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JEWISH LITERATURES AND CULTURES
Context and Intertext

edited by
Anita Norich and Yaron Z. Eliav

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Contiguity, once we start investigating its dynamics, will emerge as not altogether arbitrary or accidental series of contacts and semi-contacts caused by a general, vague relatedness. While it will never exhibit the neat order, or causal-temporal linearity, of unity and continuity, it might reveal some rules of its own that will be subtle and perhaps not uniformly applied, but therefore more intriguing and certainly in need of further research. It is my contention that a new theory of Jewish literature, if it ever takes off, would focus among other things on the ways—sometimes underground and secret ways—of literary contiguity, its high tides and low ebbs, its attractions and repulsions, its centripetal and centrifugal energies. We may discover that what was unconvincingly explained in terms of continuity—such as the stylistic resemblances Bialik detected between Ramhal's poetry and his own, or the moments that Gershom Scholem highlighted of cultural and literary overlapping between the Jewish Enlightenment and the legacy of Sabbatianism and Frankism—can be better explained by contiguity. Cultural and literary histories consist of many dialogues, colored by diverse tonalities, rather than of one continuous monological soliloquy delivered by a unified national-cultural personality. Theories of history and literature should also strive toward a dialogical rather than monological status. Preliminary insights and differentiations pertaining to the nature and workings of Jewish literary contiguity may be offered within the framework of such a dialogical exchange.

1

Beyond Influence

Toward a New Historiographic Paradigm

MICHAEL L. SATLOW

Writing the history of the Jews in antiquity used to be a much easier business. From the Hellenistic to the Roman periods, the story was one of religious and cultural conflict. Against the great colonial powers of Seleucid Syria, republican and then imperial Rome, and the "evil empire" of the Christian East, Jews struggled to defend their ancestral faith from interfering outsiders and even those other Jews seduced by alien cultures. This is not entirely a "lachrymose" vision of Jewish history; the historiography is rich with accounts of Judaism and Jewish culture frequently influenced—albeit usually not in a significant way—by its contact with the Greeks, Romans, and, less often, Christians.¹ Sometimes condensed into the dichotomy "Judaism/Hellenism," this is a narrative of distinct cultures in conversation and conflict. Even a standard textbook of Jewish history from 1980 talks of the "confrontation" between Jewish and Greek "civilizations."²

Over the past twenty years, this narrative has begun to fray. In his introductory book, Shaye Cohen discusses his discomfort with a model that opposes Palestinian (i.e., "pure") Judaism to Hellenistic Judaism, and elsewhere he has argued that the very term of identity—"Jewish"—was not stable through antiquity.³ Erich Gruen self-consciously rejects this

1. The standard collection of essays along these lines is Henry A. Fischel, ed., *Essays in Greco-Roman and Related Talmudic Literature* (New York: Ktav, 1977).
2. Robert M. Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 155. This narrative continues to be replicated. See, for example, Lee I. Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity: Conflict or Confluence?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), whose very title assumes a model of distinct cultures in interaction.
3. See Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Library of Early Christian-

model. Like Cohen, he believes that "[w]e can no longer contrast 'Palestinian Judaism' as the unadulterated form of the ancestral faith with 'Hellenistic Judaism' as the Diaspora variety that diluted antique practices with alien imports."⁴ He calls for a new conception that recognizes that Jews were part and parcel of the Hellenistic societies in which they lived: "The Jewish intellectuals who sought to rewrite their past and redefine their traditions grew up in Diaspora or even Palestinian communities suffused with Hellenism. For them it *was* their culture. Their ideas and concepts expressed themselves quite naturally in Greek forms."⁵ Seth Schwartz has developed a nuanced narrative of Jewish interaction in antiquity that highlights imperial power rather than alien culture.⁶ Peter Schäfer, focusing on one particular moment of similarity between Jewish and Christian understandings of God, tries to avoid using "influence" and the underlying notion of opposing cultures as an explanatory model.⁷ Yaron Eliav suggests a model that he calls "filtered absorption" or "controlled incorporation," a "quiet process of the absorption of outside cultural elements into ancient Jewish society through revision and adaptation."⁸ Daniel Boyarin has demonstrated the fuzziness of boundaries even at the formative moment of rabbinic Judaism and "Orthodox" Christianity.⁹

These authors are part of a wider trend in Jewish and non-Jewish historiography. This historiography has recognized the inherent weakness of explanatory models that turn culture into static binary encounters, characterized by "conflict," "resistance," "influence," "assimilation," "acculturation," or "appropriation." It sees even the peoples whose history is told

ity 7; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 34–45 (but see 43: "For most Jews the ideal solution was to create a synthesis between Judaism and Hellenism"); idem, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Hellenistic Culture and Society 31; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), esp. 69–106 and 140–74.

4. Eric Gruen, "Hellenistic Judaism," in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History* (ed. David Biale; New York: Schocken, 2002), 80. But see, for a partial defense of these categories, Daniel Schwartz, "From Maccabees to Masada: On Diasporan Historiography of the Second Temple Period," in *Jüdische Geschichte in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit: Wege der Forschung: Vom alten zum neuen Schürer* (ed. Aharon Oppenheimer; Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1999), 29–40.

5. Gruen, "Hellenistic Judaism," 94 (original emphasis).

6. Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

7. Peter Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 222, 229–35.

8. Yaron Z. Eliav, "The Roman Bath as a Jewish Institution: Another Look at the Encounter Between Judaism and the Greco-Roman Culture," *JSJ* 31 (2000): 416–54, quotation from 426 and 454; see also idem, "Viewing the Sculptural Environment: Shaping the Second Commandment," in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture* (ed. Peter Schäfer; 3 vols.; Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 93; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 3:411–33.

9. Daniel Boyarin, "Justin Martyr Invents Judaism," *Church History* 70 (2001): 427–61.

as themselves de-essentialized "imagined communities" continuously forming and reforming their collective identity.¹⁰

In his preface to *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, David Biale attempts to apply these modern historiographical trends to Jewish history. Discussing an ornate fifteenth-century Jewish Italian casket, Biale writes:

How should we label such adoption of non-Jewish culture? Does it suggest "assimilation" or, to use a less loaded term, "acculturation"? The Italian Jewish culture that produced our casket has frequently been described as one of the most assimilated or acculturated in all of pre-modern Jewish history. But perhaps the contemporary model of assimilation is misleading when applied to the Jews of Renaissance Italy. Here was a traditional community intent on drawing boundaries between itself and its Christian neighbors but also able to adopt and adapt motifs from the surrounding culture for its own purposes. Indeed, the Jews should not be seen as outsiders who borrowed from Italian culture but rather as full participants in the shaping of that culture, albeit with their own concerns and mores. The Jews were not so much "influenced" by the Italians as they were one organ in a large cultural organism, a subculture that established its identity in a complex process of adaptation and resistance. . . . [W]e may find it more productive to use this organic model of culture than to chase after who influenced whom.¹¹

Historians of the Jews have certainly not been unaware of these "organic" models; in his essay in *Cultures of the Jews* on Jewish culture in Poland, and in a more programmatic essay, Moshe Rosman explicitly discards "influence" and "borrowing" as analytically useful terms.¹² Indeed, I suspect that Biale is here articulating the consensus of historians of early modern and modern Jews.¹³

The goal of this essay is to articulate and programmatically draw out the implications of this approach for the study of ancient Jews and Judaism. Building on the work of the scholars mentioned above, I will argue for a historiographical model that avoids the traditional dichotomy between "Jewish" and "alien" cultures and the language that this traditional model

10. See Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (rev. ed.; London: Verso, 1991).

11. David Biale, "Preface: Toward a Cultural History of the Jews," in Biale, *Cultures of the Jews*, xix.

12. Moshe Rosman, "Innovative Tradition: Jewish Culture in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth," in Biale, *Cultures of the Jews*, 523–30. Cf. Moshe Rosman, "A Prolegomenon to the Study of Jewish Cultural History," *Jewish Studies: An Internet Journal* 1 (2002), <http://www.biu.ac.il/JS/JSIJ/1-2002/Rosman.doc>.

13. See David N. Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 162–68. For a survey of some of this literature, see Moshe Rosman's essay in this volume.

most often uses to describe the relationship between them. Instead, I argue for an approach that recognizes Jews as subjective agents fully embedded within their cultural environments. There are four primary characteristics to this approach: (1) it focuses on people and their agency rather than on abstractions; (2) it recognizes the fluid nature of identity and identity formation; (3) it assumes similarities and seeks to explain difference; (4) and it explicitly justifies the linking of different types of data, such as using archaeology to interpret texts and vice versa.

Focus on People, Not Abstractions

One of the reasons that scholars of Jews in antiquity have been slow to abandon a historiographical model of static encounters between easily defined cultures has been that this model has such a long and venerable history that any departure from it—no matter how intellectually justified—seems radical. For this reason, it is important to trace, however briefly and insufficiently, the theological roots and assumptions of the model itself.

As told by the Bible, the history of Israel is a history of cultural struggle; the biblical etymology of "Israel," in fact, links its meaning to "struggle" (Gen 32:29). Legal, narrative, and historiographical sections of the Hebrew Bible all reinforce the notion that Israel is a "people apart," a group that has a particular essence marked by its relationship with and mode of devotion to its God. Legal sections of the Pentateuch, for example, construct a sexually promiscuous Canaanite Other, against which Israel's proper behavior is defined.¹⁴ The Israelite origin narratives, from Abraham through Moses, are preoccupied with the theme of self-definition and identity formation.¹⁵ In these stories, cultures emerge as sealed and unchanging, with an "essence" opposed to that of Israel.¹⁶ The reality, as we now know, was far more complex, but no careful reader of the Bible can fail to be impressed by Israel's continuous struggle to retain its cultural distinctiveness amidst external and internal threats.

This biblical model was certainly influential on the Jewish author or epitomizer of 2 Maccabees, writing in the late second century B.C.E.¹⁷ Yet

14. See most vividly Lev 18:1–4, 24–30. On the charge of cultic prostitution as a rhetoric of "othering," see Robert A. Oden, Jr., *The Bible without Theology: The Theological Tradition and Alternatives to It* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 131–53.

15. This preoccupation can be embedded quite subtly. See Robert L. Cohn, "Before Israel: The Canaanites as Other in Biblical Tradition," in *The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity* (ed. Laurence J. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn; New Perspectives on Jewish Studies; New York: New York University Press, 1994), 74–80.

16. See Ronald S. Hendel, "Israel among the Nations: Biblical Culture in the Ancient Near East," in Biale, *Cultures of the Jews*, 43–75, esp. 43–46.

17. See Daniel R. Schwartz, "On Something Biblical about 2 Maccabees," in *Biblical Per-*

this author shifts the focus from a people, Israel, to their culture, "Judaism." 2 Maccabees uses the new term "Judaism" to denote a distinctive culture locked in eternal and mortal combat with "Hellenism."¹⁸ This text thus sharpens the biblical conflict model: "Judaism" and "Hellenism" become opposites in a way that "Israelite" and "Moabite" never are.

To the extent that the rabbis had any historiographical model, they too understood their culture to be one locked in essential combat with that of the Greeks.¹⁹ For the rabbis, the opposite of "Jew" is "Greek."²⁰ The opposite of the religion of Israel is *avodah zarah*, the strange worship exemplified by, although not limited to, the Greeks. For many rabbis, "Greek wisdom" is opposed to Jewish wisdom, and according to some rabbis is to be avoided completely.²¹

This traditional understanding of the relationship between "Jewish" and "non-Jewish culture," now preserved in biblical and rabbinic texts and reinforced by their study, parallels a strong Christian historiographical

spectives: Early Use and Interpretation of the Bible in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls (ed. Michael E. Stone and Esther G. Chazon; Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah 28; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 223–32.

18. For the term "Judaism," see 2 Macc 2:21; 8:1; 14:38. For "Hellenism," see 2 Macc 4:13–15, which describes the "acme of Hellenism" in Jerusalem. On these terms, see Yehoshua Amir, "The Term *Ioudaismos* (*Ioudaismos*): A Study in Jewish-Hellenistic Self-Identification," *Immanuel* 14 (1982): 34–41; Jan Willem van Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 201–4; Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Religion, Ethnicity, and 'Hellenism' in the Emergence of Jewish Identity in Maccabean Palestine," in *Religion and Religious Practice in the Seleucid Kingdom* (ed. Per Bilde et al.; Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1990), 204–23; idem, "Ioudaios; 'Judaean' and 'Jew' in Susanna, First Maccabees, and Second Maccabees," in *Geschichte—Tradition—Reflexion: Festschrift für Martin Hengel zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. Peter Schäfer et al.; 3 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 1:211–20, esp. 215–20. Cohen, against Amir, prefers "Jewishness" to Judaism as a translation of *ioudaismos*. See also Gabriele Boccaccini's article in this volume.

19. On the lack of rabbinic historiography, see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 16–26. For a more nuanced position on the ways that the rabbis were sensitive to history, see Isaiah M. Gafni, "Concepts of Periodization and Causality in Talmudic Literature," *Jewish History* 10 (1996): 21–38.

20. This position has never, to my knowledge, been systematically argued, but see, for example, *t. Ber.* 6:18, in which the rabbinic man is commanded to thank God each day for not making him a boor, a woman, or a non-Jew, each of which denotes a distinct and meaningful Other. For a more subtle conclusion, see Steven D. Fraade, "Navigating the Anomalous: Non-Jews at the Intersection of Early Rabbinic Law and Narrative," in Silberstein and Cohn, *Other in Jewish Thought and History*, 145–65.

21. See the essay by Saul Lieberman, "The Alleged Ban on Greek Wisdom," in Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Literary Transmission, Beliefs and Manners of Palestine in the 1 Century B.C.E.–IV Century C.E.* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950), 100–114. Cf. Philip S. Alexander, "Hellenism and Hellenization as Problematic Historiographical Categories," in *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide* (ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 72–79.

tradition that opposed Judaism to Christianity. Early Christians sought to define themselves against the Jewish Other, constructing a category, "Judaism," that at times only marginally if at all described the beliefs and practices of real Jews.²² Even the eighteenth-century *philosophes*, with their uneasy relationship to Christianity, continued to maintain an essentialized view of "Judaism" as Other.²³

Jewish and Christian theological and historiographical trends converged in the nineteenth century. New Testament scholars divided the objects of their study into "Hellenism," "Judaism," and that odd hybrid, "Hellenistic Judaism."²⁴ Contemporary Jewish scholars found this division congenial.²⁵ By the middle of the twentieth century, the categories of "Judaism" and "Hellenism" were so entrenched that nearly all scholars of antiquity took them for granted, debating primarily about the relationships between them.²⁶ The category "Hellenistic Judaism" grew in the middle space to represent a phenomenon thought to be half-way from Judaism to Christianity.²⁷

22. See Judith Lieu, *Image and Reality: The Jews in the World of the Christians in the Second Century* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996). For a particularly stunning example of the aporia between the heuristic construction of Judaism and its reality, see Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).

23. See Arthur Hertzberg, *The French Enlightenment and the Jews: The Origins of Modern Anti-Semitism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 280–86; Allen Arkush, "Voltaire on Judaism and Christianity," *AJS Review* 18 (1993): 223–43; Adam Sutcliffe, "Can a Jew Be a Philosopher? Isaac de Pinto, Voltaire, and Jewish Participation in the European Enlightenment," *Jewish Social Studies* 6 (2000): 31–51.

24. See Dale Martin, "Paul and the Judaism/Hellenism Dichotomy: Toward a Social History of the Question," in Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide*, 29–61. See also the essay by Boccaccini in this volume.

25. See Maren R. Niehoff, "Alexandrian Judaism in 19th Century *Wissenschaft des Judentums*: Between Christianity and Modernization," in Oppenheimer, *Jüdische Geschichte in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit*, 9–28; Ismar Schorsch, *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism* (Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry 19; Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1994), esp. 266–302.

26. The essays in Fischel, *Essays in Greco-Roman and Related Talmudic Literature* amply attest to the attractiveness of "influence" as an explanatory concept. The trend continues among many excellent modern scholars. Cf. Martin Goodman, "Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies* (ed. Martin Goodman, Jeremy Cohen, and David Sorkin; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 36–52, esp. 42. Exemplary is John J. Collins, "Cult and Culture: The Limits of Hellenization in Judea," in *Hellenism in the Land of Israel* (ed. John J. Collins and Gregory E. Sterling; Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 13; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 38–61. Collins is clearly aware of the problems that these terms present, yet uses them uncritically in his analysis. In the same volume, Gregory E. Sterling, "Judaism Between Jerusalem and Alexandria," argues that "While all Jews were hellenized, the specifics of their Hellenization varied markedly" (264). My point is that there are better ways to frame the question that avoid the concept of "hellenization."

27. See Martin, "Paul and the Judaism/Hellenism Dichotomy."

Now, as Biale suggests and Schäfer has recently argued, there are two critical flaws with this historiographical model. The first is the reification of culture implied by categories such as "Judaism" and "Hellenism."²⁸ "Judaism"—as some kind of independent, unfolding tradition with its own inexorable logic—is not tangible; it is an abstract, second-order category.²⁹ For "insiders," Jews who identify themselves as religious practitioners, it is a functionally useful category that allows them to see a vast array of diverse religious practices as part of the same tradition. In Benedict Anderson's felicitous phrase, it reinforces an "imagined community."³⁰ Yet I am becoming increasingly convinced that particularly for historians of the Jews of antiquity, "Judaism" as an analytical category is more pernicious than useful. Terms such as "Judaism" or "Jewish culture" immediately imply a model of culture that separates "Jewish" from "non-Jewish" culture. Unless used with extensive qualifications, the terms obscure the ongoing messy negotiations that constitute culture. At the same time, they obscure agency. Jews exist, not Judaism.³¹ Each Jewish community enters its own distinctive cultural negotiations with tradition, non-Jews, and other Jews.³² It is perhaps more awkward but certainly more accurate to speak of how Jews wrestle with these issues, than how "Judaism" or "Jewish culture" responds to "Hellenism," "Christianity" or "non-Jewish" culture.

The second critical flaw with this model is the analytical terminology used to describe the relationships between the categories. "Syncretism" used to be commonly used to label the borrowing and incorporation of elements from one "culture" into another; Hellenistic Judaism was thus seen as a syncretistic phenomenon, combining "Jewish" and "Hellenistic"

28. See Alexander, "Hellenism and Hellenization."

29. See Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty*, 222, 229–35. I do not think that Schäfer himself goes far enough. He seems to want to preserve "influence" as an explanatory mechanism (thus talking of "varying grades and shades—or, better yet, different configurations—of what might be called, for strictly heuristic purposes, 'Hebraic' and 'Hellenic'" [p. 222]), but ultimately does not develop a new model of "influence" that overcomes its inherent limitations. Similarly, despite his dissatisfaction with current historiographical approaches, Israel Jacob Yuval uses "influence" as an explanatory model; see *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2000), esp. 41–43 (Heb.).

30. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

31. For some insightful theoretical comments on the relationship between such categories as religious traditions and agency, see Robert Ford Campany, "On the Very Idea of Religions (in the Modern West and in Early Medieval China)," *History of Religions* 42 (2003): 287–319.

32. It is, perhaps, only a marginal improvement to speak of "Jews" as a single, united corporate entity in antiquity that acts with a single "national" will. Some Zionist historiography uses this national model. See Seth Schwartz, "Historiography on the Jews in the 'Talmudic Period' (70–640 CE)," in Goodman, Cohen, and Sorkin, *Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, 79–114, esp. 83–87.

culture. Syncretism, however, with its implied negative value judgment of inauthenticity, is hardly a neutral term; for this reason, contemporary scholars of Jews in antiquity have by and large abandoned it as a useful analytical category.³³ From around the mid-twentieth century until today, it has become more common to speak of the Greek, Hellenistic, Roman, Babylonian, or Christian "influence" on the Jews. In his monumental *Judaism and Hellenism*, Martin Hengel paradoxically demonstrated the deep "Hellenization" of "Jewish" culture in Palestine, and thus the difficulty of using "Hellenistic Judaism" and "Palestinian Judaism" as apposite categories, while at the same time implicitly justifying the analytical usefulness of the terms "Judaism" and "Hellenism."³⁴ "Influence," as a descriptor of similarities, is hardly better; its flaccidness and imprecision as an explanatory term have long been recognized.³⁵

Thus, I think that it is critical to disentangle the concepts "Judaism" and "Jewish culture" from "the Jews." Scholars can and should use the category "Judaism" to denote the worldview and rituals of a particular group of Jews, but it is always important to remember that "Judaism" as we use the term is a heuristic construct, a category created and used by modern scholars for specific reasons.³⁶ Getting beyond the confusion that it has created in historiography of the Jews of antiquity requires shifting attention to the agents themselves, the Jews.

De-essentialize the Jews

"How do you know a Jew in antiquity when you see one?" Shaye Cohen asks in the subtitle of an essay.³⁷ The answer, of course, is that you don't—

33. On the history of "syncretism" as an analytical category in the study of religion and anthropology, see Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart, "Introduction: Problematizing Syncretism," in *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (ed. Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw; London: Routledge, 1994), 1–26. Cf. David Chidchester, "Colonialism," in *Guide to the Study of Religion* (ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon; London: Cassell, 2000), 423–37, esp. 435–36.

34. Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (trans. John Bowden; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1974); idem, "Judaism and Hellenism Revisited," in Collins and Sterling, *Hellenism in the Land of Israel*, 6–37.

35. Edouard Will, "'Influence': note sur un pseudo-concept," in *Hellenica et Judaica: hommage à Valentin Nikiprowetzky* (ed. André Caquot, Mireille Hadas-Lebel, and Jean Riaud; Leuven: Peeters, 1986), 499–505.

36. I think that this basic conceptual confusion undermines Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*; see his discussion on pp. 8–12.

37. Shaye J. D. Cohen, "'Those Who Say They are Jews and Are Not': How Do You Know a Jew in Antiquity When You See One?" in *Diasporas in Antiquity* (ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen and Ernest S. Frerichs; BJS 288; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 1–45.

at least not according to any obvious visual cues. Despite the strong self-assertions of many Jews that they were a distinctive people, and the legal recognitions of Jew by Greeks and Romans, Jewish identity throughout this time was more fluid than historical accounts of "the Jews" frequently reflect.³⁸

The fluidity of Jewish identity in antiquity has only recently begun to receive sustained scholarly attention. Many inscriptions that used to be considered unproblematically "Jewish"—or unproblematically not Jewish—turn out to be far more complex than originally thought.³⁹ Seth Schwartz has argued that in second-century Palestine, there was little that was distinctively "Jewish" about "Jewish" urban culture.⁴⁰ Schwartz's position is admittedly controversial, but it does frankly acknowledge the lack of extant evidence for such a distinctive culture.⁴¹ Even into the fourth century, the boundaries between "Judaism" and "Christianity" at times may have remained porous.⁴²

"Jews," like "Judaism," should not be taken for granted. To be a Jew in antiquity could mean many different things to different people; to make a priori assumptions about who the "Jews" were is to obscure the ways in which Jewish identity could be fluid. Put differently, the ambiguity of the very criteria by which historians of the Jews gather their data (i.e., "Jew") needs to be recognized.

Theology accounts for the essentializing of Judaism, but Zionism is the more direct cause of modern historiographic essentializing of the Jews. Modern historical study of the Jews developed in nineteenth-century Germany, at a time of increasing state nationalism that, in its more romantic forms, attributed a unique essence to each *Volk*, or people. As the Jewish

38. Much of the extant Jewish literature in Greek is preoccupied with assertions of ethnic distinctiveness, and even superiority. See John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (2nd ed.; Bible Resource Series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). It is important not to forget that Jews were also defined from the outside. See Daniel R. Schwartz, "Antisemitism and other -isms in the Greco-Roman World," in *Democratizing the Other: Antisemitism, Racism, and Xenophobia* (ed. Robert S. Wistrich; Amsterdam: Harwood, 1999), 73–87; Martin Goodman, "Nerva, the *Fiscus Judaicus*, and Jewish Identity," *JRS* 79 (1989): 40–44; Amnon Linder, ed., *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987).

39. See Ross Kraemer, "On the Meaning of the Term 'Jew' in Greco-Roman Inscriptions," *HTR* 82 (1989): 35–53; Jan W. van Henten and Alice J. Bij de Vaate, "Jewish or Non-Jewish? Some Remarks on the Identification of Jewish Inscriptions from Asia Minor," *BO* 53 (1996): 16–28.

40. Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 129–61.

41. See Yaron Z. Eliav, "The Matrix of Ancient Judaism: A Review Essay of Seth Schwartz's *Imperialism and Jewish Society 200 BCE to 640 CE*," *Prooftexts* 24 (2004): 116–28.

42. Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Divinations; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

manifestation of this nationalism, Zionism too returned to the biblical notion of "Israel" as a unique nation, set apart with its own essence.⁴³

The assumption that there is a unique and identifiable people, Israel, with its own culture and history—*toledot am yisrael*—underlies nearly all Israeli historiography on Jews in antiquity (and beyond). Gedalyah Alon's lectures and study have had a decisive influence on later Israeli historiography, and its assumptions are thoroughly Zionist: the "Jews in their Land" strove for political and institutional autonomy.⁴⁴ The Jews, in this view, are a given; it is the historian's job to discover how they have expressed their national spirit through the ages.⁴⁵

Any historiography that either explicitly or implicitly ascribes an "essence" or "spirit" to a people is not tenable in today's academy.⁴⁶ There were Jews in antiquity. Ancient Jews asserted their distinctiveness, in literary and epigraphic forms. The challenge for modern historians is to avoid imposing a static and essentialist definition of what it meant to be a Jew back onto identity formations that frequently were perspectival and in flux. Minimally, the scholar needs to state clearly what she or he means by using such concepts as "Jews" or "Jewish"; ideally, it is precisely the explication of these ancient strategies of Jewish identity formation that can be incorporated into nearly all historical studies.

Assume Similarity, Explain Difference

Over the last century scholarship on Jews in antiquity has tended to emphasize how alike Jews were to their neighbors. Many Jews in antiquity maintained their ethnic distinctiveness, but they were physically indistinguishable from, and socially integrated with, their non-Jewish neighbors.⁴⁷

43. See David N. Myers, *Re-inventing the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History* (Studies in Jewish History; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). In their essentialization of national identity Zionist historians were simply participating in wider historiographical trends. See Arielle Rein, "Patterns of National Historiography in B. Dinur's Work," *Zion* 68 (2003): 425–66 (Heb.).

44. See Schwartz, "Historiography on the Jews," 83–87; Yeshayahu Gafni, "On Gedalyahu Alon and His Role in the Study of Rabbinic Historiography," *Jewish Studies* 41 (2002): 75–83 (Heb.).

45. This assumption is not limited to Zionist historians. It underlies, for example, Judah Goldin, ed., *The Jewish Expression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

46. Even Jacob Neusner sometimes comes close to essentializing the people of Israel. See Jacob Neusner, "Stable Symbols in a Shifting Society: The Delusion of the Monolithic Gentile in Documents of Late Fourth-Century Judaism," in "To See Ourselves as Others See Us": *Christians, Jews, "Others" in Late Antiquity* (ed. Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs; Scholars Press Studies in the Humanities; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 373–96.

47. See Cohen, "Those Who Say They are Jews and Are Not." See the important qual-

They shared their "deep structures" of meaning.⁴⁸ Given the significant and growing indications that Jews shared much with the larger cultures in which they lived, these similarities cease to require explanation. The thing that needs explaining is difference: How and why are a given group of Jews different from those around them? How and why did they create their own distinctive ethnic identity?

The Greeks and Romans both recognized "ethnicity" as an organizing category of identity. Greek ethnography dates back to Herodotus and flourishes in the Hellenistic period.⁴⁹ Romans and Christians also developed ethnographies.⁵⁰ In addition, both Greek and Roman legal systems allowed ethnic groups to create corporate, legal identities.⁵¹ At least some Jews in Egypt and Cyrene (modern-day Libya), like other contemporary ethnic communities, had their own semi-autonomous civic institutions, *politeumata*.⁵²

I am suggesting that when these Greek-speaking Jews created their distinctive "imagined communities" from their cultural and traditional

ifications of Daniel R. Schwartz, "How at Home Were the Jews of the Hellenistic Diaspora?" *CP* 95 (2000): 349–57.

48. See Michael L. Satlow, *Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality* (BJS 303; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 315–20, 330–31; Eliav, "Viewing the Sculptural Environment."

49. See the classic essays of Arnaldo Momigliano, especially "Persian Historiography, Greek Historiography, and Jewish Historiography," in *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Sather Classical Lectures 54; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 5–28; and "The Herodotean and the Thucydidean Tradition," 29–53 in the same volume; idem, *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1977); idem, *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). On the method and influence of Herodotus, see François Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History* (New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics 5; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). For more recent research, see Irad Malkin, ed., *Ancient Perceptions of Greek Ethnicity* (Washington: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2001).

50. On Christian ethnography, see Guy G. Stroumsa, "Philosophy of the Barbarians: On Early Christian Ethnological Representations," in Schäfer, *Geschichte-Tradition-Reflexion*, 3:339–68.

51. See Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (rev. and ed. Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, and Martin Goodman; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973–86), 3.1:107–25. Roman law was also flexible. See Greg Woolf, *Becoming Roman: The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 71–72; Tessa Rajak, "Was There a Roman Charter for the Jews?" *JRS* 74 (1984): 107–23.

52. On the existence of Jewish *politeumata*, see Jean Juster, *Les Juifs dans l'empire romain: Leur condition juridique, économique et sociale* (2 vols.; Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1914), 2:1–27; Alfredo Mordechai Rabello, *Ha-Yehudim ba-Imperyah ha-Romit bi-re'i ha-hakikah: be-'ikvot mehkaro shel G'an Yuster* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Dinur, 1987), 65–68; Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 3.1:86–107. For Egypt, see esp. James M. S. Cowey and Klaus Maresch, *Urkunden des Politeuma der Juden von Herakleopolis (144/3 – 133/2 v. Chr.) (P. Polit. Iud.)* (Papyrologica Coloniensia 29; Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher, 2001).

resources, they were, ironically, engaged in a more widespread process of identity formation. Groups, ethnic and otherwise, in the Greek and Roman worlds could maintain distinctive identities, and there were accepted strategies for marking these identities.⁵³ To Greeks and Romans, the Jews were little different from any other ethnic group. They had distinctive customs and ideas, but, as Martin Goodman has proposed, "the oddities of the Jews in the Graeco-Roman world were no greater than that of the many other distinctive ethnic groups, such as Idumaeans, Celts, or Numidians. . . ."⁵⁴

In this plan, then, the role of the historian is to recover within local Jewish communities the arenas in which they asserted their distinct identities as Jews, *how* they did so, and *why*. It is significant, for example, both that through most of antiquity most Jews did *not* use marriage as a locus in which to assert a distinctively Jewish identity, and that this began to change in late antiquity.⁵⁵ Outside of prescriptive rabbinic texts there is little evidence that Jews, from the Persian period through late antiquity, regularly used or were required to use a distinctive civil law.⁵⁶ Where precisely did Jews think it was important to mark their own identities as Jews?

Identity formation was a complex, variable, and messy enterprise that worked in the present but that drew upon the past, as understood in the present. There was no obvious or natural way to be a Jew, but that does not mean that all options were open.

Each Jewish community may have fashioned its own "culture" or expression of identity, but it did not make it up out of whole cloth. When Jewish communities, or individual Jews, chose to mark their identity as Jews, they drew upon the stuff of their tradition, as they understood it within their local cultural frame.⁵⁷

In Rome, for example, six Jewish catacombs that together contain about six hundred burial inscriptions from late antiquity have been discovered.⁵⁸

53. See Ramsay MacMullen, "The Unromanized in Rome," in Cohen and Frerichs, *Diasporas in Antiquity*, 47–64.

54. Martin Goodman, "Jews, Greeks, and Romans," in *Jews in a Graeco-Roman World* (ed. Martin Goodman; Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 4.

55. See Michael L. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); idem, "Slipping Towards Sacrament: Jews, Christians, and Marriage," in *Jewish Culture and Society under the Christian Roman Empire* (ed. Richard Kalmin and Seth Schwartz; Leuven: JTS Press and Peeters, 2003), 65–89.

56. See Hayim Lapin, *Early Rabbinic Civil Law and the Social History of Roman Galilee* (BJS 307; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

57. See Cohen, "Those Who Say They Are Jews and Are Not." Cohen essentially argues that Jewish identity was voluntary and based on association and observance.

58. The classic, and still useful, discussion is by Harry J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1960). Cf. Leonard V. Rutgers, *The Jews in Late Ancient Rome: Evidence of Cultural Interaction in the Roman Diaspora* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World; Leiden: Brill, 1995), who corrects Leon's dating (although note the

All of the inscriptions are in Greek and Latin, and in form and language they are virtually indistinguishable from contemporary non-Jewish epitaphs. Yet several of the inscriptions from the Jewish catacombs also have etched on them some distinctive Jewish symbol, such as a menorah.⁵⁹ A few even have a Hebrew phrase at the end, typically "shalom."⁶⁰ One inscription reads in Greek: "Here lies Sabbatius, twice archon. He lived 35 years. In peace his sleep." Following this is a Hebrew phrase (שָׁלוֹם עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל), with etchings of a shofar, menorah, and lulav.⁶¹ The phrase—misspelled in the Hebrew by someone who clearly had in mind a Greek phonetic system—together with its symbols clearly serve as a marker of ethnicity. Even in the most "Jewishly" marked of all graveyards, at Beit She'arim, some of the conventional Greek inscriptions contain short Hebrew phrases as ethnic markers.⁶²

Iconic artifacts demonstrate another strategy of identity formation. The content of the third-century C.E. synagogue mosaics in the Syrian border town of Dura Europos are distinctively Jewish; the scenes are drawn from the Bible.⁶³ The style is clearly drawn from the surrounding culture. Generally in antiquity the similarities between Jewish and non-Jewish material artifacts can be so strong that it is sometimes impossible to recover whether they were produced by Jews or Christians, as when, for example, the object draws either linguistically or iconographically from the Hebrew Bible.⁶⁴

Even Jewish understandings of the Torah offer yet another kind of example of the ways in which Jews filtered their traditions through their

problematic title!). The inscriptions have recently been republished by David Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe*, vol. 2, *The City of Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

59. See, e.g., *CIL*, nos. 62, 86, 89, 105, 118, 234. On the menorah as a symbol of Jewish identity, see Rachel Hachlili, *The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-Armed Candelabrum: Origin, Form, and Significance* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 204–9, where she also provocatively compares its use as an identity marker to that of the cross for contemporary Christians.

60. E.g., *CIL*, nos. 319, 349.

61. *CIL*, no. 397.

62. See, e.g., Moshe Schwabe and Baruch Lifshitz, *The Greek Inscriptions*, vol. 2 of *Beth She'arim: Report on the Excavations During 1936–1940* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1973–76), nos. 178, 203. Cf. Seth Schwartz, "Language, Power, and Identity in Ancient Palestine," *Past and Present* 148 (1995): 3–47; Hayim Lapin, "Palestinian Inscriptions and Jewish Ethnicity in Late Antiquity," in *Galilee through the Centuries: Confluence of Cultures* (ed. Eric M. Meyers; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 239–67.

63. For an overview, see Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (ed. Jacob Neusner; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 178–83.

64. See Johan H. M. Strubbe, "Curses against Violation of the Grave in Jewish Epitaphs from Asia Minor," in *Studies in Early Jewish Epigraphy* (ed. Jan Willem van Henten and Pieter W. van der Horst; Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums 21; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 70–128.

local cultural contexts to construct identity. Both Philo and Josephus seem to understand "Torah" as a Jewish constitution analogous in all ways to other contemporary constitutions, only better.⁶⁵ Martin Goodman has suggested that many Jews in antiquity saw the physical object of the Torah as a sort of pagan idol.⁶⁶ At least some rabbis, I have argued, had a very different understanding of Torah, seeing it not as a national or ethnic constitution but as a source of wisdom analogous to non-Jewish philosophical classics, whose study mirrored the philosophical spiritual exercises so common throughout late antiquity.⁶⁷

These brief linguistic, iconic, and conceptual examples illustrate the same process: Jews living fully within their local cultures while marking themselves as distinct according to the rules, or "*habitus*," of those local cultures.⁶⁸ Many Jews in antiquity appear to have had the choice of whether to publicly identify themselves as Jews. What, for example, of the many thousands of dead Roman Jews who were not buried in the local Jewish catacombs? Do hundreds of other Jewish catacombs lurk underground, waiting to be discovered, or did Jews choose to be buried among non-Jews? Such questions take on meaning only within a framework that abandons a focus on systems and the influence between them.

Despite my emphasis thus far on focusing on Jews rather than Judaism, I do think that shifting our approach can open up productive ways of discussing the practices, beliefs, and worldviews of the Jews in antiquity. In his monumental *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman World*, Erwin Goodenough highlighted the variety of Jewish religious expression in antiquity. Goodenough posited two primary types of "Judaism," one rabbinic and the other mystical and syncretistic. Jacob Neusner extended this insight to

65. See Reinhard Weber, *Das "Gesetz" bei Philon von Alexandrien und Flavius Josephus: Studien zum Verständnis und zur Funktion der Thora bei den beiden Hauptzeugen des hellenistischen Judentums* (Arbeiten zur Religion und Geschichte des Urchristentums 11; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001), 68–114, 236–71.

66. Martin Goodman, "Sacred Scripture and the 'Defiling of the Hands,'" *JTS* 41 (1990): 99–107.

67. Michael L. Satlow, "'And on the Earth You Shall Sleep': Talmud Torah and Rabbinic Asceticism," *JR* 83 (2003): 204–25.

68. The concept, of course, is Pierre Bourdieu's. He defines *habitus* as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules . . ."; see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (trans. Richard Nice; Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72 (original emphasis). Cf. Martha Himmelfarb, "Judaism and Hellenism in 2 Maccabees," *Poetics Today* 19 (1998): 19–40; Eliav, "Viewing the Sculptural Environment," esp. 433: "The rabbis' ruling on Roman statuary . . . reflects the discerning attitude of a minority group . . . that forged its own way of life out of a profound awareness of the environment in which it was living, defining its own uniqueness within this environment."

speak of the "Judaisms" of antiquity.⁶⁹ Although I think that Neusner errs by considering each *text* as representative of a distinctive form of Judaism, this model does suggest that the religious practices of each Jewish community need to be evaluated on their own terms.⁷⁰ Jonathan Z. Smith has taken this a step further, arguing for a polythetic definition of Judaism.⁷¹ For Smith, the creation of any overarching definition of Judaism starts with, and must be inclusive of, the local "Judaisms." That is, the religious practices of local Jewish communities are the primary focus of first-order historical scholarship, and "Judaism" is a second-order scholarly term to accommodate them. First-order scholarship must thus focus not on an abstract notion of tradition but on the Jews and their religious practices in their distinct historical contexts.

Justify Data Selection

One of the reasons that scholars of the Jews of antiquity have been slow to adopt historiographical models like this with their focus on the "thick description" of local Jewish communities is evidentiary.⁷² Cultural history, in the sense that it is practiced by modern historians, is out of the reach of all historians of antiquity. Only two Jewish societies in antiquity—the rabbis and the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls—left anything approaching a significant body of evidence, and the extant evidence is frequently problematic. Otherwise, we know of Jewish communities for which we have very little direct evidence, and we have evidence that we cannot place within a particular community. For example, the synagogue and frescoes from Dura Europos are fascinating in their own right, but cannot be put into the larger context of Jewish life in Dura—there is no other evidence from this community.⁷³ The complex third- and fourth-century Jewish

69. "[T]here were many Judaisms," Neusner succinctly states in his foreword to Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, xxvii.

70. For discussions of this issue, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, "The Modern Study of Ancient Judaism," in *The State of Jewish Studies* (ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen and Edward L. Greenstein; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 63–65, and Richard S. Sarason, "Response," in *ibid.*, 74–79; Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 8–9.

71. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Fences and Neighbors: Some Contours of Early Judaism," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism* (ed. Jacob Neusner; vol. 2; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980), 1–25.

72. For a good survey of recent developments in the field, with explicit regard to issues of evidence, see Isaiah Gafni, "A Generation of Scholarship on Eretz Israel in the Talmud Era: Achievement and Recognition," *Cathedra* 100 (2001): 199–226 (Heb.).

73. For a brief review of the Jewish remains from Dura Europos, see Lee I. Levine, "The Hellenistic-Roman Diaspora CE 70–CE 235: The Archaeological Evidence," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 3, *The Early Roman Period* (ed. William Horbury, William D. Davies, and John Sturdy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1014–24.

graveyard in Beit She'arim presents a similar challenge: against what other evidence should we interpret it?⁷⁴ A stash of papyri in the Judean desert throws a fascinating light on the legal affairs of a few Jewish families in the second century C.E., but we know neither how representative these families were nor anything about other aspects of their lives.⁷⁵ On the other hand, much other evidence floats without a context. A significant corpus of Jewish literature written in Greek survives, but it is largely of unknown date and provenance.⁷⁶

Clearly, any attempt at cultural history of the Jews in antiquity requires an unholy combining of evidence. Combinations of different types of data from antiquity are in no way obvious or natural. Although aware of the different perspectives and provenances of Jewish literature written in Greek, for example, Erich Gruen nevertheless combines these texts into a single argument about the state of "Diaspora" Jewry.⁷⁷ Ze'ev Weiss and Ehud Netzer have interpreted the iconography of a synagogue mosaic from Sepphoris against other literature that clearly was not produced in Sepphoris.⁷⁸ Whether or not these specific scholarly interpretations are compelling, they point to the need to articulate more fully the model that allows for such combinations of evidence. It is not at all obvious how the evidence from one Jewish community can or should be used with evidence from another Jewish community in antiquity.⁷⁹

In fact, the historiographical shift that I have noted above implies that scholars should focus less on comparing evidence from different Jewish communities and more on using local non-Jewish evidence to create the primary context. Of course scholars have always used pagan and Chris-

74. See Zeev Weiss, "Social Aspects of Burial in Beth She'arim: Archeological Finds and Talmudic Stories," in *The Galilee in Late Antiquity* (ed. Lee I. Levine; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 357–71, who unselfconsciously juxtaposes rabbinic and archaeological data.

75. See Hannah M. Cotton, "The Rabbis and the Documents," in Goodman, *Jews in a Graeco-Roman World*, 167–79: "I maintain, therefore, that they are representative of Jewish society as a whole in the period under discussion. They present a faithful picture of the realities of life at the time that they were written" (p. 172). It is unclear which "Jewish society" Cotton has in mind.

76. See Ross Shepard Kramer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph: A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and His Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 303–5.

77. Erich S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

78. Ze'ev Weiss and Ehud Netzer, *Promise and Redemption: A Synagogue Mosaic from Sepphoris* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1996). Cf. Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 248–61, for a critique of the interpretation of Weiss and Netzer.

79. See the discussion of conflation of evidence in Goodman, "Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period," 44–48.

tian evidence in their histories of the Jews of antiquity, often with great effectiveness. Frequently, however, this evidence provides a secondary rather than primary context. If the Jews were more a part of their larger local cultures than they were part of a trans-Mediterranean Jewish culture, then the *comparanda* should be sought locally. To interpret the mosaics of Dura, for example, we need to look primarily at the city and its immediate environs rather than at Philo or the rabbis. When scholars do move further afield—which they frequently should do—they are nevertheless obligated to justify this move explicitly. What, in particular, justifies the elucidation of a particular material artifact with a particular text?

* * *

For many scholars of ancient Jews and Judaism, "culture" is a noun rather than a verb. "Jewish culture," "rabbinic culture," and "Greco-Roman culture," for example, are frequently understood as transparent categories needing little explicit justification. No matter how precise the cultural category (e.g., Palestinian amoraic culture) or nuanced the description of the interaction between the cultures, the assumption that culture exists as a static category is severely limiting. When Erich Gruen, for example, asserts that Jewish ideas "expressed themselves quite naturally in Greek forms," he seems to assume that one can speak meaningfully of distinct Jewish culture, however subtle and fluid the interactions between this and "other" cultures.

I have argued here that as an analytic category "culture" works better as a verb.⁸⁰ It is an ongoing, shifting, highly complex set of negotiations. Throughout antiquity Jewish identity was largely voluntary, with Jews deeply embedded within their wider environments. Many Jews self-consciously identified as Jews and marked themselves in various, shifting, and unpredictable ways as Jews. To describe "rabbinic culture," for example, is to unpack the ways in which the rabbis filtered their traditions through their deep structures of meaning, which were themselves largely the products of the broader material, intellectual, religious, and social worlds in which they lived. The goals of this essay have been both to articulate the assumptions that might underlie such an approach to "culture" and to argue for its potential utility reframing the study of the Jews of antiquity.

80. In Homi Bhabha's oft-quoted formulation, culture is "the 'inter'—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space . . ."; see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 38 (original emphasis).