I

Introduction

IN THE AFTERMATH OF NATIONAL CATASTROPHE

The biblical book of Lamentations commences with the following verse:

> How solitary sits
> the city [once so] full of people;
> [it] has become like a widow;
> [once] great among the nations,
> a noble among territories,
> [it] has become subjugated.

In this haunting Hebrew poetry, an ancient author, whom some Judaic traditions identify as the biblical prophet Jeremiah, mourns the devastation of Jerusalem in 586 BCE by the (Neo-) Babylonian imperial armies. The Babylonians invaded the land of Israel and the entire Levant at the end of the seventh century BCE. In 597 BCE, Jerusalem, the capital of the kingdom of Judah, surrendered to the new invaders. But in 587/86 BCE, the last king descended from David and Solomon decided to revolt. After a hard siege, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian forces. Its fortifications, palaces, and the royal temple to the God of Israel (a temple built centuries earlier by Solomon) were all torn down. All institutions of *national* civil and religious self-governance and administration of the people of Israel in the land of Israel ceased to exist. And the royals, nobles, military leadership, literary

class, temple personnel, and prominent artisans of Jerusalem were herded away to places of exile in Mesopotamia.

Despite this devastation, renewal began in Jerusalem a little more than half a century later, when, after Persian and Median armies overthrew the Babylonians, Cyrus the Great and the Achaemenid-Persian kings who succeeded him mandated the return of control of Jerusalem and its surrounding territory to the descendants of those who had been exiled—all under Persian supervisory rule, of course. What resulted over the next half a millennium, that is, to near the time of Jesus' birth, was a major reframing and refashioning of Judah-ite society, culture, and religion, using (selectively) the heritage of ancient Israel and adding much to it.

During this period of renewal, virtually all of the books of the Hebrew Bible roughly in the versions we possess today were composed as a national literature. Many other literary works were also composed and widely revered, although these ultimately were not included in the canon of Hebrew Scriptures (but were preserved, often in Greek and other translations by the early church).

While the old Davidic monarchy was not renewed, a new Second Temple was built, which became the center for the most important institutions of national civil administration and of the national cult to YHWH, the God of Israel. All of this was under the aegis of the temple's high priest, who oversaw a significant number of cultic personnel, a national judicial and legislative system, and a national civil administration. True, for a brief but significant period lasting roughly from the mid-second to the mid-first century BCE, a priestly family with no Davidic ancestry, the Hasmoneans, reestablished a monarchy (while simultaneously claiming high priestly status). That said, it was the high priest's office and administration that remained throughout at the apex of national Judah-ic life, even after Rome conquered the region in the mid-first century BCE.

In the latter half of the first century CE, history seemingly repeated itself in the land of Israel. In 66 CE, Judah-ites drawn to (or ensnared by) a "national liberation movement" began a revolt against the Roman occupation. The end result was as devastating to Jerusalem and its national institutions of the cult of YHWH and civil administration as the revolt of the last Davidic king against their Babylonian overlords had been more than five hundred years earlier. In 70 CE, rebel-held Jerusalem fell to the Romans, who had been besieging it. As had occurred more than half a millennium before, all of Jerusalem's national institutions, including especially the temple and all of its functions, ceased to exist. Soon thereafter, the last fortress occupied by the rebels, Masada (by the shores of the Dead Sea), fell as well to Roman legions. It was all over.

No doubt some believed that history would repeat itself in another fashion—that by divine providence another national restoration would occur in the not too distant future. Jerusalem would be restored to her people, a Third Temple would be built, and the cult and other institutions administered by a new high priest would resume. Rome was not so inclined, and no new imperial power existed in the region that would immanently overthrow Rome and end its rule in the Levant, as the Persians and Medes had done to the Babylonian Empire many centuries earlier. The seal on the destruction was a second revolt from 132 to 135/6 CE undertaken again by Judah-ic militant nationalists, led by Simon Bar-Kokhba (aka Bar-Kuziba). The immediate impetus to rebel is not entirely clear. Some scholars maintain that plans by the Emperor Trajan (or Hadrian) to rebuild Jerusalem as a "pagan," military, garrison city was the match that lit the fuse. There certainly was such a plan; indeed, it was implemented soon after Bar-Kokhba's forces were defeated. And the city of Aelia Capitolina, with temples to Jupiter and Aphrodite, was constructed over the site of Jerusalem. But whether the plan was devised and adopted as policy by Rome before or after the rebellion is unclear. What was clear to anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear was this. Jerusalem would not be restored to the people of Israel in the near or medium term. None of the Jerusalem temple's institutions of religious and civil administration would be renewed. In fact, Judah-ites were all but banned from dwelling in the city for a time. Indeed, most Judah-ites moved away from the most war-devasted areas and, if they stayed in the land of Israel at all, moved to the west along the coastal plain of the land, as well as to the north in the lower and upper Galilee and the Golan. The *national* Judah-ite world in the land of Israel was in a shambles. What remained largely intact was traditional, local village and town governance and authority. Any renewal to be had, if one could be fashioned, must be reconstituted on this base, upon the unquestionably rich and revered cultural and literary remains of Judah-ite society from the pre-destruction era, and upon the reality of continued Roman rule.

It is precisely in this social, cultural, and political context in the latter decades of the second century CE that the early rabbinic movement, a self-designated, self-formed cadre of scholars and teachers of a specific type, formed in the land of Israel in towns of the coastal plain and soon thereafter in the Galilee. As remarked in the preface, many centuries later, this cadre's intellectual, occupational, and institutional heirs were looked to as the highest authorities for how one should live and act as a Jew in accordance with the demands of Torah. This book aims to elucidate their beginnings, but in a very particular manner, for a certain audience.

This book offers nonspecialists an introduction to the earliest rabbinic movement near and soon after its initial foundation (during the decades leading up to and just following the turn of the third century CE) within Jewish society in the land of Israel. The volume focuses almost entirely on *what* members of the earliest rabbinic movement were by exploring two intertwined sets of questions.

1. What was (were) the shared, collective social profile(s) of members of this group? And what did they seem to think they were (or wish to be)?
2. Moreover, upon what historically, socially, culturally, or politically relevant antecedent and contemporary models might the nascent rabbinic movement have drawn to forge their collective profile(s)? And what might they have thought they were (or should be seen as) like, in their own eyes and in the eyes of others?

Such questions, in various formulations, will recur at junctures throughout the book as important organizational signposts of the volume's subject matter. And later in this first chapter, I will unpack these questions and articulate the value to a nonspecialist readership of posing and addressing these specific queries (as opposed to others) in order to gain an introductory toehold on understanding the early rabbinic movement, including what was "rabbinic" about it (beyond the already stated and somewhat self-evident fact that members of the movement bore the title "rabbi"). Before doing that, however, let me say something about why nonspecialists might be interested at all in better understanding the earliest rabbinic movement. (We specialists, by contrast and by definition, always care intensely about the subject matter of our speciality.)

THE EARLY RABBINIC MOVEMENT: OF INTEREST TO WHOM, AND WHY?

As I have already begun to articulate, the earliest rabbinic movement is a group that

1. First emerged as self-styled "specialists" within Jewish society in the land of Israel under Roman rule after the destruction by Roman armies in 70 CE of Jerusalem and of its central temple of the God of Israel
2. Had attained a reasonable level of organization and shared self-definition as a social formation sometime during the latter half of the second century in the land of Israel (after the failure of the Bar Kokhba rebellion, c. 132–135/6 CE, against Roman rule)

Furthermore, the early rabbinic movement:

3. Had begun by the middle of the third century (if not a little earlier) to articulate a shared narrative that (a) expressed what they were as a group, and that (b) legitimated the role(s) members sought as specialists of a certain type in Jewish society

Indeed, in the mid-third century CE, the movement was sufficiently well self-defined and developed to clone itself to establish a "branch-plant" group (or groups) in Persian-ruled Mesopotamia. How? By the mid-third century, the early rabbinic movement was already attracting would-be members from the lands "between the rivers" (the literal meaning of "Mesopotamia") to apprentice with members of the movement in the homeland, and to export members from the land of Israel (back?) to Mesopotamia. Eventually, due largely to the Christianizing policies and politics of the Byzantine-Roman Empire in the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries, the Mesopotamian branch, which operated beyond the ken of Byzantine Christian rule, eclipsed its sister, founding movement in the land of Israel. But I am getting not only ahead of myself but also beyond the timeframe of this book's focus.

What, in my view, is so inherently interesting about the earliest rabbinic movement in the land of Israel during the movement's formative period in the second century CE through the first half of the third, and to whom (beyond a more narrowly defined audience of readers for whom this topic is a primary focus of research and study)? That is to say, whom do I believe to be among the more broadly defined, likely interested readers of this book about the early rabbinic group, and why? To answer this question, let me begin not in ancient times, but in the early twenty-first century, our own era.

In our times, almost all Jews who affiliate or identify with one or another institutionalized faction or movement of contemporary Judaism—among them, the ultra-Orthodox (aka *haredi*), Modern Orthodox, Hasidic, Conservative (called *Masorati* in the state of Israel), Reconstructionist, and Reform/Liberal movements—are adherents and practitioners of some *modern* interpretation of rabbinic Judaism.[1] In other words, the

1. Yes, even the ultra-Orthodox movements—there are several—of twenty-first-century rabbinic Judaism are modern, no less so than the Reform/Liberal synagogue movements. Like all other contemporary, twenty-first-century forms of rabbinic Judaism, ultra-Orthodoxy, too, represents coherently articulated, shared, and organized Judaic responses to the challenges faced by religious communities in modern, particularly open, and increasingly secularized societies. Those responses are just different than that of the Reform, Reconstructionist, or Conservative movements of Judaism. On a continuum of responses to modernity, ultra-Orthodoxy leans more toward social/cultural distancing from others, even from Jewish others. By contrast, Jews who identify with more liberal streams of modern rabbinic Judaism seek to a

Judaism of today in (almost) *all* of its forms, somehow has its origins in a rabbinic movement that began in the land of Israel in the first several centuries CE. This alone should make that early movement a matter of interest to those who today self-identify as Jews, or to anyone who wishes better to understand modern-era Judaism *and/or its antecedents*, in the same way that the early Jesus movement(s) and earliest Christianity/Christianities of roughly the same ancient period and, in their initial phases, in roughly that same geographical region, the land of Israel and immediately adjacent territory, are at the root of the many forms of contemporary Christianity observed in our current era.

Now I have deliberately devised the last sentence of the preceding paragraph as a "Trojan horse" of sorts. It seeks to entice another group of potentially interested parties to be drawn into the subject matter of this volume, by suggesting that the early Jesus/Christian movement(s) and the earliest rabbinic movement were *sibling* developments. Both movements—a mealymouthed term that permits me to avoid (for now) a more substantive characterization of what they were—proffer *alternative* responses, arising from a *shared* Judah-ic cultural, social, and religious heritage, to roughly the same social, historical, and political environment. The environment was that of the Levant and eastern half of the Greco-Roman world in the lead-up to and/or the aftermath of two tumultuous, dislocating wars fought in the first and second centuries CE in the land of Israel between Roman imperial legions on the one side and, on the other, militant-nationalist Jewish militia bent on freeing the land of its Roman occupiers.

Indeed, the Gospels portray one of Jesus' disciples, Simeon "the Zealot," as someone who was (or had been) associated with such a militant-nationalist Jewish group (Matt 10:4; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; and also Acts 1:13). This portrayal plays into the Gospels' deft handling of the question of Jewish messianism and of Jesus' identity as the expected Messiah. How so? Simeon is, at least implicitly, portrayed (like other disciples of Jesus) as knowing or suspecting that Jesus is (or will be) the expected Jewish Messiah. But Simeon's (former?) zealotry would contrast with the Gospels' explicit portrayal of Jesus as rejecting such nationalistic militancy as part of his messianic consciousness. Jesus' messianic mission, according to the Gospels, lies in another direction altogether, a kingdom of heaven that is not (yet?) political.[2]

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greater extent to blend their participation with and in non-Jewish society and culture with their rabbinic Judaic identity and their lives as Jews. Absent modern, open, increasingly secularized societies, neither option makes any sense, and so both types of responses are distinctively modern.

2. A theme that became central several centuries later to the philosophy and