DOING WITHOUT THE TEMPLE: PARADIGMS IN JUDAIC LITERATURE OF THE DIASPORA

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I. The Problem: How Can a Diaspora Jew Worship a God Whose Temple is Far Away?

The question of the role of the Jerusalem Temple and its cult in Diaspora literature, and that of the attitudes of Diaspora authors towards them, cannot be explored outside of the broader contexts of Jewish religious worldviews, practices and identities in the Diaspora communities of the Greco-Roman world. The Diaspora Jews’ predicament vis-à-vis the Temple and its cult could be succinctly delineated as follows.¹

According to the pentateuchal tradition, which is usually considered to have taken its final shape by the end of the Persian and the beginning of the Hellenistic periods, the Temple, its sacrificial cult and its priesthood stood at the center of the Judean religion.² Most of the legal materials contained in the Torah of Moses, on diverse levels, in numerous ways, and in different measures are related to the Temple and the sacrificial cult carried out in it. Various sacrifices (as well as other cultic acts performed in the Temple such as, for example, libations, the burning of incense and the like) were the main rituals of Mosaic religion as conceived by the authors-redactors of the Torah, and as the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews pithily put it at the end

¹ This paper, a shortened version of one of the chapters of my doctoral dissertation, which I am preparing under the supervision of Prof. Daniel R. Schwartz, was written while I was a member of the Scholion research group that sponsored the conference that this volume represents.

of the Second Temple period, “without the shedding of blood there [was] no pardon.” The ritual purity system, which played such an important role in the Mosaic legislation, mainly answered the questions: “Who can and who cannot participate in the Temple cult, when and how?” Major biblical festivals were defined, basically or broadly, as those of the pilgrimage to the Temple, and the activities of the celebrants were to take place in it or in its vicinity. All this should not surprise us since the majority of the pentateuchal legal materials are most likely to have originated with the priestly and levitical circles based in the Temple or at least connected to it—circles which were eager to promote the Temple as the center, indeed, the embodiment, of the Judean religious expression. So much for the written tradition authoritative in the period under review.

From the historical point of view, correspondingly, at the very beginning of the Persian period Judea was reconstituted as a “Temple-state,” at the head of which stood the high priest. This situation endured in the early Hellenistic period, until the beginning of the Maccabean revolt, of which the apogee was the rededication of the Temple and the

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5 See Leviticus 23. For the analysis of these traditions, see J. Milgrom, Leviticus 23–27 (New York, 2001), ad loc.
