believed “devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers” (Acts 2:42-47).

³³ While God is “creator and father of all,” the “active cause” imminent within the cosmos, yet transcending the “passive,” material world (Philo, *Opif.* 7-10), the cosmos has an order corresponding to the revealed Torah so that one “. . . who is obedient to the law, being, by so doing, a citizen of the world, arranges his actions with reference to the intention of nature, in harmony with which the whole universal world is regulated” (*Opif.* 3).

context. It provided the materials out of which objects were created and used symbolically by communities, and was a multidimensional arena in which countless human recollections were performed and ritualized.⁴ Ancient landscapes were lived spaces, and, depending on the type and significance of the experiences associated with a particular place or object, certain sites became the “crucial centers” of peoples’ memories.⁵ Consider the symbolic events associated with Mt. Sinai, Mt. Gerizim, the Jordan River or the Jerusalem temple. Similar meaningful associations were associated with pagan temples, the hills of Rome, or statues celebrating the Caesars, famous generals, or the gods. Established patterns of remembering became associated with these sites such that “. . . changes in one raise the possibility of changes in the other.”⁶ Traumatic events experienced within an already memory-laden landscape initiated complex reactions in people that often translated into memory battles. This phenomenon accounts for why different conquerors attempted to eradicate physical evidence of important sites, such as the Jerusalem Temple, and why the rabbis needed to re-present the Temple rituals within the Mishnah in new ways that would preserve these traditions for generations without a Temple. *The Parthenon above was built at the height of Athenian power over an original temple dedicated to Athena, the city’s patron goddess, which had been destroyed by the Persians.* What do you think the visible ruins communicated to the Greeks, and what memory battle may have been taking place at the rebuilding?



Thirdly, ***the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran scholars has been followed by recognition of a remarkable diversity among Second Temple Jews referred to as sectarianism; yet, the origins, adherents, and halakhah of these diverse groups are largely shrouded in mystery and subject to avid scholarly***

⁴4. Susan E. Alcock, *Archaeologies of the Greek Past: Landscape, Monuments, and Memories* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2, 28-32.; and Norman Yoffee, “Peering into the Palimpsest: An Introduction to the Volume,” in *Negotiating the Past in the Past: Identity, Memory, and Landscape in Archaeological Research* (ed. Norman Yoffee; Tucson, Ariz.: University of Arizona Press, 2007), 3-5.

⁵5. Pierre Nora, “From *Lieux de mémoire* to Realms of Memory,” in *Conflicts and Divisions* (ed. Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kritzman; trans. Arthur Goldhammer; European Perspectives; vol. 1 of *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*; New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), xvii, xv-xxiv.

⁶6. Alcock, *Archaeologies*, 44.

debate.⁷ Part of the challenge lies with the lack of direct evidence from many of the subgroups themselves regardless of Josephus' avowal of a careful, first-hand experience (εμπεiri,α) of the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes in his early youth.⁸ What we know about the major sects comes primarily from other individuals and groups, which requires investigators to distinguish between fact, opinion, reasoned judgment, or propaganda and semantic slanting.⁹ Did these groups consider themselves to be part of a recognizable, distinct collective, or did they eventually blend in with the peoples surrounding them? How was one group marked off from another? To be a recognizable "us" requires an "other" for comparison; however, where did the focus of comparison lie and what boundaries were drawn as a consequence? Recent studies, for example, distinguish between the Sadducees and Pharisees' proximity to the centers of authority to provide more insight into their practices and beliefs.¹⁰ It is therefore essential to formulate questions that clarify whether a practice or belief corresponds to a social reality or represents an ideal. One also must remember that those who provide written testimony tend to be aristocratic, literate people with their own agendas, and what we know about these groups are literary constructs, not the groups themselves. For these reasons, attention must be given to the literary contexts that contain the information, the *Tendenz* of the source, and any corroboration from among the scattered references found in the Bible, Josephus, Philo, the DSS, or relevant rabbinic literature.

⁷ Two different approaches to the study of sectarianism have been presented by Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, (LEC 7; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 124-173; and Albert I. Baumgarten, *The Flourishing of Jewish Sects in the Maccabean Era: An Interpretation* (JSJSup 55; Leiden, Brill, 1997). As to the imprecision of historical reconstructions of the major sects, see Lester L. Grabbe, "Sadducees and Pharisees," in *Where We Stand: Issues & Debate in Ancient Judaism* (ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck; vol. 1, part 3 of *Judaism in Late Antiquity*; HO; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 35-36; and Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society* (Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1989), 3-10.

⁸ Josephus, *Life* 1.9-12; and "Empeiri,α," *LSJ*. Apart from Qumran, the early Jesus movement, and the Samaritan additions to the Samaritan Pentateuch, no other Jewish group has been definitively linked to a literary text.

⁹ For a discussion of the historical difficulties with just one sect, see William Scott Green, "What Do We Really Know about the Pharisees and How Do We Know It?" *IQHP*, 409-45.

¹⁰ Newman, *Proximity to Power*, ix-xii. "The degree of proximity to power has a decisive impact upon the life and development of Jewish groups in the Second Temple period. The proximity to power influenced the lifestyle, ideology and Halakhah of the four groups discussed . . . ,," xi. This presupposes an accepted normative center. What that normative center was needs to be determined for each group.



Fourth, it is evident from what has already been discussed that ***what constitutes actual evidence regarding the socio-cultural contexts and nature of the groups who lived during the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E. is far more limited and fragile than generally presumed.*** All research must reckon with this same finite data, the reliability of which has been vigorously debated by modern critical scholarship.¹¹ In addition, the two main sources of data, written texts and archaeological evidence, depend on the interpretive skill of the scholar, whose guiding questions determine the narrative presentation of the research and construction of hypotheses, yet whose hermeneutical distance from the sources will always invite revisions. Despite the numerous socio-historical aporias, especially after 70 C.E., and these interpretive limitations on modern research, constructive statements can be made from the available data: “I believe that it is possible to know something about the distant past. I do not think however, that this knowledge can ever really claim to be more than a sort of hermeneutical model that can help us make sense of the paltry scraps of information that have come down to us.”¹² Thus, one must proceed with caution, but not despair.

¹¹ Josephus’ reliability as a historian has been thoroughly treated by Louis H. Feldman, “Flavius Josephus Revisited: the Man, His Writings, and His Significance,” *ANRW* 21.2:763-862. For a brief list of some recent research and synthesis of primary sources for the Hasmonean and Roman periods of the Second Temple era, see Grabbe, *Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period*, 59-128. For a discussion of the nature and use of sources for the Hasmonean period, see Tessa Rajak, “The Jews under Hasmonean Rule,” in *The Last Age of the Roman Republic, 146-434 B.C.* (J. A. Crook, Andrew Lintott, and Elizabeth Rawson, eds.; *CAH* 9; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 277-80.

¹² Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 2. Schwartz characterizes his own research as “moderately positivistic.”