This passage is often read before each chapter of Pirkei Avot:
All Israel have a portion in the world that is coming, as it is written:
“Your people shall all be righteous, they shall possess the land forever; they are a shoot of My planting, the work of My hands in whom I shall be glorified” (Isaiah 60:21).

Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1

CHAPTER I

1:1 Moses received Torah from God at Sinai. He transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, the Prophets to the members of the Great Assembly.

They formulated three precepts: Be cautious in rendering a decision, rear many students, and build a fence to protect Torah.

1:2 Shimon HaTzadik was one of the last members of the Great Assembly. This was a favorite teaching of his:
The world stands on three things: on Torah, on worship, and on good deeds.

1:3 Antigonus of Sokho received the tradition from Shimon HaTzadik. This was a favorite teaching of his: Do not be like servants who serve their master expecting to receive a reward; be rather like servants who serve their master unconditionally, with no thought of reward. Also, let the fear of heaven determine your actions.

1:4 Yose ben Yozer of Tzredah and Yose ben Yohanan of Jerusalem received the tradition from him. Yose ben Yozer of Tzredah taught: Make your home a regular meeting place for the scholars; sit eagerly at their feet and thirstily drink their words.

The most likely understanding of who men of the great assembly were is that they are a mythic way of treating a period of significant transition. This very mishnah includes another of these nebulous figures—the z’keinim, or Elders—who effect a transition from the foundational generations of the exodus and conquest (represented by Moses and Joshua) to the time when the people Israel are settled are settled in the Land and prophets arise, but who are not mentioned by that name in Scripture. Thus, the transition chronicled here from the immediacy of the biblical (prophetic) period to that of an ongoing, continuous oral tradition is marked by an otherwise unknown body. Its existence did not create the transition. Rather, consciousness of the transition created a mythic body.

By Tamar Elad-Applebaum

Pirkei Avot: Teachings of the Sages

This passage is often read before each chapter of Pirkei Avot:

And people meet, is called Torah.

Purpose. This continent, where God searches of meaning, inspiration, and encounter a spiritual continent in our being handed a treasure from one generation or another, a mythic way of treating a period of significant transition.

The Men of the Great Assembly—who were they? The simple answer is that we don’t know. Reflecting this nebulousness is the fact that various traditions ascribe membership in this body to figures of such diverse temporal and geographic provenance as the prophet Zechariah, Daniel, Ezra, Mordecai, and Shimon the Righteous (see below, v.2), not all of whom can themselves confidently be assigned an historical date, and who may have not have overlapped in their lifetimes.