

***The Origins of Judaism: An Archaeological-Historical Reappraisal.***

**By Yonatan Adler.**

**The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library**

**New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022**

**384 pp., ISBN: 9780300254907**

Ian Young

In this fascinating and accessible book, Yonatan Adler aims ‘to apply systematic historical and archaeological methods to seek the earliest evidence for the emergence of...practical Judaism within the routine lives of ordinary people in antiquity’ (xi).

The aim of the present book is to investigate when and how the ancestors of today’s Jews first came to know about the regulations of the Torah, to regard these rules as authoritative law, and to put these laws into actual practice in their daily lives. (3)

In other words, this book is not about the date when the biblical books were composed (and, in this context, Adler is particularly interested in the laws found in the books of the Torah), nor does it pursue the question of when, say, a small portion of the population began to keep the laws of the Torah. Rather, the focus is on the question of how far back we can trace evidence for the widespread observance of Jewish laws among the general populace. Adler’s answer to this question is that the origins of Judaism in the specific sense of a people marked by their observance of the laws of the Torah can only be traced back to the second century BCE. The spread of knowledge about these laws was tied to the origins of the synagogue in that same century as a means to teach the people about the Torah. This development was related to the redefinition of the Torah, from an earlier conception that it represented ideals, to one where it now functioned as prescriptive law. Adler conjectures that the change was sponsored by the rulers of the Hasmonean dynasty.

Adler is not the first scholar to argue this case. He indicates a number of other scholars with compatible views about the importance of the second century BCE in the development of Jewish identity, reviewing work by Shaye Cohen, John Collins, and Reinhard Kratz. What he does, though, is argue the case systematically, using historical and archaeological evidence, and present the argument in a clear manner. He brings together a vast amount of information presented in a lucid and perspicacious manner.

Adler’s approach investigates Jewish practices for which textual and archaeological evidence can be expected to be found—the ideas and beliefs held in the majority of ancient people’s minds cannot be directly studied. He begins from the first century CE as a time when the laws were observed widely among the Jewish populace. He, then, works backwards to establish



the point at which we get our earliest evidence for widespread observance of these practices.

The proof that Adler looks to find is not only in literary texts. In fact, he is well aware that such texts may reflect more the aspirations of a small circle of authors, rather than reflecting the actual practice of a large number of people (21). Adler looks to supplement written sources with material evidence from archaeology. This latter class of evidence is also limited by the practical question of what may reasonably be expected to have survived from the ancient world. Adler must rely on limited sources here, too.

The author's first study presents evidence for widespread adherence to the dietary laws of the Torah. These specify which animals, fish, birds, and insects may and may not be eaten and in what manner (see especially Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14). Adler first establishes his baseline: the clear evidence of the observance of the dietary laws in the first century CE. Literary sources such as Philo, Josephus, and the New Testament unambiguously indicate widespread knowledge of following dietary laws. He cites, for example, the question of the emperor, Caligula, to the Jewish delegation in which Philo participated: 'Why do you refuse to eat pork?' (27). Adler moves to archaeological evidence, pointing out that only aspects of the food laws can be investigated archaeologically, in particular animal bones. He focuses his discussion further on the categories of pigs and scaleless fish. From a detailed review of the available evidence, he suggests that 'it seems justified to infer that, by and large, Judeans living in the first century CE did not consume pig' (35). A similar conclusion may be inferred about scaleless fish, but it is less certain due to there being fewer data available.

Adler then turns to the evidence for observance of the dietary laws before the first century CE. Here, he concludes that: 'Prior to the second century BCE, there exists no surviving evidence, whether textual or archaeological, which suggests that Judeans adhered to a set of food prohibitions or to a body of dietary restrictions of any kind' (49). The literary sources that indicate adherence to food laws in the second and first centuries BCE are mostly later sources, such as Josephus from the first century CE, referring back to events of the first century BCE, nevertheless they do provide evidence that the food laws were widely known in that period. Before this time, outside of the Pentateuch, Adler finds no evidence in biblical texts or in extra-biblical sources that indicates that Judeans in these earlier periods observed special dietary laws. Some evidence that might at first appear to contradict this is explained differently by Adler. Thus, the issue in 1 Samuel 14:31-35, where Saul's troops sin by eating meat 'with the blood', is explained as cultic, since the problem is solved by building an altar, not to do with meat that was not properly cleansed of its blood. In regard to archaeological evidence, pig bones are not a helpful indicator in any period, since no group in the region, not just Judeans, ate much pork. On the contrary,

scaleless fish remains represent a significant percentage of fish bone assemblages throughout most of the first millennium BCE, whereas the limited fish bone assemblages from the first century BCE contain none, providing evidence of significant non-adherence to the dietary laws in the earlier period.

Adler follows a similar procedure in subsequent chapters dealing with ritual purity, figural art, tefillin and mezuzoth, and other practices such as circumcision, Sabbath prohibitions, Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, fasting on the Day of Atonement, Sukkoth (Booths and the Four Species), and the seven-branched menorah. All these studies amount to a solid case that widespread observance of these Jewish practices does not date before the second century BCE. In his final chapter, he discusses further important evidence, such as the commonly made observation that the Judean community in fifth century BCE Egypt, evidenced by the Elephantine Papyri, does not show clear evidence that they knew the laws of the Torah, and provides evidence of non-compliance (for example, evidence of polytheism).

Adler is well aware that he is not absolutely proving the date when Judaism in his definition emerged. He is only establishing the date *by which* Judaism must have emerged, the *terminus ante quem*. He states:

Lacking further evidence, this is the most we can determine with any degree of confidence. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. It is possible that Judeans knew of the Torah and were observing its laws for decades or even centuries prior to our established terminus ante quem, and that for whatever reasons no evidence of this has survived. (18-19)

Nevertheless, despite his citation of the well-known saying about absence of evidence, the strength of Adler's argument is largely that he can argue an absence of evidence before a certain point. It is not true that such a silence is not evidence: scholars, and people generally, make such inferences all the time. As I have outlined, Adler can present positive evidence for his case that the Torah was not being widely observed in periods before the second century BCE.

However, it is fair to highlight that the evidence that we have access to is skewed towards the latter end of his period. It is only in the first centuries BCE and CE that we have extensive written evidence, such as Josephus, Philo, the New Testament, and the Qumran Scrolls, which amply evidence the widespread observance of Jewish laws in those centuries around the turn of the era. A critic of Adler's case might wonder what would be revealed if we had a detailed contemporary historical narrative (along the lines of Josephus) about Judah in, say, the fourth century BCE.

Adler is aware that the question of the dating of the biblical texts is complex. However, he reasonably points out that the vast majority of them are considered to date before the second century BCE. As we have seen, it is

these texts that are quite often relied on as evidence for Jewish practices in the pre-second century BCE era. It is not uncommon for Adler to have to deal with evidence from these earlier sources, as well as extra-biblical sources, which at first glance might seem to contradict his case. We have already seen how he dealt with the apparent issue of eating blood mentioned in 1 Samuel 14. Another example is where Adler must admit that circumcision was a common practice among early Israelites—note, for example, the contrast the biblical text makes with the uncircumcised Philistines. However, he circumvents this issue by claiming that the question is whether circumcision was practised in fulfillment of a divine commandment, for which he finds no evidence, as opposed to just being a common practice in the region, later taken up into Pentateuchal legislation (135-136).

Regarding the Sabbath, Adler has to deal with the statements of a pagan author, quoted by Josephus, about Jerusalem falling to Ptolemy I in the late fourth century BCE due to their not fighting on the Sabbath. He explains this as anachronistic due to that author’s setting in the mid-second century BCE. So, too, a biblical text like Jeremiah 17:19-27, where Jeremiah tells the inhabitants of Jerusalem to keep the Sabbath day holy, is used as evidence that people were *not* keeping the Sabbath at that time (142-143). The story of Ezra’s promulgation of the Torah already in the Persian period (for example, Nehemiah 8) and its widespread acceptance by the people is countered by arguments such as that ‘the stories themselves never stake the claim that Ezra’s promulgation of the Mosaic book of instruction had any lasting effects on the Judean masses’ (195). A critic of Adler’s case might argue that he is explaining evidence away using a series of ad hoc arguments.

Adler has made a strong and challenging case that needs to be taken into account by anyone interested in the origins and history of Judaism. I have indicated some of the areas where the case is open for discussion and some of the issues where I expect there to be a continuing debate.