בס"ד

**Memories of the Hurban: between Priests and Sages [Where Priests and Sages Diverge][סתם הצעה חלופית:**

Shortly after the *hurban* (destruction) of the Second Temple in Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans, a member of the Jewish priestly class, Flavius Josephus of Jerusalem, settled in Rome and began to write the history of the war that occasioned this event. Given his status as an eyewitness, Josephus’ personal recollections are an important element in the story of that war. He was not alone. Josephus himself mentions another Jew named Justus of Tiberias who wrote the history of the war. Apparently, too, several high Roman officials penned memoirs on the topic.[[1]](#footnote-1) Naturally, each writer, particularly if he had been present at the battles, recounted matters from his own point of view and his past and present cultural and conceptual milieu. What about the rest of the Jews? Did they, too, try to remember and retell the hurban?

In this article, I investigate the Jews’ recollections as are preserved in one rather lengthy passage of rabbinical literature, part of a work known as *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* (The fathers according to Rabbi Nathan, hereinafter: *ARN*). In recent decades, as we know, the use of this literature as a historical source is much frowned upon.[[2]](#footnote-2) Within this constraint, I intend not to try to reconstruct the events as they were but to deal with memory—what the Sages chose, and foremost how they chose, to retell and remember the hurban. I wish to show that the hurban passages in *ARN,* although told in uninterrupted sequence, actually accommodate different recollections and different if not clashing ways of perceiving the hurban.

**a. *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*: Separating the Later from the Earlier and the Even-Earlier**

The works of the Sages are very different from Josephus’ books and from the writing tradition in the Greco-Roman world. In that world, each book has one author who invests his vigor and strengths in it. The work is meant to express the author’s worldviews, ideas, and, of course, the message that the author wishes to send his readers. The most salient characteristic of the rabbinical literature, in contrast, is the absence of an author. Not only does no author’s name appear on the cover but the various works are not even the products of one person’s mind. Rabbinical writing is an accumulation of sayings, stories, and hermeneutics that jelled over a rather lengthy period of time, sometimes centuries, and underwent subsequent redaction and processing.[[3]](#footnote-3) In principle, one may discern three layers in rabbinical works:

1. “Raw material”—sayings, stories, exegetic or aggadic passages, and more, of ancient provenance, each transmitted along different paths irrespective of the need for other sayings in the work;
2. Redaction/compilation—a redactor or group of redactors who combine the various sayings and stories into a single work with defined limits;
3. Transmission—after redaction, the work is passed on in written or oral form. As this happens, of course, it may change in minor or major ways. Errors, copying mistakes, or even deliberate proofing changes, additions, and deletions may significantly change its form and even the content of the work.

The first two of these levels of treatment are the concern of “Higher Criticism”; the third is the province of “Lower Criticism.” Although these remarks are valid in regard to every work in the rabbinical corpus, they are particularly important in reference to *ARN*, which stands at the forefront of our discussion.[[4]](#footnote-4) *ARN* is a quasi-Talmudic composition on the Mishnaic Tractate Avot.[[5]](#footnote-5) Much of it presents Avot in sequence and offers a passel of stories and sayings on each saying within it. It has come down to us in two versions, known as A and B. These versions are similar in many respects but also very different. Over the years, scholars have disagreed on how to date the work. Menahem Kister showed convincingly that both versions in our possession acquired their form, more or less, in the late Byzantine era, somewhere around the seventh century CE. Both versions, however, are corollaries of splitting from an even earlier version. This earliest version is quite ancient indeed. On the basis of internal indications in the account as it has come down to us, Kister dates its provenance to the third century CE. If so, it is the oldest post-tannaic work in existence.[[6]](#footnote-6) No less important, the earliest *ARN*, like all rabbinical literature, is composed of sayings and stories that are even older.

Therefore, the first stratum is composed of the memories that took shape in the immediate aftermath of the hurban. They are the oldest sayings and stories given over by those who experienced the hurban to their offspring and those in their intimate surroundings. These recollections were passed on generationally for nearly 200 years until they came down to the early *ARN*. Did these reminiscences jell into a cohesive narrative tradition that permits no deviation and, if so, when? Were these memories, or some of them, placed in writing and thereby cast into wording that was more rigid and less prone to change? As important as these questions are, they are largely unanswerable. These memories first appear in the rabbinical literature within the framework of the early ARN[[7]](#footnote-7)—the second stratum. This work, whether created as a composition meant for oral transmission or committed to writing from the time of its provenance, contains various stories that probably underwent selection and shaping by a redactor. This is the second stage of the coalescence of the cycle of hurban stories. In Stage 3, the work is transmitted via the formation of the two versions that we possess. Reconstructing the older *ARN* is a complex but somewhat possible task; the more successfully we do it, the more we may approach the ancient memories that are embedded in the original work.

**b. The Cycle of Hurban Stories: Two Plots and a Lamentation**

Both versions of *ARN* recount the destruction of the Second Temple, the hurban. This redundancy is the best evidence of the existence of the story in the earlier version as well. As a rule, insofar as a story or saying appears in both versions and in similar wording, the more probable it is that it is part of the earlier *ARN.* The presence of a saying or story in only one version, in contrast, raises concern that the addition came about or was implanted only in the stage of transmission and did not exist in the earlier *ARN*.[[8]](#footnote-8) In both versions, three main sections are easily discernible. The first two are differentiated foremost at the textual level. Both begin rather similarly: “When Vespasian came to destroy Jerusalem [...]” in ARN-A and “When Vespasian came and encircled Jerusalem” in ARN- B. The double prolegomenon that denotes Vespasian’s arrival in Jerusalem twice [!] disrupts the narrative continuum and, in effect, disregards everything stated and recounted previously, as though starting a new story. The first part, which we will call the Yohanan b. Zakkai plot (hereinafter: YP), presents Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai’s views on the Jewish revolt and recounts his departure from Jerusalem. It ends with his prophecy to Vespasian (ARN-A) or the acceptance of Yavne (ARN-B). The siege plot (hereinafter: SP) deals with Vespasian’s conquest of Jerusalem and ends with the destruction of the city and the Temple. The distinction between the plots comes through clearly in that they appear in different chapters.[[9]](#footnote-9) In ARN-B, YP is retold in Chapter 6 and SP occurs in Chapter 7. In ARN-A, the differentiation is even more meaningful: Wedged between YP in Chapter 4 and SP in Chapter 6 is in an additional chapter that has nothing to do with the destruction.[[10]](#footnote-10) The best evidence of the separate nature of the two plots is that one can read each plot independently of the other. The third passage is the lamentation, which is not a natural continuation of SP because it carries out a slight retreat in time: “Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai used to sit and observe across from the rampart of Jerusalem.” This unit presupposes the existence of both plots: it “knows” that Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai has left Jerusalem and that the Temple has been destroyed. As I show below, the composition and nature of this unit are much different from that of the two plots. The differentiation of plots relates not only to the specific content of each but to the literary-linguistic and ideological contents of the stories.

1. Story vs. Chronicle

The contentual differences between the stories may be explained, of course, by defining them as different episodes in the history of the siege and the hurban. In the first episode, which I call the Yohanan b. Zakkai plot (YP), the first stage of the siege is described, including negotiations between the rebels and the Romans and an intra-Jewish dispute over the value and logic of the war. In the second episode, which I call the siege plot (SP),” the description ostensibly concerns the next stage, in which the Romans and the rebels engage each other militarily.[[11]](#footnote-11) A literary and linguistic examination of the two plots, however, reveals discrepancies and differences not only in content but also in literary and linguistic form.

The plots are differentiated in the way each of them progresses. YP is propelled largely by declarative and expressive verbs in the heroes’ mouths. The confrontation between Vespasian and the rebels takes place through exchanges of words. Vespasian makes himself known to Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai through a written message from spies. Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai “tells” the rebels two or three times; they reject his message. Pursuant to this, he “urges his students.” Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai accepts Yavne through Vespasian’s statement, “Here, it is given to you,” and assures the Roman generalissimo that the empire will be his by asking, “Would you like me to tell you something?” The function of these rhetorical verbs is to expose the protagonists’ considerations and explain their motives. The siege plot, in contrast, abounds with action verbs: surrounded, gathered, burned, weighed, went out and did, and so on. The only rhetorical act in the story is Vespasian’s. This statement, however, neither pushes the storyline forward nor changes anything. Vespasian’s soldiers do not improve their fighting; the general’s remarks may as well not have been made. In addition, even though SP tracks the stages of the siege with exactitude, it does not establish a causal relationship between the events except for the successive nature of their occurrence. Instead, SP is noteworthy for realistic descriptions that find expression in the relative profusion of technical terms, as I show below. Finally, SP seems to be divorced from the Sages’ cultural world. While in the siege plot [the Yohanan b. Zakkai plot?] the Sage takes action and is accompanied by two students, SP features no rabbinical personality whatsoever. One may, it is true, attribute this absence to the course of the plot, i.e., once Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai has left, no Sages and students of Torah remain in Jerusalem. The alienation of SP from the Sages’ world, however, is also manifested in the absence of verses of any kind. In both the Yohanan b. Zakkai plot and in Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai’s lamentation, use made of Biblical verses and their interpretation, and there is an awareness of the observance of the Torah and the commandments. In SP, Biblical allusion is absent and the Torah and the commandments are not manifested with the exception of the Temple service.

This set of differences and particularly the first one, concerning the way the plot progresses, shows that we are witness not only to different plots but also to different literary genres. YP meets the accepted definitions of rabbinical hagiography. It centers on a sage who, under dire circumstances and applying his sagacity and, particularly, his Torah erudition, manages to act within a given reality, as is revealed in the end. The literary characteristics of the siege plot, in contrast, are a good fit for the chronicle. Chronicle writing is comprised of short and laconic sentences that offer nothing but concise reportage about things that happened. It establishes causal relations by arraying the events on a time axis and in no other way.[[12]](#footnote-12) Indeed, it was common in the Eastern world and in Greco-Roman culture; it was also familiar to the Jewish world of the late Second Temple period.[[13]](#footnote-13)

2. To Rebel or Not to Rebel? Two Plots and Two Ideologies

The Yohanan b. Zakkai plot and the Siege Plot are not only different literary types; they present contrasting outlooks on the Jewish revolt. YP clearly draws the ideological battle lines. Vespasian reaches Jerusalem and besieges it. At this point, ARN-B shows more sensitivity to the course of the events as are brought to the surface by Josephus and are familiar in the Roman doctrine of warfare. ARN-A begins as follows: “When Vespasian came to destroy Jerusalem […].” The narrator presumes that it was Vespasian’s ultimate goal to lay waste to the city. In ARN-B, however, we find: “When Vespasian came and encircled [*heqif*] Jerusalem […].” Thus, only Vespasian’s act of besiegement is described. The word *heqif* is but a translation of the Latin verb *circumvallo,* which denotes “surrounding with a wall” and signifies the onset of a siege.[[14]](#footnote-14) According to the Roman doctrine of war, an effort must be made to avoid siege warfare—a protracted form of combat, lacking in glory, entailing many casualties, and incurring high costs.[[15]](#footnote-15) Therefore, in the first stage of imposing a siege, the Romans preferred to offer the besieged an opportunity to surrender. Indeed, Vespasian’s surrender proposal reaches those interned in Jerusalem: “Why do you seek to burn down the holy house? After all, what am I asking of you? I merely ask that you relinquish unto me each man his bow and arrow, and I will depart from you” (ARN-A). This account squares with Josephus’ account of the Roman siege of Jerusalem, which began in the middle of the month of Nisan (*Wars* 5.99, 302). Josephus, it is true, does not state that Vespasian has already issued a surrender offer at so early a stage, but about ten days after the second wall falls, on the eleventh of the month of Iyar (ibid., 302), Josephus is sent to the rebels to persuade them to surrender (ibid., 361). Josephus, like Vespasian in the midrash, warns the rebels against dooming the city and the Temple to destruction: “[…] “Take pity of your country already going to ruin; return from your wicked ways, and have regard to the excellency of that city which you are going to betray, to that excellent temple […]” (ibid., 416). In the same breath, Josephus assures the rebels that surrendering to the Romans now means not suffering and enslavement but merely the restoration of the status quo.

The rebels categorically reject the surrender offer: “Just as we went out against two [Roman generals] before him and killed them, so too will we go out against [you] and kill [you].” The rebels’ argument—they have already defeated two generals—is also anchored in the events of the revolt. Some scholars believe that it relates to the obliteration of Metilius’ garrison force and subsequently to Cestius Gallus’ panicky retreat.[[16]](#footnote-16) For our purposes, the rejection of the surrender bid is more important than the extent of reliability of this claim. At this point, Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai intervenes and turns to the rebels: “Why are you destroying this city and wish to burn the Temple? All he asks of you is one bow or one arrow and he will go away” (ARN-A). That Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai adopts Vespasian’s words is no coincidence; for our purposes, it matters not whether and what Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai told the rebels. What counts is that the narrator places Vespasian and Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai on the same side. Both have the same trend of thought. Both are interested in salvaging the Temple and the city and both insist that the rebels surrender. Their relationship is clearly expressed in the following passage: “Vespasian’s spies [*qatolin,* *σκουλκάτωρ*?][[17]](#footnote-17) were massed at the walls of Jerusalem, and each and every word they heard was written on an arrow and the arrow was thrown over the wall, meaning that Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai was a friend of the Emperor” (ARN-A). Vespasian’s spies advised the Emperor that Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai was indeed in Jerusalem but was one of the “friends of the Emperor.” This immensely important epithet is evidently a translation of *amicus caesaris,* a person who is bound to the ruler in a client–patron relationship that assures the client the Emperor’s protection and various emoluments in return for political support.[[18]](#footnote-18) Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai not only foresees the bitter outcomes of the revolt; he makes the Roman general’s stance his own. Consequently, his exit from Jerusalem takes on an additional dimension. Were it merely an attempt to flee the doomed city, why would he approach Vespasian? By leaving Jerusalem, Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai reveals his principled stance against the revolt and his siding with the Roman military commander. In return for his loyalty, Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai receives Yavne so that he may learn and teach Torah and fully observe its commandments there. This is the gist of the story in ARN-A. In ARN-B, Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai’s “prophecy” of Vespasian’s coronation as Emperor does not appear until the two have their encounter, giving the impression that Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai received Yavne as a quid pro quo for supporting Vespasian’s ascension to the imperial throne.[[19]](#footnote-19) Either way, the reward is similar in both versions: Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai does not believe in the revolt and attempts to persuade its protagonists to stop it. Failing at this, he abandons the city and openly sides with Vespasian.

Throughout YP, not an untoward word is said about Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai, unless one interprets *amicus caesaris* in that manner.[[20]](#footnote-20) On the contrary: the plot, which at this stage does not even mention the future destruction, presents Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai as having had the good sense to extricate himself from Jerusalem and assure continued Jewish existence in the absence of a temple. His “prophecy” to Vespasian lends his actions and decisions a religious justification, of course. YP sees the revolt as a foreknown failure and praises the sage who tries to thwart the destruction and manages to assure continued Jewish life.

SP presents a different, if not opposite, outlook on the chances of the revolt, the precipitant of the hurban, and the persona of Vespasian. The plot begins with the besieging of Jerusalem. Unlike YP, which quotes Vespasian’ offer of surrender and thus depicts him as an even-handed, moderate military leader if not a friend of the Temple and Jerusalem, in SP Vespasian is seen as being interested in demolishing the city ab initio and averse to negotiations. Afterwards, the torching of the food reserves is described. This occurrence is also well known due to Josephus’ description of it (*Wars* 5.21–26) and Tacitus’ brief remarks (Tacitus, *His.* 5, 12). Apparently, this suffices to establish the credibility of the event and, more important, the stark impression that it left on the hurban generation. Indeed, Josephus traces the destruction on Jerusalem to the famine that gripped the city, which otherwise could have held out for much time (*Wars* 5.26).[[21]](#footnote-21) For Josephus and Tacitus, this event also represents the climax of the rebel factions’ internecine war. This leads Josephus to state that Jerusalem sundered not due to the Roman siege but as a direct consequence of the civil war that raged within its walls (ibid).[[22]](#footnote-22) Thus, the theological rationale for the hurban—the sin of the fraternal war—and the rational historical explanation, the famine, become one.[[23]](#footnote-23)

A close reading of SP, however, shows that the famine did not diminish the Jerusalemites’ capacity for making war. In fact, it almost forced Vespasian to abandon the siege. According to the account in *ARN*, the people of Jerusalem did experience severe hunger but lost none of their fighting fitness on that account: “The men of Jerusalem would weigh out grain and drink its waters and go out and make war with them and kill [among them].” In fact, when Vespasian discovered the source of the Jewish warriors’ nourishment, he gathered his soldiers “and told them, Come and see [hungry] and thirsty people who go out and make war against you and kill among you. Were they fed and their thirst quenched, all the more so” (ARN-B). In ARN-A, hunger becomes an impetus: “He said, bring me five dates and I will go down and take five heads. They gave him five dates. He went down and took five heads from Vespasian.” The famine not only fails to dent the rebels but enhances their fighting ability. For our purposes, there is no need to discuss the historical reliability of these accounts. What matters is that SP subtly rejects the claim that Jerusalem fell due to famine or as the result of the fraternal strife that caused the reserves to be burned. According to this plot, insofar as the fighting depended solely on the rebels’ fighting capacity, Jerusalem and the Temple would have continued to stand.

If so, what caused the hurban? SP describes the stages of the siege in detail and with relative accuracy. Although the siege machines did manage to breach the wall, the struggle was not decided on that account. The denouement arrived after the warfare transitioned from the physical track to the metaphysical. In the second stage of the siege, Vespasian engages neither in hand-to-hand combat with the rebels nor in breaching the array of fortifications behind the wall. He loads his artillery machine with a swine’s head in order to ritually defile the altar. When this happens, the Temple service ceases and the city collapses immediately. The hurban is in no way the rebels’ fault. On the contrary: the torching of the food stores, perceived by Josephus as a socio-religious sin and a cause of the hurban, becomes, contrarily, a stimulus and a source of encouragement. The Jews’ fighting prowess drives the Roman warriors almost to the brink of despair. The fault for the hurban lies with Vespasian, whose degenerate and dastardly nature prompts him to launch a religious attack on the Temple in order to mask his military failure.

Thus, the two plots take contrasting stances on Vespasian, the rebels, and the reason for the hurban. YP stresses Vespasian’s mild nature, conciliatory offer of surrender, and commitment to the future of Judaism. The fault for the hurban belongs to the rebels’ short-sightedness and conceit, as Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai himself says. SP, in contrast, portrays Vespasian as a villain who exploits the sanctity of the Temple to bring the city down. The rebels, in turn, are depicted as war heroes who under ordinary conditions could have polished off the Roman army despite, if not because of, their hunger. Vespasian’s religious odium justifies the revolt as well, of course. While YP offers no explanation for the revolt—in view of Vespasian’s generous surrender offer, it appears to be an inexplicable act of madness—at the end of SP the reason for rising against Rome is very clear. The Roman authorities are fundamentally hostile to everything that Israel considers sacred. Hence the war against Vespasian is a *milhemet qodesh,* a totally justified holy war.

Now that the discrepancies and the differences between the plots are revealed, one must consider the possibility that the ideological differences originate in different social circles that told the story of the hurban and its caused differently if not contrarily.

3. Narrative, Remembrance, History

The literary, linguistic, and ideological differences between the plots presented in *ARN* come into focus when they are compared. Examining the attitudes toward the historical information about the revolt, we again find a perceptible difference between the plots. YP concerns itself with a sage whose name we know solely from the rabbinical literature. It is true that the plot resonates with certain historical information. Above I noted Vespasian’s offer of surrender, which in principle resembles Titus’ offer to the rebels as cited by Josephus. The debate within Jerusalem between the rebels and the opponents of the uprising, too, is certainly based on the war that these groups conducted in the course of 68 CE, until the assassination of Hanan b. Hanan and Yehoshua b. Gamla effectively ended the overt struggle between proponents and opponents of the uprising. Apart from general information, however, YP offers no specific details whatsoever that might give evidence of closer knowledge of goings-on. SP, in contrast, abounds, relatively speaking, with such details.

The plot begins as follows: “When Vespasian came and surrounded Jerusalem, he moved against [Jerusalem] from the east.” The account that Vespasian attacked the city from the east and established his headquarters there clashes with what we know about the final siege of Jerusalem, which Titus mounted in 70 CE. Titus reached the city from the north and encamped first on Mount Scopus and afterwards in the northwest sector of the city (*Wars* 5.106–108).[[24]](#footnote-24) Painstaking examination of Vespasian’s campaign in the spring and summer of 68, however, yields an interesting picture. When winter ended, Vespasian set out from Caesarea and conquered the Judean foothills and Samaria (*Wars* 4.443–449). From Shekhem, he headed southeast and captured Jericho on the third day of the month of Sivan (ibid., 449–450). Then he headed toward Jerusalem and encircled it (ibid., 490).[[25]](#footnote-25) Several weeks later, however, he was back in Caesarea, where he was advised of Nero’s death (ibid., 491).[[26]](#footnote-26) The opening sentence in ARN-B does contain a reliable historical note: Vespasian ascended to Jerusalem from the east and began to besiege it. If so, then the account of the burning of the reserves immediately afterward is chronologically sound. Comparison of Josephus’ account with that of Tacitus shows that the reserves were torched in autumn of 69 or, at the latest, the winter of 70.[[27]](#footnote-27) *ARN* also specifies exactly who committed this act. According to Vespasian, “The zealots wished to burn all this bounty in flame.” In the rabbinical literature, the term “zealots” (*qena’im*) is reserved for those whose zealotry adheres to God and who are willing to assault transgressors on these grounds. This is the first time in the rabbinical literature that the term is used as Josephus uses it: to denote one of the rebel groups, irrespective of observance of the Torah and the commandments.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Although the versions offer different hypotheses on how the people of Jerusalem coped with the famine, both describe these people as “blanching grain and drinking its waters.” A strongly similar detail is related by Josephus: “The very leather which belonged to their shields they pulled off and gnawed: the very wisps of old hay became food to some; and some gathered up fibres, and sold a very small weight of them for four Attic [drachmae]” (*Wars* 6.197–198). In ARN-A, another detail in the account of the famine is preserved in a very problematic wording: “What did the men of Jerusalem do? They brought the *‘agalim* and raked them with rakes and covered them with mud.” The word *‘agalim* should be construed according to its ancient meaning: *gelalim,* droppings.[[29]](#footnote-29) That is, the men of Jerusalem “combed the droppings with rakes and covered them with mud,” according to Kister’s proposed emendation.[[30]](#footnote-30) The besieged crumbled the droppings in order to extricate bits of food from them, as Josephus describes: “Some persons were driven to that terrible distress as to search the common sewers and old dunghills of cattle, and to eat the dung which they got there” (*Wars* 5.571).

In the next passage, the progression of the Roman siege is described in minute detail: “They brought him shavings of wood, made them as into a *masbikh*, like a *kalonos*, made them two *pagoshot*.” The repeated use of the verb *‘ayin-shin-heh, “*made,”apparently denotes two siege engines: (1) a *kalonos* and (2) two *pagoshot.* We first treat the more familiar machine. *Pagoshot* denotes sling stones[[31]](#footnote-31) and is an excellent fit for the description that follows: “They hurled them at the wall until it was breached.” The machine in question is almost certainly a ballista, which launched large stones. Josephus describes the special procedure that the defenders on the wall used to cope with the ballista stones that were hurled at them (Wars 5.269–273).

What siege engine is described as “made of a *masbikh,* made of a *kalonos*”? The incomprehensible word *masbikh,* emended as *mesokhekh* per Parma 327, apparently denotes a wooden structure that shelters something.[[32]](#footnote-32) A *kalones* is merely a post or a beam; the term occurs often in rabbinical language.[[33]](#footnote-33) Thus, this is probably a reference to a machine composed of an awning and a beam. This account fits Tacitus’ remarks that due to the city’s topography and walls, Titus decided to fight by means of *aggeribus vineisqua*—“siege-works and penthouse shelters” (Tacitus, *Hist.* 5, 13:4). The siege-works (*agger*) are very familiar and are apparently not mentioned here. The *vinea* are shelters—in the context of war, large shelters under which soldiers who held the battering ram congregated as they approached a wall,[[34]](#footnote-34) for protection against defenders of the wall who rained stones, barbs, Greek fire, and other ammunition down on them. Sometimes the battering ram was part of the siege tower; soldiers stood atop the tower and engaged the defenders in order to keep them from damaging the battering ram below.[[35]](#footnote-35) Josephus reports about the battering ram that approached the third and outermost, wall: “[…] The wall already gave way to the Nico, for by that name did the Jews themselves call the greatest of their engines, because it conquered all things” (*Wars* 5.299). Indeed, the Jews had despaired of defending the third wall, and on the seventh of the month of Iyar, “Then the Romans mounted the breach, where Nico had made one, and all the Jews left the guarding that wall, and retreated to the second wall […]” (*Wars,* 5.301) This account is strongly consonant with its Midrashic counterpart. The shelter protected the *kalones,* the wooden pole that served as a battering ram. The mention of the battering ram and the sling stones attests to the bold impression that they made in the memory: “They hurled them at the wall until it was breached.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

The last sentence describes how the Romans placed the head of a swine atop “an arch of a *zir* […] and they were *mafqi’in be-mekhni* and lowered until it rose and settled on the limbs that were upon the altar and defiled it.” Here is yet another mention of one of the Romans’ siege engines. The expression “arch of a *zir*,” Kister has shown, is Hebrew term for a Roman artillery piece, possibly the *catapulta,* a device that fired lances and was operated by energy released from the twisting of tendons wound around two axes. The word *zir* also signifies something well twisted, consistent with the action of the catapult.[[37]](#footnote-37) The expression *mafqi’in be-mekhni* also comes from Roman siege warfare. The root *peh-qof-‘ayin* denotes hurling or throwing.[[38]](#footnote-38) *Mekhni* is simply μηχανή, a machine or an engine.[[39]](#footnote-39) The use of the general expression *mekhni* for artillery pieces is common in Josephus, who sometimes notes only μηχάνημα, μηχανή (engine), ἀφετήριοι ὄργανα (“engine for throwing”) (*Wars* 3.211, 285), or ἀφετήριοι μηχαναί (ibid., 3.166).[[40]](#footnote-40) For our purposes, there is no need to determine wither the Romans actually did project a swine’s head onto the altar. What matters is that the entire account is bracketed in the various details of the Roman siege of Jerusalem as it evidently happened.[[41]](#footnote-41)

In sum, SP and YP are also differentiated by their connection with the realia of the Roman siege as reported by Josephus. YP is patterned after the familiar foundational story.[[42]](#footnote-42) It stresses the sage’s vitality, sagacity, and success under the circumstances. Although it takes place at a time of which we know quite a bit, it is hard to corroborate. In contrast, the large majority of details in SP are confirmed by other historical sources. Importantly, my argument here is not that SP is more “correct” than its counterpart but that it is better anchored in the realia of its era.

**c. Remembering the Hurban: Where Priests and Sages Diverge**

The differences between YP and SP inhere to all possible strata of the narrative act. From the formal perspective, YP focuses on the heroes’ thoughts and motives and progresses by means of exchanges of words among them. The frame of SP, in contrast, is a continuum of action verbs that describe the historical players’ doings without rhetorical linkages and causal descriptions. The plots also clash at the ideological level in assessing the revolt and in the attitude toward Vespasian. YP stresses Vespasian’s moderacy, his generous surrender offer, his regard for Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai and, pursuant to it, his willingness to help to establish [re-establish?] the Torah world. Concurrently, it stresses the hopelessness and foolishness of the revolt and even insinuates that the rebels acted in contravention of God’s will. SP, in contrast, lauds the rebels’ heroism and their exemplary coping with the famine; conversely, it describes Vespasian as a scoundrel and a malefactor who failed on the battlefield. Jerusalem was conquered not due to the warriors’ weakness but because of a piece of religious mischief that defiled the altar and brought the Temple service to a halt. These differences suffice to broach the possibility that these two plots originate in different social circles, each of which phrased its story on the basis of its own literary rules and ideological principles.

The last passage in *ARN* is helpful in identifying the social circles behind each of the plots. YP, as stated, follows the pattern of the foundational story. Narratives of this type come about in the second and third generations of the foundational event and are produced by the founders’ offspring and their associates. These elements are indeed found in YP. It is R. Yehoshua and R. Eliezer, Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai’s most eminent students and heads of the rabbinical center at Yavne, who carry their rabbi away and save his life. There is no need to thrust them into the plot; furthermore, they “disappear” from it in a somewhat odd way. Their presence, however, is instructive of the circles in which YP was produced: students of R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua. YP, unlike SP, is sparse on concrete details. Befitting a foundational story, it stresses the special characteristics of the founder and his feats and not the precise historical circumstances. The inattention to historical detail is also probably the outcome of the retreat of the events into the mist of time. Still, the story attests to the existence of the dispute that split Jewish society: to rebel or not. Admittedly, the intensity of the debate as Josephus describes it is not reflected in this account. The rebels’ cruelty toward the pro-surrender forces does not find expression; even Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai addresses the rebels as “my sons.” This somewhat conciliatory tendency may be traced to the time that passed, but an additional factor may be at work. In a highly influential article, Shaye Cohen claims that the sages after the hurban were interested in placing the residues of the past behind them so that Judaism and Jewish society in Eretz Israel could be revitalized.[[43]](#footnote-43) The placatory voice toward the rebels may be an echo of this intent.

Above I described SP as a chronicle. An allusion to the identity of those behind this chronicle may be found in the way the hurban is reported. The rabbinical tradition that persists to this day dates this event to the ninth of Av (Mishna Ta’anit 4:6), the day the Roman soldiers entered the Temple and began to set it ablaze.[[44]](#footnote-44) Prevalent along with this tradition, however, was another one setting the event at the day the *tamid* sacrifice was cancelled, Tammuz 17. In *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (Book of Biblical Antiquities), evidently composed in the second century CE,[[45]](#footnote-45) there is interesting evidence of the importance and centrality of Tammuz 17. This work, which rewrites Scripture from Genesis to the era of Saul, presents an expanded version of the prophecy given to Moses before his death: “I will show you a place where they will serve Me” (*locum, in quo mihi servient*) for 740 years.[[46]](#footnote-46) Afterwards, it will be placed in the hands of their enemies and they will destroy it and strangers will encircle it. On that day, according with the day on which you shattered the Tablets of the Covenant that I prepared for you at Horev […] that day was the seventeenth day of the fourth month” (*Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 19, 7). Here the destruction of the Temple—the place where God is served—takes place on Tammuz 17. The prophecy ostensibly pertains to the destruction of the First Temple; this date, however, is meaningless in the context of the events surrounding that first hurban.[[47]](#footnote-47) It stands to reason that the author of *Liber Antiquitatum*, who produced the work decades after the second hurban, considered the cessation of the tamid sacrifice on Tammuz 17 the hurban itself.[[48]](#footnote-48) Even though the Temple itself was captured by the Romans and burned down three weeks later, on Av 9, it is easy to see where *Liber Antiquitatum* is coming from. The very crux of the Temple is the sacrificial service. In the eyes of many Jews in the Second Temple era, this service literally sustained the world and established a line that connected heaven to earth. In Tractate Avot, a saying is given in the name of Simon the Just, evidently a High Priest who served in the late third century BCE: “The world stands on three things: Torah, the service of God, and acts of kindness” (Mishna Avot 1:2). The main pillar is the service, i.e., the Temple service.[[49]](#footnote-49)

SP concurs, directly connecting the cessation of the Temple service with the hurban. After the Romans successfully hurl the swine’s organs onto the altar and defile it, SP concludes by stating “That year, Jerusalem was captured.”[[50]](#footnote-50) The plot does not explain why defiling the altar results in the capture of the city, but the underlying theological stance is not hard to conjecture: It is the performance of the sacrifices in due sequence that assures the city’s safety and that of the nation. The cessation of this service, irrespective of the reason, snaps the link between heaven and earth and banishes God’s watch over and concern for His people and His city. Now we may easily surmise, too, which group adopted such an ideology. Positioning the Temple and, particularly, the Temple rite as a constitutive fundament of Jewish national life and well-being was a quintessential interest of the priesthood. Eyal Regev elaborates at length on the Sadducee worldview, which stresses the importance and ritual purity of the Temple.[[51]](#footnote-51) This is not the place to elaborate on the halakhic issues that surround the ritual purity of this institution; I settle for one example pursuant to Regev. The gravest impurity, of course, is that of a corpse, and purity in such a case is restored by sprinkling water in which ashes of a red heifer have been placed. The Sadducees and the Pharisees disagreed about the requisite level of purity of the priest who burns the heifer. According to the Sadducees, the highest level of purity is needed. That is, insofar as the priest sustains mild defilement during the day, he must immerse himself, wait until sunset, and only afterwards burn the heifer. For the Pharisees, in contrast, immersion alone suffices (Mishna Para 3:7). Behind the discrete dispute, Regev explains, lurks a material one: Can anything less than the highest level of purity suffice? The Pharisees answered in the affirmative; the Sadducees demurred.[[52]](#footnote-52) Continuing, Regev shows that the high priests of the late Second Temple era applied the Sadducees’ Temple ideology in diverse ways, *inter alia* by taking strong and inflexible action toward any group or individual caught offending or deriding this sanctity.[[53]](#footnote-53) Importantly, this ideology finds expression in Josephus himself. At the end of *Antiquities,* Josephus states that the crime that ultimately brought down the Temple was the Levites’ wish to wear clothing similar to the priestly garb (*Ant* 20:216–218). Thus, it was an offense against the orders of the Temple and, particularly, contempt and affront to the priests’ status, that precipitated the hurban, in the opinion of Joseph b. Matityahu the priest!

Thus, the chronicle that describes the siege and places the Temple service in its center seems to originate in priestly circles. Josephus does insinuate that the high priests headed the moderate camp, which apparently wished to dialogue with the Romans.[[54]](#footnote-54) In contrast to the implication of his remarks, however, there appears to have been a rather sizable group of priests, including members of high priesthood families, who supported the uprising. The revolt began when Elazar b. Hananya, governor of the Temple and son of the High Priest, ceased to accept sacrifices with which to pay the Emperor (*Wars* 2.409). This decision was supported, as Josephus notes, by those doing the divine service, presumably young priests and levites who worked in the Temple. Although Josephus does not specify the priests’ attitude as a social class toward the revolt, between the lines one may infer that no few of them favored it.[[55]](#footnote-55) This support persisted almost to the end of the uprising. Josephus describes several waves of departure from the city during the revolt, of which the last followed the cessation of the tamid sacrifice on Tammuz 17, 70 CE (*Wars* 6.94). Among those leaving were quandam high priests, members of their families, and many others of lofty lineage (*Wars* 6.114). Titus received them and sent them to Gophna, his rear base and a detention camp for war prisoners, where they were to ride out the war. Josephus, it is true, claims that all these escapees left the city due to his own reproachful speech, which he describes as of “influence” (ibid. 113). It is more probable, however, that if they had remained in the city until then and had not been harmed by the rebels, it is because they were among the supporters of the revolt.[[56]](#footnote-56) On Tammuz 17, when the tamid sacrifice and the priestly service were terminated, they realized that God was no longer protecting the Temple and that they would do best to leave town.[[57]](#footnote-57)

In sum, YP and SP originate in different social circles, explaining the many differences between them. SP is in effect a priestly chronicle, probably written either by one of the priests or by a supporter of the priestly Zealot faction. Its close tethering to the realia of the revolt and the siege, its use of unique expressions such as “arch of a *zir*,” and its familiarity with “the Zealots” as a social group that acted at the time of the uprising suggest that it was produced at a time very close to the hurban. The fact that the plot does not fault the rebels and presents Vespasian as a religious scoundrel is unsurprising. The treatment of the torching of the food reserves and its outcome, the famine, may even have been meant to clarify that the Temple did not fall on account of these events. Antipodally, YP, as its own contents indicate, is a foundational story created by second-generation disciples of Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai. Its crux is neither the hurban nor the reasons for that event but Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai’s sagacity and audacity. The side-by-side positioning of these contrasting narratives in ideological conception and literary style forces us to give thought to the redaction of the cycle of hurban stories and to the redactor, who saw fit to present the different recollections of the hurban era.

**d. Lamentation and Remembrance**

The cycle of hurban stories concludes with the lamentation of Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai and his students. Here Versions A and B of *ARN* differ in many ways; in fact, as the homiletic lamentation progresses, the distance between the versions grows. This indicates, foremost, that this passage was rather weak in the early *ARN* and that those who presented *ARN* felt free to add to and subtract from it. The stablest part is the first, with which I deal:

Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai sat and watched across from the wall of Jerusalem in order to know what would be, as in the manner of Eli, of whom it is said, “Now when he came, there was Eli, sitting on a seat by the wayside, watching […] (I Sam 4:13). When Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai saw that the Temple had been destroyed and the sanctuary had been burned, he rose to his feet, rent his clothing, took off his tefillin, and sat down and wept, his students with him.

The opening passage describes Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai awaiting the expected destruction of Jerusalem. The imagery used is further validated by the likening of this sage to Eli the priest. Eli, too, knew from the time God had spoken to Samuel that his line was to be terminated (I Sam 3:11–18). When his sons set out for war against the Philistines as the leaders of their nation, bearing the Ark with them, Eli feared that the prophecy was about to come to pass. Therefore, the first sentence of the lament in *ARN* acknowledges Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai’s prophecy and anticipates the city’s imminent devastation. The second sentence, describing the destruction of the city and the Temple, is of course based on the end of the siege plot. This passage summarizes and concludes both accounts of the destruction of Jerusalem. It also brings about a slight change in the assessment of the revolt and the heroes of the two preceding plots. The very fact that Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai sits and waits for Jerusalem to fall and then rends his clothing and laments the burning of the Temple softens the image of the Jewish sage who left Jerusalem because he opposed the revolt and its protagonists. His lament over the hurban distances him from the image of the *amicus caesaris* and strengthens his affiliation with the Jewish public at large, which bemoaned the hurban and the failure of the uprising. Eschewing *Schadenfreude,* Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai does not exploit the actualization of his prediction to reproach the rebels and their supporters; instead, he and his students mourn the loss of the Temple. Such imagery surely did not emanate from the circle of Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai’s students who described his close relationship with Vespasian. On the contrary: the continuation warranted by YP is the building of Yavne even as the Temple goes up in flames. The presence of Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai and his students near Jerusalem is an attempt to blur the distance between the sage, who left Jerusalem, and the rebels, who did not. Conversely, the lament refrains from explicitly naming the party at fault for the hurban; it does not blame the rebels and does not absolve Vespasian either. What matters is the loss as such, irrespective of who caused it.[[58]](#footnote-58)

Thus, the lamentation passage internalizes both of the hurban narratives and leads them to their terminus. The encounter of the two plots attenuates the conceptual differences and the ideological gaps between the social groups that created them. Here too, perhaps, is the key to understanding the redaction that produced the cycle of hurban stories in *ARN*. Active in the Jewish society immediately preceding the hurban were groups that had strong self-awareness and coherent creedal outlooks. It suffices to mention the bounteous literary harvest of the Qumran group. Presumably the priests, the Pharisees, and other groups also toiled to formulate and express their beliefs and outlooks in various fields.[[59]](#footnote-59) It stands to reason that just as Josephus and Justus felt it necessary to recount the hurban, so did other Jews who belonged to different social circles. It is equally probable that the disagreements among the groups, especially between the opponents and proponents of the revolt, persisted in the generations closely following the hurban. These points and counterpoints are strongly reflected in the attitudes toward the uprising and toward Vespasian in SP and YP. Admittedly, no manifestation of this dispute seems to have survived in the tannaic literature. On the country: as noted, this literature hardly mentions the hurban, let alone its precipitants. At this point, it is worth returning to Shaye Cohen’s remarks about Yavne and its sages. Cohen claims that a decision of principle was made in Yavne to put aside the sectarian disagreements that had fragmented Jewish society and produce a “grand coalition” of sages in order to make the revitalization of Jewish life possible. If this was indeed the post-hurban trend of thought in the Jewish street, one may easily understand why the tannaic literature skirts the topic of the hurban.[[60]](#footnote-60) Still, as stated above, the diverse groups definitely produced cycles of recollections from those days and passed them on to members of their group. The redactor of the early *ARN* plied his craft some 200 years after the hurban, by which time the disputes had run out of steam. From this temporal distance, it became possible to go back and take up the hurban. However, when the redactor of *ARN* came upon the topic, he did not find an agreed-upon canon narrative because no such narrative existed. Instead, he found collections of stories that contained the various groups’ recollections. Two of the most literate groups in Jewish society on the eve of the hurban were the priests, who also had a distinct class consciousness, and the Pharisaic sages. There is no way to know whether these are the only sets of recollections that found their way to the redactor or whether he chose them among others. Either way, he placed these two narratives side-by-side. I tend to hypothesize that the story of Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai’s departure originally did not include the opening sentence about Vespasian’s arrival but focused on the confrontation with the rebels and the sage’s rescue. The redactor of *ARN* chose, for understandable chronological reasons, to position Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai’s exit before the account of the hurban itself. To set YP within a clear historical context, however, he had to mention the advent of Vespasian. To do so, he doubled the opening sentence of SP, thus bringing the double introduction about. The very juxtaposition of the stories makes a statement of principle: Both groups are legitimate and their memories deserve to be mentioned and told. Thus a first step toward reconciliation and peace-making between the rival narratives was taken. The second step was taken in Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai’s lamentation. Now Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai, like Jeremiah in his own time, is not only a prophet of rage and destruction but also a deliverer of consolation and lament to the nation after the destruction of its temple.[[61]](#footnote-61)

**e. Conclusion**

The destruction of the Second Temple—the hurban—was the greatest of disasters for those Jews who experienced it. The loss of this centuries-old structure occurred in connection with a cruel fraternal war that left its imprints on Jewish and non-Jewish authors alike. Consequently, various Jewish groups must have told themselves various stories and shaped diverse recollections about the sequence of events and the reasons for the hurban. In this article, I attempted to trace these memories by studying the cycle of hurban stories in *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan.* Undoubtedly, the attempt to raise ancient memories from a later work, especially a problematic one such as *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan,* poses many challenges. Much caution is needed when one deals with the early strata of this work. Conversely, one should be wary of the widespread tendency to focus on the redacted stratum only. Finally, we should assume that different redactors of ancient works worked in different ways. Some probably regarded the ancient stories and sayings as non-obligatory grist—as an infrastructure—for the creation of their own stories. They must have deleted, added, and revised the original contents in accordance with their culture and values, treating them indeed “like clay in the potter’s hands,” as Amram Tropper maintains.[[62]](#footnote-62) Other redactors, however, must have taken a more refined and less intervening approach.[[63]](#footnote-63) The literary, linguistic, and narrative differences between the siege plot and the Yohanan b. Zakkai plot show that the redactor of *ARN* was not inclined to meddle with the stories before him and did not impose his beliefs, values, and language on them. This is why we were able to trace the memories, and not necessarily the historical truth, back to the period proximate to the hurban. YP was the product of the second generation of students of Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai. Its gist is the account of the sage’s departure from Jerusalem and the establishment of a new center. The story, however, does not settle for this alone. Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai’s trenchant confrontation with the rebels and the willingness to call him an *amicus caesaris* preserve clear echoes of the intra-Jewish standoffs between the proponents of the revolt and its opponents. As stated above, the tannaic literature refrained from dealing with the hurban, perhaps in order to avoid a confrontation with the accusations and counter-accusations. This story may have preserved something of the remembrance that the sages, or some of them, chose to recount in their internal circles. Contrastingly, the siege plot is evidently based on a priestly chronicle that was produced shortly after the hurban. In this chronicle, the fault-finding exhibited by Josephus, and probably shared by others—that the fratricidal war and the torching of the food reserves caused famine and brought on the destruction—is rejected. For them, the only culprit is Vespasian’s act of desecration.

The redactor of *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* did not favor either of the versions; instead, he laid them side-by-side in reasonable chronological order. Thus he attenuated the contrasts between them by making them appear to be part of one story. I am almost inclined to say that this was his goal. Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai’s lamentation, which concludes the cycle of hurban stories, again positions Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai next to Jerusalem. When the Temple is destroyed, he does not condemn the rebels, says nothing in praise of Vespasian and his actions, but, together with his students, bemoans the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Thus the redactor of *ARN* bridges the gulf between the rivaling memories and the contrasting narratives one last time.

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)