Reshaping the Memory of Zedekiah and His Period in Chronicles

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1 Introduction and Basic Considerations

As per its title, the goal of this contribution is not to shed light on the details of the historical events around 586 B.C.E. or to shape a historically accurate mini-biography of King Zedekiah. Instead, the goal is to reconstruct another historical king Zedekiah, namely the Zedekiah of memory that existed within a particular community that consisted of early Second Temple literati who encountered, constructed, and remembered their own Zedekiah through social acts of imagination grounded on their readings and re-readings of (past shaping/evoking) texts that existed within their core, authoritative repertoire, and in our case, especially, Kings, Chronicles, Jeremianic, and Ezekielian texts. In particular, this essay focuses on the contribution of reading and rereading Chronicles to the shaping of this socially shared Zedekiah of memory. Since the contribution made by Chronicles can be reconstructed only against the background of the contributions of other texts, this work touches, even if in general strokes, on the latter as well.

Given the crucial role of matters of and approaches about (a) social memory and (b) readings and re-readings in the present endeavor, it is 'good practice'

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1 I locate these literati at the earliest in the late Persian period and at the latest in pre-Hasmonean times. We may refer to this period as the Early Second Temple period or perhaps and more precisely, the late Persian/early Hellenistic period. An exact date for each of these texts and more relevantly for the mnemonic system that emerged out of and became reflected in readings of each one of these texts in a way informed by all the others within one community (see below) is impossible to prove. But such a precise date is neither required nor relevant to the present study. The general time range established by the temporal boundaries mentioned above suffices. It is to be stressed also that the analysis advanced here does not require that the relevant texts existed exactly in their present forms at the time. It assumes, however, that the present forms—note the plural—of the books are significantly representative of the texts read by the community at that time. Most scholars would grant that point.
to state explicitly from the very outset some general remarks that provide the grounds out of which the approach taken here emerges. Four key observations, none of which is controversial in any way but whose implications are not always thoroughly thought out, are particularly important in this context.

First, social memories exist in all human groups. Significant transcultural trends can be discerned, as studies in social or cultural memory have shown.2 This being so, it stands to reason that approaches raised by (transcultural) social memory studies are likely to be, at least, a good heuristic tool for the reconstruction of the memory of Zedekiah in our particular group. Minimally, these approaches would suggest issues to bring up, questions to ask, and ‘particularities’ that can be noticed only against the existence of general trends. In other words, it is not reasonable to dismiss ‘memory studies’ when one conducts research on ancient Israel’s social memory.3

Second, no group, or individual for that matter, can construe and possess a memory of one individual without involving memories of others. Memories of any person or place are always set in a large mnemonic landscape that not only involves, but also intertwines multiple memories. Very often, the very significance associated with the relevant memory is grounded in and depends on the ways in which it is intertwined with others. In other words, we are always faced


3 This is not deny that on certain areas one needs to ‘fine-tune’ some common approaches and concepts that emerged within a field of Memory Studies in which social studies of ancient communities are still in a clear minority. I have addressed these issues elsewhere, cf. my “Remembering the Prophets through the Reading and Rereading of a Collection of Prophetic Books in Yehud: Methodological Considerations and Explorations,” in Remembering and Forgetting in Early Second Temple Judah (ed. Ehud Ben Zvi and Christoph Levin; FAT 85; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 17–44; esp. 18–28.