

Corporate Identity in the Second Temple Period

For how shall it be known that Your people have gained Your favor unless You go with us, so
that we may be distinguished, Your people and I, from every people on the face of the earth?"
--Exodus 33:16 (TNK)

"I will establish My abode in your midst, and I will not spurn you. I will be ever present in your
midst: I will be your God, and you shall be My people"
--Leviticus 26:11-12

Jewish corporate identity derived its most essential self-understanding from a distinctive *being with God* and how this unique existence was conceived, authenticated, maintained, and reinforced. Israel's own written testimony envisioned a relationship of obligation and priestly responsibility: "Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you (~**Taw**) shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," (Exod 19:5-6a). Built on mutual trust, covenant fidelity was contingent upon Israel's commitment to listen and obey; yet, the strength of this commitment depended on the effectiveness of the memory *God our deliverer* to capture subsequent collective imagination that in turn revitalize hope: God brought *us* out of Egypt with a mighty hand (Exod 13:14, 16); God accompanied *us* on a journey that anticipated rest and home.¹ Israel further visualized this covenantal relationship as embracing generations across space and time: "I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the LORD our God and with those who are not with us here this day," (Deut 29:13). Israel's earliest and most complex memories thus

¹ "Remember the word that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, saying, 'The LORD your God is providing you a place of rest, and will give you this land,'" (Josh 1:13). The journey from Egypt to the land of Israel took on symbolic significance as a period of exile when God purposefully led, nurtured, and tested the people despite these adverse circumstances. Cf. Deut 8:1-10 and Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1997), 202-204.

provided emerging communities with paradigmatic ways of being *with God* in a promised place of settled rest made accessible through processes of recollection performed in and adapted to new contexts.

Throughout Jewish history the consolation this relationship brought was fragile, threatened by destabilizing socio-political upheavals that elicited a counter question: "If the LORD is *with us*, why has all this befallen us? Where are all His wondrous deeds about which our fathers told us, saying, 'Truly the LORD brought us up from Egypt'?" (Judg 6:13b). The vicissitudes of daily existence under imperial rule presented communities scattered throughout Palestine and the Diaspora with an acute need for fresh answers. Dialectical processes were taking place among displaced audiences who, though sharing the same paradigmatic memories, had the imaginative capacity to ". . . generate, evoke, and articulate alternative images of reality, images that counter what hegemonic power and knowledge have declared to be impossible."² As a result, the tension between divine presence and abandonment was to draw out some of the most creative discussions of the late Second Temple Period as different Jewish groups, including the early church, transformed complex Torah traditions into symbols capable of addressing potentially subverting experiences, such as the destruction of the temple, loss of Jewish constitutional rule, or notably the death of Jesus the Christ.

Temple and Torah

² Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 68, cf. xvi. Brueggemann draws attention to human imagination as a crucial ingredient for rendering reality in unsettled contexts, especially when a majority point of view conflicts with individual or collective experience and is in a position of power to impose that view. The "*interactionist potential* of the community present to the text" is of particular interest when investigating the innovative ways Diaspora Jews recalled their relationship to God in local contexts removed from the center of power in Jerusalem. Many of the early church communities were mixed, diasporic entities whose ties to Jerusalem were redefined by the death and resurrection of Christ, e.g. Luke 13:33 and 24:27.

Where does God dwell, and in what way is God *with us*? Jews asked the same questions, but they differed widely as to their answers. One way to investigate the *mnemonic processes* at work in diverse Jewish communities is to consider how the two main institutions, temple and Torah, mediated the symbols and metaphors of divine presence during Gentile occupation. Both temple and Torah were *lieux de mémoire* but in very different ways.³ As sacred sites invested with the holiness of God and pregnant with centuries of accrued symbolism, differences arose in how collectives related to them, and as a consequence, how they perceived themselves and others.⁴

Torah had the advantage of being preserved in written and oral forms, transportable to any locality. Where Torah went traditions followed, and where traditions were kept alive through strategic repetitions during observances of Sabbath, festivals, or shared meals, communities were able to envision contemporary ways of being in localized contexts. All groups in Judaism looked to Torah for guidance in holy living. As written text, Torah was an established site where the oldest, authoritative recollections preserved the notion of the one God as *transformative sovereignty*, whose actions and speech-acts were and continued to be life-giving.⁵ Deliverance from slavery provided the key context for the giving of instruction at Sinai; yet, it was the open-endedness of the deuteronomic narrative that enabled Israel to reflect on its

³ Nora defines a *lieu de mémoire* as “. . . any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community.” 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.

⁴ Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 49-66.

⁵ I am indebted to Brueggemann’s proposition that Israel’s narrative memories of God are governed by “strong verbs of transformation” in a narrative sequencing—*creation, promise, deliverance, command, and nourishment*—that became paradigmatic for Israel’s life experiences throughout its history. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 145, 211.

“life of vulnerability.”⁶ Positioned for an inheritance not yet realized became a metaphor of hope to “. . . all sorts of displaced human communities, for the Pentateuch, in the end, is a promise of a homecoming and a home, to be given by the God of all promise who will not finally settle for wilderness, exile, or displacement.”⁷ It is not surprising then that Torah interpretation occupied an important identity-shaping place in Jewish communities.

Conversely, the concept of the sanctuary (or temple) had both a public and cosmological orientation for Jews that evoked a variety of associations centered in the notion of God *with us*. Viewed in antiquity not only as the navel of the earth and center of the cosmos, the sanctuary was “. . . the place of God’s presence with the ‘inner’ cultic service, primarily related to concepts of exclusive priestly theology.”⁸ The sacrificial altar stood as an ongoing invitation for Israel to participate in the priestly pageantry aimed at assuring the sanctity of God’s sacred space and his people through a service satiated with the sights, smells, and sounds of evocative ritual.⁹ Via mnemonic reenactments the faithful reconnected with the foundational experiences of their ancestors, drawing from a tradition of seeing “. . . wherein *Israel is invited to gaze on a vision of*

⁶ “Justice, Justice shall you pursue, that you may thrive and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you,” Deut 16:20. Cf. “And what the LORD requires of you: Only to do justice And to love goodness, And to walk modestly with your God,” Mic 6:8; also Deut. 6:4-7; 10:12-13; 30:6, 15-20.

⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 210-12.

⁸ Maier, “Temple,” *EncDSS* 2:922-23.

⁹ Deut 7:6; 14:2, 21; 26:19; and 28:9 refer to “a people holy to the LORD your God.” The camp is to be in a state of holiness since God move about freely (%Lhtm, hith.), Deut 23:14; cf. *IBHS* 26.1.2.b.

Yahweh's presence, holiness, and beauty."¹⁰ Thus, sacrifice, ritual purity, and presence were all interconnected and highly provocative.¹¹

Cosmological symbolism was ultimately infused with political ideology when cultic activity was directed solely to the temple in Jerusalem as "the elected place for the abode of God's presence, glory, or name."¹² This particular geographic location was saturated with a distinct collective memory. Jews were particularly reminded of King David and his son Solomon's glory days when the "Presence of the LORD filled the House of the LORD" (1 Kgs 8.11b). Furthermore, on this very mountain *our ancestor* Abraham confirmed his unswerving loyalty to God to the extent of sacrificing his beloved son.¹³ Even the mysterious Melchizedek,

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Bruegemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 424-5. The Sinai tradition is exemplary in that Israel's face-to-face encounter with God obligated her:

... not only to do justice for the neighbor, but also to be in the presence of God, to see God, to submit to the unutterable overwhelmingness that is the very character of God. It belongs to the life and character of Israel to be with and to be before this One to whom Israel is responding partner. Israelite traditions, which are rooted in the Sinai encounter, attest to the ways in which this awesome moment of presence is made continually available in Israel's cultic practice. It is clear in the development of this tradition of obligation that Israel has a keen aesthetic sensibility, suggesting that Yahweh to whom Israel responds is not only righteous but also beautiful. The encounter is conducted in an environment of beauty, which makes the communion possible and which is reflective of Yahweh's own character.

Participation in the cult also strengthened ethnic and religious bonds; however, not all Jews were able to witness the pageantry first hand. Diaspora Jews unable to make the long journey to Palestine would need to rely on symbolic corporate reenactments most likely provided through the synagogue or home.

¹¹ Cf. Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4. The juxtaposition of sacrifice and ritual purity in Leviticus is basic to Jewish cultic thinking:

It becomes clear that ritual purity is the prerequisite for those who would come to the sanctuary to offer sacrifices, for those priests who regularly officiate at sacrifices, and for any animals that are to be offered as sacrifices. Ritual impurity, by definition, is associated with those phenomena that are barred from the sanctuary. Sacrifice, also by definition, involves many activities that—especially according to the priestly traditions—can take place *only* in the sanctuary.

Klawans describes two symbolic approaches to purity, sacrifice, and temple. The first presents the temple as a symbol for the cosmos, whereas the second conceives the earthly temple as "an analogue" of the heavenly one. Both tactics envision a place where God dwells, though the manner of dwelling is different.

¹² Maier, "Temple," *EncDSS* 2:922

¹³ Josephus, *Ant.* 1.222-226. Although Gen 12:6-8 attests that Abraham erected the first altar to God at the oak of Moreh in Shechem, where "the LORD appeared to Abram and said, 'I will assign this land to your heirs,'" (12:7),

king of Salem, was regarded in various apocalyptic and Qumranite traditions as “the sanctuary’s priest-king.”¹⁴ The temple would be plagued by the combined history of subsequent destructions, defilements, purifications, and lingering questions of legitimacy. Indeed, collective memories of the temple such as found in the *Mishnah* would invite reflection whether it stood in grandeur or lay in ruins. Throughout the Second Temple period Jews differed in the ways they conceptualized these two institutions or utilized innovative symbolism to shape group identity.¹⁵

Significance of Context

Social, cultural, and historical contexts are not neutral but provide people with a shared system of language, symbols, and events through which meaning-making becomes possible.¹⁶ Memories linked to a particular site are exposed to the forces of time, distance, and change; forcing communities to bridge any gaps in shared knowledge that affect the collective self-understanding. Consideration of socio-cultural environments reminds the exegete that a textual community tells only one part of the story, that the impetus for engaging others who shared or disputed particular truth claims emerges out of a “world of power, and . . . concerns the rise and

priestly tradition attests an ancient connection with the temple mount in Jerusalem (Gen 22.7 and 1 Chr 3:1). Cf. the interpretive move taken in the Genesis Apocryphon (1QapGen ar XIX, 7-9a): “. . . [. . .] and I called on the [name] of G[od] there and said: You are [my] Go[d, the et]er[nal God . . .] . . . Up till now I had not reached the holy mountain, so I set out for . . . and kept on walking towards the South . . . and I went until I reached Hebron,” DSSSE I:39.

¹⁴ Maier, “Temple,” *EncDSS* 2:922. Cf. Gen 14:18-20; Psa 110:1-4; Heb 5:6-10; 7:1-14; and Josephus, *J.W.* 6.438. Maier points out that Melchizedek was “. . . regarded as a figure beyond history and without descendants (cf. *Heb.* 7), and in the Melchizedek Scroll (11Q13) he is, indeed, conceived as a timeless, even heavenly figure with eschatological connotations.”

¹⁵ “Jews varied in their ways of interpreting the Bible more in the first century CE than in any other time in Jewish history until the emergence of Reform and Liberal Judaism in Europe in the nineteenth century.” Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 166.

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Barbara A. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering* (Maidenhead, England: Open University Press, 2003), 11. People influence their socio-cultural and political environments as well.

fall of empires and the living and dying of human persons and communities.”¹⁷ Changes to the cultural landscape effected by socio-political and religious upheavals will be met by resistance or adaptation. Stability of identity necessitated a will to stay connected to ancestral ways, no small task for marginalized people without land or temple toward the end of the first century C.E. Those entrusted with the authority to shape meaning and interpret cultural texts would need strategies to encourage individual commitment and strengthen cohesion. By investigating and comparing competing views about *where* and *how* God is present to Jews during the Greco-Roman era, it is theoretically possible to differentiate between groups and draw attention to the kinds of processes and strategies at work in preserving a particular point of view.¹⁸ It is therefore appropriate to look at the ways Jews referred to the two foundational institutions, temple and Torah, in which contexts, and to what purpose. What will become evident is how context and people influence each other, the ways key personages and ideas subvert or encourage hegemonic interpretations, as well as the emergence of groups who functioned as dialogue partners in the arena of daily life or via texts.

¹⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 113.

¹⁸ The Samaritans, *Yahad* of the Dead Sea Scrolls, early churches, and Sages of Yavneh all preserved the Torah but developed into distinct groups with their own authoritative texts and claims of proximity to God. As near contemporaries of the early churches, their perspectives are particularly useful.