

Land *and* Diaspora: Spatial Perspectives

Over the past 50 years, numerous scholars have discussed the identity construction and sense of local belonging of the Jews who settled in various diaspora communities in the first centuries CE. The central questions raised in this discussion include: to what extent did Jews living in the diaspora continue to keep Jerusalem and Palestine, conceived as the Land of Israel (the Land), as the focal point of their spatial belonging; to what extent did they develop a sense of local affiliation; and in what sense could a longing towards the Land and a feeling of local affinity go together?

The present contribution aims to add a new aspect to this ongoing discussion. I wish to suggest that a change of spatial epistemology may broaden and challenge the way we interpret descriptions of space and spatial affiliation in ancient texts. My question is: In what sense could Jews living in diaspora communities have entertained a notion of being in the Land while being *away* from Palestine?



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From ‘territory’ to ‘localized action’

Recent decades have seen growing theoretical interest in the human conception of space and place. Contributions have come from several academic disciplines, including geography, sociology, and philosophy. Michael Foucault and Michail M. Bakhtin figure prominently on the list of contributors, as do Henry Lefebvre, Jonathan Z. Smith, Doreen Massey, and Edward W. Soja.¹ The sketchy presentation that follows here presents some core ideas from the theories of Lefebvre and his follower Soja, but does not dwell on the specifics of their theoretical contributions.²

The main aim of the theoretical approaches developed by the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre and the American geographer Edward W. Soja has been to propose a change of spatial epistemology. As reactions to the typical modern ‘Western’ idea of understanding space as a given and passively existing materiality ‘out there’, they deny that space is something neutral, and hold that humans are not only affected by space, but also create space by their practices. Instead of understanding space as a given territorial void, or a stage where humans act, Lefebvre and Soja have suggested that space should be studied as a cultural construct. This understanding of space implies that space is always ‘space for someone’, that the understanding of space is never static, and that the conception of

1: Cf. Foucault (1986); Bakhtin (1981); Lefebvre (1974/1991); Smith (1978); Massey (1994); Soja (1996).

2: Cf. Flanagan (1999) and Lied (2005) for more detailed presentations.

a given place can always be redefined by different groups and generations. Thus, Lefebvre and Soja suggest that instead of studying space in terms of territorial/material aspects alone (territorial epistemology), we should study space as a phenomenon created and recreated by human action in the broadest sense, as part of a continuing construction and reconstruction of reality.

The change of spatial epistemology proposed by Soja and Lefebvre may challenge the way scholars commonly conceive of the spaces described and constructed in ancient texts. Instead of taking it for granted that these spaces can be identified only as reflections of presumably given territories, their epistemological shift would suggest that spaces presented in the texts could rather be studied as descriptions and constructions of localized action. In the context of this particular study, their epistemological shift should make us reconsider whether descriptions of the Land in ancient texts are always identified as Palestine³, or whether the Land could also be construed in the texts as the spatial outcome of the localized practices of diaspora settlements.

Take Syria and Babylonia...

This study takes its examples from the Mishna and the Babylonian Talmud, both of which are authoritative Jewish text collections containing compiled, diverse and extensive descriptive rules and interpretation literature.⁴ Two methodological reservations must be noted initially. Firstly, I have deliberately chosen examples from the expansive rabbinic literature, which question the fruitfulness of assuming a territorial epistemology. I am not saying that a territorial epistemology would never provide interesting readings of the texts, or that a study that sees space through the lenses of localized action would account for all the tendencies in the material. I wish to argue that several tendencies may be observed side by side and to point out some descriptions in the material which are hard to account for unless we change spatial epistemology. Secondly, it is important to bear in mind that the texts in question are discursive. They do not provide any direct access to the socio-historical world of the period in which they were written. They probably discuss that world – they possibly opt to make worlds – and tend to let several interpretations coexist.

My first example is Syria. In the article “The Significance of the Land of Israel in the Mishnah”, R.S. Sarason draws attention to the ambivalent position of Syria in various tractates of the Mishna. In a discussion of *m. Yad*.⁵ 4:3, Sarason argues that Jewish settlements outside Palestine, e.g. in Syria, may have given tithes, a regulation which biblical laws would ascribe to the Land only. He concluded that “this scenario also supposes a symbolic transfer of attributes of the Land of Israel to large Jewish settlements outside the Land (...)” (Sarason, 1986, 119). Indeed, in the

3: Palestine can be defined roughly as the territorial entity between the Mediterranean Ocean and the Jordan river. Alternatively, as the area between the Mediterranean Ocean and the Euphrates (Gen 15:18).

4: It is common to date the Mishna to the beginning of the third century CE and to assume that the Babylonian Talmud contains material from a wide period which probably reached its final form some time between the fifth and the seventh century. The various parts of these text collections are, however, notoriously difficult to date.

5: All abbreviations are according to the standard of *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies*. Edited by P.H. Alexander et al. ii. 4th reprint. Peabody, Ma., Hendrickson Publ., 2004, 79–81.

context of extensive discussions concerning laws of agriculture, produce and harvest in the Land, Syria is given particular attention in the Mishna. It is sometimes presented as a part of the Land (*m. Ḥal.* 4:11f; *m. Demai* 6:10) and sometimes not (*m. 'Or.* 3:9; *m. Ma'as.* 5:5; *m. Ḥal.* 4:7–8). Other passages seem to ascribe a both-and identity to Syria (*m. Šeb.* 6:2–6), or put it in a special position both vis-à-vis the Land “proper” and other lands of the world (*m. Šeb.* 6:6). In effect, Syria seems to be partly inside and partly outside the Land.

How should we understand this phenomenon? We must, of course, take into consideration that there may have been no clear distinction between the areas I have referred to as Palestine and the larger geographical entity of Syria. Since some tractates distinguish between Syria and Palestine, however, that explanation is not sufficient in itself. Another factor may have been that Syria was considered contingent with Palestine, on the fringe area of biblical mappings of the Land. The debates about the role of Syria may display a certain elasticity to the Land in order to include areas in the north. A third factor, however, may have been that the Jewish settlements in Syria were already large and therefore important to define at the time when the Mishna was written and redacted. As *m. Ḥal.* 4:11 says: “One who acquires [land] in Syria is like one who acquires [land] in the outskirts of Jerusalem”. Thus, it is possible that an effort was made, at least in some tractates, to ascribe the status of Land to the localized action of Jewish settlements in Syria.

My second example is Babylonia. As I. Gafni points out in his book *Land, Center and Diaspora: Jewish Constructs in Late Antiquity*, the Jewish communities that dwelled in Babylonia came to ascribe a wide range of attributes commonly reserved for the Land to their own environment in Babylonia, but without denying the historical and eschatological status of Palestine as the Land (Gafni, 1997, 116). According to Gafni, Babylonian institutions were thought to equal and continue the legacy of institutions formerly in Jerusalem (*b. Giṭ* 6a). Babylonian Jews ascribed Davidic roots to their leadership. They claimed to have material remains from the Jerusalem temple. They understood Babylonia to be the ‘real’ homeland of Abraham (*b. Pesah.* 87b), and they ascribed notions of sacred soil and boundaries to it (*b. Sanh.* 38a–b; *b. Giṭ* 6a; *b. B. Qam.* 80a). They also explicitly equated cities in Palestine with cities in Babylonia (*b. Yoma* 10a) and claimed that the Shekinah, God’s presence, went with the exiles to Babylon, only to linger there in Babylonian synagogues (*b. Meg.* 29a).⁶ In other words, there is reason to believe that an attempt was made in these tractates to redefine the Babylonian settlement in vital matters as the Land.

In the Land while abroad

This very brief discussion of the examples Syria and Babylonia suggests that differing versions and interpretations of the Land may have coexisted in the extensive rabbinic material. Coupled with continuing concern for Palestine as the historical and eschatological Land of Israel, we find a willingness to redefine Jewish settlements outside Palestine as local Lands. By adjusting the biblical laws of the Land to Syria, the Jewish communities of Syria may have lived “as in the Land”. Moreover, by applying names and

6: Cf. Gafni, 1997, 116. Cf. further *b. Qidd.* 71b; *b. Ketub.* 111a.

notions, and by transferring the customs and the authority of the institutions of Jerusalem to Babylonia, the tractates of the Babylonian Talmud mentioned here attempt to construct Jewish Babylonia into a parallel and perhaps equally real, Land. In this manner, these texts would allow diaspora settlements to commemorate the history of the Land in Palestine as well as a hope for returning to that Land, but at the same time continue their life abroad as if they were dwelling in the Land. This means that in a period when relatively few Jews in fact lived in Palestine, these texts could present other ways of defining one's life as living in the Land.

A spatial epistemology that highlights localized action has several advantages. Firstly, it displays sameness where an interpretation based on a territorial epistemology would show the differences between Palestine, Syria and Babylonia. Secondly, where a territorial epistemology would focus on the concern for the territory of Palestine, an epistemology stressing localized action would pinpoint the continuing fruitfulness of the Land-concept. Thirdly, this epistemology would make sense out of passages that are busy mapping people and their practices rather than precisely delimiting territories. It makes it easier to understand why texts let the extent of the Land vary so much, why texts sometimes include Syria, for instance, and why some tractates would allow the areas on the eastern side of the Euphrates to be described as the Land. In this manner, the spatial epistemology of Lefebvre and Soja equips scholars of ancient texts to deal with more meaningful interpretations of descriptions which would otherwise seem strangely “out of place”.

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