

Travis B. Williams, *History and Memory in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Remembering the Teacher of Righteousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Hardback. Pp. xvi + 458. £ 90. ISBN 9781108493338.

This book focuses on how references to the “righteous Teacher/Teacher of Righteousness” in the Qumran scrolls should be understood and historically interpreted, whilst at the same time offering a wider methodological exercise on how to do (historical) research. The Teacher works as a good case study since—although significant in earlier Qumran scholarship—scholars are not very invested in particular interpretations of this figure, unlike the historical Jesus, for example. Thus the book can be recommended even for readers not primarily interested in the Scrolls.

Williams draws a distinction between a “traditional” and a “new” approach to the Teacher. He considers this a difference between historical positivism and the more recent focus on the reception and audience of texts. Williams contextualizes this difference within a wider framework of changes in the discipline of history (chapter 2). The motivation of the book comes from the belief that scholars should fall into neither naive objectivism (of positivism) nor endless relativism.

Williams’s proposal for a new path is mnemonic studies. In chapter 3, he outlines his “mnemonic-historical approach,” which is interested in explaining “why the historical Teacher was remembered in a particular way by his later followers” (86). I would welcome cultural evolution studies to complement this approach. Chapter 4 is dedicated to studying the circumstances of the remembering communities. Williams carefully considers the evidence for dating the Psalms Pesharim and the Habakkuk Pesharim, including the predictive or postscriptive nature of time references (especially the “forty years”). Yet he is not concerned with the dating of the source he considers the earliest, the Damascus Document, where the mention of the forty years after the Teacher’s death appears (CD 20:13–15). Moreover, he takes it as given that the forty years of the pesharim are the same as the forty years in CD—which is not certain, as the schematic figure could refer to other things as well. This is somewhat surprising since in chapter 6 he criticizes Philip Davies’s method of intertextuality pointing out how the language of the pesharim might not derive from the Hodayot but from other (scriptural) traditions.

Williams keeps open the possibility of locating the Teacher in the second or first century BCE, but does not fully address the problem of not having a firm dating of the Teacher’s lifetime. If he died (assuming the title refers to one individual), say in 150 BCE (purely theoretically, Williams does not discuss this), the theory that the Psalms Pesharim was written *within* the forty-year period, would mean that the Psalms Pesharim manuscript as we have it must have been copied and recopied over a long time. If the Teacher died around 100 BCE or little later, this might provide a better fit for Williams’s dating and interpretation of the pesharim. Williams makes his point that not necessarily many generations passed between the death of the Teacher and the writing of the pesharim.

Williams is meticulous in considering if and how memories of the Teacher could have been created and transmitted. Chapter 5 considers the likely life expectancy in antiquity, in order to estimate how many “memory carriers” (people alive and able to pass on the memory) may have transmitted the Teacher’s memory.

Chapter 7 aims to turn Teacher scholarship upside down by claiming that the burden of proof rests on those scholars who argue that Teacher traditions were forgotten and only later revived. Williams notes that not all information that travelled in the ancient world was in written form. It is indeed likely that oral traditions about the Teacher existed prior to and after the written sources that mention him.

Williams subsequently shows how living memories become cultural memories. In chapter 8 he employs the concept of “schema” to suggest that information is encoded and retrieved by a process of selection, abstraction, interpretation, and integration. One central schema for information on the Teacher is scriptural—here a more detailed analysis of such a scriptural schema of the Teacher would have been welcome. Williams then (chapter 9) stresses the collective nature of forming and supporting schemas.

Chapters 10 and 11 are the most relevant to see how Williams’s methodology works for the Teacher. In Chapter 10, Williams seeks to show that memories on the Teacher were relatively consistent over time. This chapter relies on certain choices that Qumran scholars have long been struggling with: whether the different sobriquets denote the same individuals, whether the same sobriquet within one document always means the same, and whether a sobriquet refers to one individual or a collective. My main objection would be the lack of discussion on the nature of the sobriquets: these individuals went unnamed for a reason. Sobriquets invite analogous thinking and potentially identifications with other people too, even if at one level people knew the historical referent.

In chapter 11, Williams argues that the malleability of memories have their limits. He employs different variables that affect to what extent an individual’s reputational memory can be modified: salience, valence and ownership (294). As an example of a case where collective memory resists change Williams takes Columbus’s persistent reputation as a discoverer of America (302). However, there the time distance between the individual and the collective memory is several hundred years, versus a few decades that Williams argues for the Teacher. Would these years provide similar repetition of the Teacher’s reputational memory, seeing that Williams at the same time argues that there could have been people alive who witnessed the Teacher’s life?

The argument that the Teacher’s memory could not be completely disconnected from his past relies largely on Williams’s theory that the sources are not far removed from the Teacher’s lifetime and that the community’s future salvation relied on their attitude to the Teacher’s instruction. In other words, the Teacher was a leader before he was presented as a leader. While this conclusion is not unreasonable, it would have been desirable in a study on memory to consider *different* scenarios how the present sources could be explained. For example, I have raised a possibility that the Teacher was not *their* Teacher exclusively (*Social identity and Sectarianism*, 194–209) but something more complex was going on.

Williams provides a welcome advancement of my own and others’ past work on the Teacher. Previous scholars (including me) can possibly be blamed to have left the work unfinished: the *historical* nature of the sources needs to be properly understood and their perspectival information of the Teacher needs to be explained. Williams is convinced that every source records information of the past, but “by way of representation” (51). Even contemporary reports could be biased or fabricated, as Williams admits. If on the other hand, one assumes that the the information of the Teacher was not very prominent early on, then Williams pushes us to better explain “why this reconstituted memory gained prominence amidst competing representations of the past” (283). I do not think the memory in the pesharim was necessarily accepted and prominent—there might actually be arguments towards the opposite—but the question is valid.

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