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Seth Schwartz: Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.

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INTRODUCTION

IMPERIALISM AND JEWISH SOCIETY traces the impact of different types of foreign domination on the inner structure of ancient Jewish society, primarily in Palestine.¹ It argues that a loosely centralized, ideologically complex society came into existence by the second century B.C.E., collapsed in the wake of the Destruction and the imposition of direct Roman rule after 70 C.E., and reformed starting in the fourth century, centered now on the synagogue and the local religious community, in part as a response to the christianization of the Roman Empire.

This book thus covers a longer period and has a broader scope than is conventional for books on ancient Judaism, aside from the not uncommon handbooks, which are characterized by varying degrees of comprehensiveness but the absence of an explicit argument. One reason I chose to treat a broad topic is the character of the evidentiary basis of ancient Jewish history. In brief, it is slender. This fact has paradoxically contributed to, though it is certainly not the only cause of, the common tendency to produce monographic studies of extremely limited issues, on the assumption that only minute study of small selections of material can yield reliable results. Clearly such work has its place, but, as I will argue in more detail below, hypotheses about the society that produced the artifacts must necessarily accompany their interpretation, and the evidence as a whole must be used to construct these hypotheses. Thus it seems worthwhile to get a sense of the entire system before, or while, examining its parts.

Swallowing the evidence whole is necessary but not sufficient for this task. It is intuitively obvious that the ancient Jews (assuming that they behaved like a recognizably human group) were profoundly affected by the imperial powers under which they were constrained to live.² It is equally obvious that the effects of imperialism were not limited to reaction—to the impulse to “circle the wagons” that has so often been attributed to the Jews by historians and others. Nor can the effects of domination by Hellenistic kingdoms and the Roman Empire all usefully be crowded under the rubric of “hellenization.” The effects of domination were complex, pervasive, and varied, and we cannot begin to apprehend the structure of the system without paying careful attention to them. This consideration explains the importance of power and its

¹ Though the Greco-Roman Diaspora is frequently mentioned, I have omitted all discussion of the Jews in the Parthian and Sassanian empires, due to the nearly complete absence of information outside the Babylonian Talmud.

² See T. Endelman, “Introduction: Comparing Jewish Societies,” in *Comparing Jewish Societies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. 1–21, especially 10–13.

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influence on social and cultural integration in the historical scheme that I propose in this book. For example, the rulers of the Jews in the later Second Temple period were empowered by their overlords to use the “ancestral laws” of the Jews—the Torah—as their constitution. I argue that this fact had profound but complex effects and cannot be ignored in a description of Palestinian Judaism before 70 C.E. Conversely, that the descendants of the Jewish leaders for several centuries after 70 had no such authorization helps to explain the importance of Greco-Roman urban culture in northern Palestine demonstrated by archaeological remains. The political marginality of “rabbinic Judaism” matters profoundly for our understanding of it and for our interpretation of rabbinic texts, not to mention for our understanding of the history of the Jews in the period of its consolidation.

Method

This book has four main methodological characteristics: First, it is moderately positivistic. I believe that it is possible to know something about the distant past. I do not think, however, that this knowledge can ever really claim to be more than a sort of hermeneutical model that can help us make sense of the paltry scraps of information that have come down to us.

Second, it combines induction and deduction in its interpretation of evidence. Historical remains, both literary and physical, are in reality opaque. Pure induction can never work because it assumes that the artifacts are meaningful in themselves and that the interpreter’s job is merely to uncover this meaning and then reconstruct the relationship between the discrete artifacts. But this assumption seems to me false; even the most determined empiricist never *actually* works this way, whatever he or she may claim. It is best to be aware of what we are doing and, while not eschewing detailed examination of the evidence, at least admit our need for certain kinds of models.

Third, one of the components of its deductive structure is concern about how societies work. Every artifact is the product of social interaction; some theory of society, appropriately complex and nonreified, must therefore be involved in the act of interpretation. I am suggesting that a theory of society is just as essential an element of method as a theory about how to “read” the evidence.

Fourth, it tends to interpret evidence minimalistically. The realization that the evidence is socially specific leads to self-consciousness about the act of generalization. Thus, a positive statement in an ancient Jewish literary text cannot be taken without further argumentation as evidence for what “the Jews” thought or did. Rather, it is a nugget of ideology, telling us what some limited (perhaps more or less elite) group of Jews considered worth committing to writing at a specific time, which is in itself nothing to sneeze at. We

may then ask, Did its authors have the means to impose their view on others? Are others likely to have agreed with them for other reasons? Thus, it may indeed correspond to what other classes of Jews, or Jews living at other times, thought or did, but this needs to be demonstrated. Material remains are no less socially and chronologically specific, and similar considerations constrain our interpretation of them, too. This does not mean that generalizing is always illegitimate, only that it must always be done with cautious skepticism.

Social Theories

One of the purposes of this book is to apply a type of analysis to ancient Jewish history that had been long established among Roman and to a lesser extent Greek historians. Like its models, this book is informed mainly by structural functionalism—a tendency in Anglo-American social thought which assumes that there are such things as societies and regards societies as usually complex, organism-like systems that can be understood by analyzing the relations of their component parts. Of particular importance for this analysis, at least in my version of it, is the distribution of power in a society and its effect on the society's integration.³

Several qualifications are in order. My adherence to this system is neither complete nor exclusive. I believe that it is neither the true nor the only way to understand human social interaction, only that it has proved an intermittently helpful way of thinking about my topic. I am also aware of, and have tried to incorporate, some of the fundamental criticisms of structural functionalism—most seriously that it depends on a long series of metaphors that treat human social behavior reductively and misleadingly ignore agency, the complex ways in which people constantly negotiate with each other and with normative ideologies, which themselves are constituted through agency. Furthermore, in imagining societies as working, more or less stable systems, structural functionalism has trouble accounting for change.⁴ (On the other hand, theorists who emphasize agency to the exclusion of structure have trouble accounting for continuity.)

I have attempted to compensate for the second criticism by building change into my account—by producing what might be thought of as three time-lapse photographs of ancient Jewish society and also, I admit, by deferring the problem. The Jews were a small subculture in a larger Mediterranean world, and one of my points in this book is precisely that the crucial changes sometimes

³ I am anticipated in this project by Albert Baumgarten's excellent book on ancient Jewish sectarianism, *The Flourishing of Jewish Sects in the Maccabean Era: An Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

⁴ For a concise statement of this critique, see A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 235–59.

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occurred in that larger world: why the Roman Empire rose, why it was more centralizing than its predecessors, and why, finally, it eventually became Christian—three developments of central importance in this account—are questions I happily leave to others.

As to the more substantial criticisms of structural functionalism, associated especially with such skeptical social theorists as Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, I agree with them up to a point.⁵ Structural functionalism certainly is reductive but should be seen only as a set of heuristic schematizations. Indeed, analytic schemes are necessarily reductive, though there is some point in reducing the reduction as far as possible. The only way to avoid reductive schematization is through complete skepticism, a totally reflexive and critical sociology, which neither Giddens nor Bourdieu advocated.

Furthermore, it must be recalled that the semiskeptical sociologies of Giddens and Bourdieu, like structural functionalism, are social theories of modernity, and as such rarely have to confront the crucial problem of premodernity, the absence of information. In fact, social theory functions differently for ancient historians than for modernists. For the latter, it is purely an analytic tool, whereas for the former it is also an aid to reconstruction, a way of filling in or otherwise compensating for gaps in information. So, it is precisely the schematic character of structural functionalism, the fact that it tends to view its subject from a great distance, through a telescope rather than a microscope, that makes it especially useful for my purposes.

Criticism of Conventional Analytical Categories and Assumptions

In a field that depends more on reinterpretation of familiar material than on exposition of new, it is inevitable that books aspiring to innovation will be characterized by a critical attitude toward their predecessors. There is some justification for the skeptical view that this dynamic owes more to the boredom and restlessness of each generation of scholars with the work of their elders than to the inexorability of intellectual progress. In either case, we should be sobered by the expectation that our successors will reject our work when the time comes. Still, perhaps this position is just a bit too skeptical. Innovations sometimes do enter the *koiné* of scholarly consensus, and stay there. For example, it is difficult to imagine any serious scholar ever again describing the Judaism of the later Second Temple period as a rigorous, monolithic ortho-

⁵ For a helpful introduction, with bibliography, see Bourdieu and L. J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); despite (or rather because of) the obvious similarities between them, Bourdieu strives to distance himself from Giddens. I have found little engagement with Bourdieu in what I have read of Giddens's work.

doxy, as was still common only a generation ago. Criticism of old categories, and construction of new ones, may contribute to a slow accretion of understanding.

All this is to apologize not only for publishing a large-scale synthetic revision in a field that has already been studied so intensively but also for the polemics that follow. In fact, I have tried to avoid polemics in the body of the work, except where absolutely necessary, mainly as a way of keeping the book's length manageable. The introduction seems an appropriate place for critical discussion of some of the previous scholarship.

Nationhood

This book is, among other things, a sustained examination of the question of whether the Jews constituted a group in antiquity and, if they did, of the character of that group. Admittedly, this question cannot really be answered satisfactorily. An essential component of groupness is the subjectivity of the agents—a point generally associated with Benedict Anderson but actually already made by Max Weber.⁶ Indeed, even this point is something of a schematic oversimplification, since it does not consider the fact that not all subjectivity is the same: do the agents need to be strongly self-conscious of belonging to a group? Must it be a central element of their self-construction? Or can a group consist of or contain people who are only peripherally or occasionally aware of belonging? While we must be conscious of all these questions when considering the case of the ancient Jews, we cannot answer them because we simply do not have enough information. But this does not entitle us to ignore the problem in interpreting the information we do have. It must be said though that most ancient Jewish historians have not been concerned with such issues at all: the groupness, and even the nationhood—a very specific type of groupness—of the Jews has usually been assumed.

One reason for this is that many Jewish historians are writing from deep inside some sort of romantic nationalist ideology, nowadays usually Zionism.⁷ The Zionist historians of the first generation, most importantly for our purposes Gedalyahu Alon (1901–1950), argued that the Jews had always constituted what amounted to a nation, even in periods when they lacked political self-determination, mainly because Judaism always had a national component

⁶ *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 4, the first paragraph of the book.

⁷ For some discussion, see D. N. Myers, *Re-Inventing the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 109–28. It should be noted at once that the embrace of history, as opposed to historicizing philology, is something I share with, and probably owe to, Zionist and Israeli scholarship (the only courses in ancient Jewish history I ever took were at the Hebrew University, and I found them inspiring). The historical study of Jewish antiquity is rare outside Israel.

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at its center.⁸ And conversely, the Jews were always devoted to Judaism because of their overwhelmingly powerful national sensibility. Alon expressed this view in a ringing passage in the introduction to his Hebrew University lectures published posthumously as *The Jews in Their Land in the Talmudic Age*:

we shall begin our study by regarding the [Talmudic] age as a continuation of the Second Commonwealth, expecting to find the Jews with all the attributes of a people dug in on its native soil; undergoing changes in its national, social, and economic life; struggling to regain its freedom; trying with might and main to hold together its scattered limbs, to unite its far-flung diasporas around the central homeland, to strengthen them, and to fan their hopes for final reunification and liberation—a consummation that still appeared to be a practical possibility, perhaps just around the corner.

This view, which I will argue against in detail in the second section of this book, has several interesting consequences. For Alon and his followers the “spiritual” (i.e., religious) character of the Jews’ nationhood, which is only implicit in the passage quoted here but is a basic assumption of Alon’s work, meant that there was an unusually close connection between the prescriptions of the rabbis, the ancient Jews’ presumed spiritual leadership, and the Jews’ behavior. Indeed, it is difficult to find in Zionist and Israeli scholarship even a hint that the rabbis were anything other than the distillation of the Jewish national will. This has important implications for how such historians read rabbinic literature: in short, they used what we might call a hermeneutics of goodwill, as opposed to the hermeneutics of suspicion now widespread among non-Israeli scholars. According to this model, rabbinic prescriptions could be used to *describe* Jewish life, rabbinic disagreements were thought to reflect deeper social and political conflicts among the Jews, and so on.⁹ In fact, Alon was more careful about the deployment of this model than his followers have been. Thus, although his historiography remains resolutely rabbinocentric, Alon was at least aware, because the Palestinian Talmud told him as much, that the authority of the rabbis in Palestine in the third and fourth centuries was neither absolute nor unchallenged.

⁸ Alon (sometimes spelled Allon) was the founder of the field of Jewish history in the “Talmud period” in Israel. As far as I am aware all the current practitioners there with the exception of Lee Levine (in addition to several Roman historians who sometimes work on Jewish topics, for example, Hannah Cotton, Joseph Geiger, and Menahem Mor) are students of his students. Michael Avi-Yonah was also influential, though primarily for archaeologists and art historians (see below). This field has been unusually conservative, with no counterparts to Moshe Idel, who has revolutionized the study of Kabbalah.

⁹ It should be noted that although nowadays it is almost only Israeli scholars who work this way, these assumptions were standard among scholars of *Jüdische Wissenschaft* and their successors down to the middle of the twentieth century, who were of course no less romantic than their Zionist epigones. For general discussion, see I. Schorsch, *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1994).

The Israeli view of the “Talmud period” is not typical of Zionist historiography. The Talmud period had a special status in that it functioned for many of the historians and their audience as a kind of utopia, when, as Alon put it, the Jews “still lived as a nation on their land” and still lived lives characterized by untrammelled commitment to the Torah as expounded by the rabbis, in opposition to an oppressive foreign empire.¹⁰ The unrealistic harmony attributed to the Jews of this period by such historians contrasts sharply with the realistic complexity of Jewish social and political life described by Zionist historians of other periods. One fundamental cause of this difference was information. The documents discovered in the Cairo Geniza, for instance, allowed Alon’s contemporary Shelomo Dov Goitein, no less a Zionist than Alon, to produce a rich, detailed, and tension-filled account of Jewish life in high medieval North Africa.¹¹ But Alon and his followers had no comparable sources for their period, or so they thought, and so were free to impose their ideological readings on the past without encountering the corrective of historical evidence.

In fact, there *was* other information, which they did not ignore but felt they could explain away. While almost all Jewish literature written between the second and sixth centuries was produced by rabbinic circles and is characterized by a much more pronounced uniformity of genre, discourse, and ideology than Jewish literature earlier and later, archaeological remains render its status problematic. Erwin R. Goodenough’s, monumental collection of material remains, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (1953–1968), argued that the rabbis did not control Jewish life to the extent imagined by earlier scholars. On the contrary, most Jews of the rabbinic period practiced a profoundly hellenized, mystical, platonic version of Judaism that received its classic literary formulation in the works of Philo of Alexandria. The second half of

¹⁰ For some suggestive observations, concerning Alon’s colleague and friend Yitzhak Baer, see I. Yuval, “Yitzhak Baer and the Search for Authentic Judaism,” in D. Myers and D. Ruderman, eds., *The Jewish Past Revisited: Reflections on Modern Jewish Historians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 77–87. But Baer’s work on ancient (as opposed to medieval) Jews was not influential, a neglect that needs to be partly reevaluated. Alon awaits his Boswell. In the meantime, see the foreword by G. Levi to the 1980 edition of *The Jews in their Land*, vii–x; Baer’s eulogy of Alon, printed as the preface to *Toldot Hayehudim Be’eretz Yisrael Bitequfat Hamishnah Vehatalmud* (Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hame’uhad, 1959), z’-y’, which captures the tension between *engagement* and science (as well as that between traditional Torah study and academic scholarship), which *mutatis mutandis* was characteristic also of Baer’s own work.

It should be added that though *The Jews in their Land*, which was patched together from Alon’s lecture notes, is in every way a problematic book, many of the articles collected in *Mehqarim* (most of which are translated in *Jews and Judaism in the Classical World* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1977)) retain their importance.

¹¹ The Cairo Geniza refers to the contents of the attic of the “Palestinian rite” synagogue in Fustat (old Cairo), where, starting in the tenth century, the local Jews deposited not only discarded religious texts but also documents, personal letters, receipts, and so on. At the end of the nineteenth century, most of the material was brought to the Cambridge University Library.

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Goodenough's argument, based as it was on a highly problematic method of "reading" ancient Jewish art, was immediately and universally rejected. The first half of the argument, though, laid the foundations for the revolution in the study of ancient Judaism produced by the early work of Jacob Neusner, a revolution that I embrace in this book. It was Neusner who first argued consistently that rabbinic documents were not simply repositories of tradition but careful selections of material, shaped by the interests, including the self-interest, of tradents and redactors. In his view the documents did not simply reflect reality but constituted attempts to construct it, that is, they are statements of ideology. Finally, they are the writings of a collectivity of would-be leaders, scholars who aspired to but never in antiquity attained widespread authority over the Jews. In sum, Neusner's work *historicized* rabbinic literature and reduced it to an artifact of a society in which it was in fact marginal.

Unity and Diversity: Judaisms

Especially since the early 1980s, positions that Neusner first embraced out of interpretive caution have rigidified into orthodoxies. To insist on questioning the accuracy of "attributions" in rabbinic literature (i.e., the common sort of statement that begins, "Rabbi X said . . ." or ends, ". . . so said Rabbi Y") on the grounds that later rabbis and/or the editors of the documents had some motivation to falsify them, and may in any case simply have misremembered, is salutary. But to conclude that we must assume the falsity of attributions, that therefore (?) the documents are essentially pseudepigraphic and can be assumed to provide evidence only for the interests of their redactors, is in fact no longer a skeptical but a positivist position and is less plausible than the one it replaced.

Similarly, Neusner began with the view that rabbinic documents should be read separately, on their own terms, before the relationships between them can be worked out.¹² This view is actually less reasonable than it seems at first glance, since, given the obvious fact that the documents overlap, presuppose, and comment upon one another, and so on, some theory of the documents' relationships should logically precede the description of the discrete texts (and in real life, as opposed to programmatic pronouncements, internalist and comparative reading proceed hand in hand). In any case, Neusner once again pushed this ostensibly cautious view too far by insisting that the documents

¹² In his preface to *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era*, ed. W. S. Green and E. Frerichs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. xiii, for example, Neusner writes, in a passage that seems to me typical: "All we propose is to describe things item by item, and to postpone the work of searching for connections and even continuities until all the components have had their say, one by one." In the meantime, Neusner asserts, we should continue to speak of "Judaisms"; cf. more persuasively *The Systemic Analysis of Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), pp. 9–15.

are *in fact* self-contained (and not simply that for heuristic purposes they should be read as if they were), that each one is as if it were a summary statement of the ideology of a discrete social organization. The result is not only bad history but also tautologous reading: if texts must be read in a rigorous way on their own terms, the only thing to say about them is to recapitulate their contents.

Here Neusner, along with many other scholars of ancient Judaism, was influenced by an important tendency in New Testament scholarship, though he applied its methods in an uncompromising way. It is not uncommon among New Testament scholars to posit a discrete social context to serve as a hermeneutical framework in which to set each Gospel. This method has an element of circularity to it, since the hypothetical context is inferred mainly from the Gospel itself, but is not unilluminating. However, scholars are frequently seduced by their own creations: the hermeneutical models are reified into real communities, which are supposed to have existed more or less in isolation from each other, so that each literary work is approached as if it were the hypostasis of a single monadic community. When the same technique is applied to Jewish literature of the Second Temple and rabbinic periods, the result is “Judaisms,” a term introduced by Neusner and widely adopted. Once again, what started as interpretive restraint ended in implausible positivism: because it is advisable to read the literary works on their own, even though they obviously have close relatives (and because their social context is on the whole poorly known), each work begins to seem utterly different from its congeners and so must be the product of an impermeably discrete social organization.

In this book I assume that ancient Judaism was complex, capacious, and rather frayed at the edges, and I devote a chapter to a description of these qualities. In doing so, I reject the characterization of Judaism as multiple, as well as the atomistic reading of the sources that justifies it. This is an appropriate place to consider some of the problems with the latter characterization, which I think is the enlightened consensus in America and Europe, influential even among those who refrain from using the term “Judaisms.”

In the first place, the hypothesis of radical diversity seems to me inadequate. The notion that each piece of evidence reflects a discrete social organization is obviously wrong. Communities do not write books, individuals do, and several individuals in even a very small community might write very different sorts of books (as the library discovered at Qumran demonstrates) and few of these books are likely to be ideological manifestos.¹³

¹³ In any case, it is probable that for most Jewish sectarian groups, including Christians, the most important books, those that the groups themselves considered central to their self-definition, were precisely not the sectarian books but the Hebrew Bible.

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In addition, the search for differences neglects ancient political, demographic, and social realities. As far as politics is concerned, the empowerment of certain Jewish elites in the later Second Temple period imposed limits on acceptable variety. There was necessarily a normative core of Judaism before 70 C.E., though as we will see in the first section of this book, this core is by no means easy to describe, and it certainly had no special connection with the pharisaic/rabbinic Judaism regarded as normative by pre-Neusner and most Israeli scholars.

Furthermore, and here we move on to a discussion of demography, the authors of all ancient Jewish literature—little of which, outside Qumran, is in any obvious way sectarian—necessarily belonged to a tiny elite, a basic and undeniable fact that to my knowledge has never been mentioned in considerations of the issue. It may be worth briefly speculating about the number of these elites at various periods. There can be no claim of precision here, only of a rough heuristic plausibility.

In the third and early second centuries B.C.E., when, according to the generally accepted view, 1 Enoch, Kohelet, and the Wisdom of Ben Sira were composed, there are unlikely to have been more (and probably there were many fewer) than 150,000 Jews living in Palestine, if we assume that the maximum possible population of the country in premodern conditions was one million and that before about 130 B.C.E., almost all Palestinian Jews lived in the district of Judaea.¹⁴ It is highly unlikely that as much as 10 percent of

¹⁴ On the geographical distribution of the Jews, see below. On the size of the population, see M. Broshi, "The Population of Western Palestine in the Roman-Byzantine Period," *BASOR* 236 (1979): 1–10, supported by G. Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine, First Three Centuries C.E.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 137–40. Their figures, adopted here, are based on the carrying capacity of the land and on estimates of population density in built-up areas. Though these are imperfect criteria, they yield a far more realistic figure than that produced by taking Josephus' numbers seriously, as earlier scholars did; see I. Finkelstein, "A Few Notes on Demographic Data from Recent Generations and Ethnoarchaeology," *PEQ* 122 (1990): 45–52. By contrast, the calculations offered by Z. Safrai, "Godel Ha-ukhlusconiya Be-eretz Yisrael Bi-tequfah Ha-Romit-Bizantit," in Y. Friedman, Z. Safrai, and J. Schwartz, eds., *Hikrei Eretz: Studies in the History of the Land of Israel Dedicated to Prof. Yehuda Feliks* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1997), pp. 277–305, are impossible, based as they are on estimated average wheat yields of about 35 to 1, and population density in built-up areas of 150 people per dunam—as opposed to the approximately 20 per dunam suggested by Finkelstein! For a systematic criticism of the use of population numbers provided by ancient writers, on the grounds that they are regularly demographically impossible, see T. Parkin, *Demography and Roman Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 58–66. Another hint about population size is provided by the recent survey of "the Land of Ephraim," whose southern half corresponds with the northern part of Hasmonean and Herodian Judaea. On the basis of ancient settlement patterns and Ottoman and British Mandatory population and crop production figures, Finkelstein estimated its peak population, attained in "Iron II" (roughly 800–600 B.C.E.), the first century C.E., and the "Byzantine" period (I assume this means the fifth and sixth centuries), as 26,000–30,000. This suggests that my estimate for Judaea as a whole may be rather high, though "Ephraim" is on the whole less fertile than the district of Jerusalem immediately to its south.

the Jewish population was literate, and still more unlikely that 10 percent of the literate population could actually read literary texts with any ease, but let us propose this anyway, for the sake of the argument.¹⁵ The number of those who could write such texts was necessarily smaller still, certainly no more than a few hundred at any one time, and this is probably much too generous. Given what little we know of the structure of Judaeon society at the time, almost all who could write are likely to have lived in Jerusalem, or at least to have had some connections with the city, and are likely also to have been members of the small scribal and priestly elite and subelite.

By the first century the Jewish population of Palestine had grown massively, perhaps to as much as 500,000; it had also expanded geographically and become socially and culturally much more complex than it was in the third century (see below). Yet the reading and writing of literary texts was still restricted to an elite of several thousands, at the very most. There were certainly religious divisions among them—the famous sects having by now come into existence—more of them lived outside Jerusalem (at any rate we know of a first-century author who lived in Tiberias), and more were multilingual, in Hebrew, Aramaic and/or Greek, than their predecessors in the third century. Yet such differences should not be allowed to obscure the fact of the elite's basic, though not absolute, social cohesion to which Josephus testifies (the tensions he describes *demonstrate* rather than refute this point).

Finkelstein's figure may also strengthen the suggestion that Broshi's estimate for the population of Palestine as a whole at its first- and fifth-century peaks, which Finkelstein accepts, is a bit too high, since at no other period did the population of Ephraim constitute only 3 percent of the population of Palestine; the figures, as given by Finkelstein, range between 5 percent and 7 percent, which would yield a total population of 600,000 at the ancient peaks. But one cannot exclude the possibility, without further examination, that Ephraim's population grew proportionally less in the general peak periods) see I. Finkelstein, "The Land of Ephraim Survey, 1980–1987: Preliminary Report," *Tel Aviv* 15–6 (1988–1989) 156–58.

¹⁵ These figures accord in a rough way with those proposed by William Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), for the Hellenistic and Roman world in general, which have not been fundamentally affected by the responses collected in J. Humphrey, ed., *Literacy in the Ancient World*, *JRA* suppl. 3 (1991). There is little reason to believe that rates of literacy were higher in Jewish Palestine than elsewhere in the Hellenistic and Roman east. To be sure, many Jews revered the text of the Bible and fetishized Torah scrolls (see below), but its contents were conveyed mainly orally; there is no reason to think the Jews were otherwise more devoted to education than anyone else. The mere fact of reverence for specific texts is no guarantee of high literacy rates—indeed, it may be irrelevant to them. Certainly reverence for the Bible, Quran, or writings of Confucius did not generate high literacy rates in medieval Christendom, the Islamic world, or premodern China. Literacy among the ancient Jews has yet to be studied with adequate care, though Catherine Hezser is now at work on the subject; in the meantime see M. Goodman, "Texts, Scribes, and Power in Roman Judaea," in A. Bowman and G. Woolf, eds., *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 99–108; for a sensibly minimalistic discussion of literacy and schools in monarchic Judah, citing much relevant literature, see P. R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), pp. 74–85.

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The scribal and priestly elites were decimated by the revolts of 66–70 and 132–135 C.E., and the rabbis probably constituted their remainder.¹⁶ It seems unlikely that there were ever more than a few dozen rabbis in Palestine at any one time in antiquity, and they clearly came to constitute a small professional group of some sort;¹⁷ by the third century they were probably far more cohesive than the scribes and priests of the first century had been, and it is certain that the literature they produced was far less diverse. An atomistic reading of the rabbinic texts is thus most problematic of all.

For the earlier periods, though, we will have to confront the fact that a small and cohesive group of people produced texts that seem quite diverse. For now, I will only observe that the ostensible diversity of the ancient Jewish literary production is to some extent a trick of perspective. In fact, all surviving Jewish literature shares a basic set of concerns, which separates it sharply from other corpora of ancient literature and marks its participation in a common, if only loosely centralized, ideological system. In trying to make sense of the many specific differences between these texts, we should not forget their commonalities.

Hellenization and Democratization

Judaism is commonly said to have undergone two important processes starting in the later Second Temple period. These processes play little or no role in this book. The first, hellenization, was so pervasive and fundamental that it has little utility as an analytic category. The second, democratization, is in my view a mirage. I shall have more to say about the problematic vagueness of “hellenization” in the body of this book. Here I note only that it implies a view of cultural interaction that is far too one-sided, simple, and static, one waiting to be unpacked, broken down socially and chronologically, and given, through analysis of its component parts, some concreteness and specificity. All of this I will attend to below.

“Democratization” is more troubling. It is a word used by scholars to describe a process whereby religious responsibilities and privileges that had once

¹⁶ See S. Cohen, “The Significance of Yavneh: Pharisees, Rabbis, and the End of Jewish Sectarianism,” *HUCA* 55 (1984): 27–53; Catherine Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), pp. 69–77.

¹⁷ On numbers, see L. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine in Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi-Jewish Theological Seminary, 1989), pp. 66–69; on the integration, the “groupness,” of the rabbis, see Hezser, whose book is concerned with the issue. I am convinced by her that the rabbinic movement was less integrated than Levine, among others, thought. Still, the rabbis were fewer in number, more concentrated geographically, and ideologically closer together (*if we may trust the impression created by rabbinic literature*, which at least implies very strongly that though there were differences among the rabbis, these differences were never institutionalized, as they had been before the Destruction), than their predecessors in the first century had been.

been the province of a Jewish elite, came, in the course of the Second Temple period or the rabbinic period, or both, to be shared by the Jews generally. So, the spread outside priestly circles (but never very far outside them) of a rigorous attitude toward ritual purity, the privileging of Torah study over priestly descent, and the rise of the synagogue, an institution in which Jews worshiped God through study and prayer rather than sacrifice, are all regarded as aspects of a general “democratization.”¹⁸

Democratization is, first of all, an apologetic term: it makes sense as a description of the above processes only as an attempt to make ancient Judaism attractive in a liberal Western environment. If democracy is characterized by elections and by representative government, then there was no tendency toward democracy among the ancient Jews, except in the trivial sense that some Diaspora communities located in Greek cities may conceivably have borrowed the practice of voting from their environment (though this is in fact unknown); even here we should recall that in such cities in the Hellenistic and Roman imperial periods, voting was mainly a ceremonial supplement to a political system that was essentially oligarchic. We should also not ignore the fact that at least half the Jewish population, that is, women, were (in most places? everywhere?) excluded from the process.

Most significantly, though, I do not believe that Judaism experienced any such process. It is true of course that Judaism has an unusually highly developed sense of its (male) constituency as a notionally egalitarian citizen body, “Israel,” but at the same time the sense that certain Israelites are naturally privileged. We may speak of a tension between egalitarianism and hierarchy. But this tension is already strongly present in the Pentateuch, and it has never been absent. The privileging of Torah study (which is, again, already understood to be a key to power in the Pentateuch itself) of course in theory broke the monopoly of the priesthood, but (1) in the Second Temple period expertise at Torah seems to have been mainly a priestly prerogative and (2) even later, when it became partly detached from priestly descent, it certainly did not make the system more democratic, since access to the acquisition of expertise at Torah was and has always been highly restricted. The privileging of Torah study slightly changed the character of the Jews’ religious leadership without making it in any way more democratic. In any case, as we will see, it is far from certain that the post-Destruction Torah scholars par excellence—the rabbis—actually enjoyed much authority before the Middle Ages.

This brings us to the synagogue because in late antiquity, though the rabbis were not totally insignificant, the real religious leaders probably were the heads of the synagogues, that is, of the local Jewish communities (see part III). It would be perfectly legitimate to think of the diffusion of the synagogue,

¹⁸ For a criticism of “democratization” similar to the one proposed here, see D. Boyarin, “A Tale of Two Synods: Nicaea, Yavneh, and Rabbinic Ecclesiology,” *Exemplaria* 12 (2000): 33–34.

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mainly in the fourth through sixth centuries, as a diffusion also of access to the sacred. Synagogues seem to have been generally regarded as holy places, and the local religious communities that built and maintained them as holy fellowships, perhaps even miniature “Israels.” But the local community was characterized by precisely the same tension between egalitarianism and hierarchy as the fictive biblical community of Israel. And what this meant in practice, as most scholars acknowledge, is that local communities were oligarchic, precisely like the notionally democratic Greco-Roman cities, which were the other main model of the late antique local religious community. The rulers of the community were the well-to-do; they may also have been relatively learned and may have regarded some knowledge of Torah as an obligation especially incumbent on their class.

Summary

The first part of *Imperialism and Jewish Society* concerns the Second Temple period (539 B.C.E.–70 C.E.) but focuses on the that period between roughly 200 B.C.E. and 70 C.E., for which relatively abundant information is available. The Jews were then ruled by a series of empires that shared the tendency to govern autonomous provinces through local intermediaries (the period of truly independent rule by the Hasmonean dynasty was very brief and, even then, the Jewish rulers never fully ceased being vassals of their stronger neighbors).

I argue that imperial support for the central national institutions of the Jews, the Jerusalem temple and the Pentateuch, helps explain why these eventually became the chief symbols of Jewish corporate identity. The history of the Second Temple period is one of integration, in which more and more Jews came to define themselves around these symbols. The implications of this development are complex, and we cannot produce an account of Jewish life in the Second Temple period solely on the basis of Pentateuchal legislation. We can say, though, that the institutional power and symbolic importance of the Torah and temple empowered their human representatives to engage in a constant *negotiation* with Palestinian Jews, whereby their behavior was interpreted in light of and reconciled with the laws of the Torah.

Another symptom of the integration of Jewish society is the rise of apocalyptic mythology, starting in the third century B.C.E. Though this mythology is suffused with a worldview that is at odds with that of the Hebrew Bible in that it regards Creation as a failure and the world as an evil mess, in its extant form it has been thoroughly judaized: its heroes are taken from Bible stories, which usually can serve as the main “intertexts” for the apocalyptic books; its angels may be extremely powerful but are still Jewish angels, their names and functions derived exegetically from the Bible; finally, Yahweh always wins in the end. This mythology was pervasively influential in the literature of the later

Second Temple period (in only a few books are traces of it absent), and it is always juxtaposed with temple- and Torah-centered material. It is thus the product of the same scribal and priestly elites and subelites who produced Jewish literature in general, and presumably it reflects their attempt to neutralize, judaize (i.e., interpret in Jewish terms), and assert control over problematic, perhaps in part magical, elements of Judaeen religion, while also providing a way of explaining, and perhaps controlling, the presence of evil in the world, as the Deuteronomic theology of most of the Bible fails adequately to do.

The second part of the book concerns the period from 135 C.E. to 350, the period when the Jews of Palestine were under the direct rule of the relatively centralizing pagan Roman state (I select 350, rather than 312 or 324—when Constantine conquered the East—in recognition of the fact that christianization was a gradual process that only began with Constantine; the date is to some extent arbitrary). The striking characteristic of this period is the disjointed nature of the evidence: on the one hand, the literature, which is entirely rabbinic, demonstrates the preservation of Judaism by a segment of the Palestinian Jewish population; on the other, the archaeological remains, and some literary hints, suggest that at least in the cities and large villages Judaism had disintegrated and was replaced, as other local identities elsewhere in the Roman Empire were, by the religious, cultural, and social norms of the Greco-Roman city.

I suggest that under the combined impact of the Destruction and the failure of the two revolts, the deconstitution of the Jewish “nation,” and the annexation of Palestine by an empire at the height of its power and prosperity, Judaism shattered. Its shards were preserved in altered but recognizable form by the rabbis, who certainly had some residual prestige and thus small numbers of close adherents and probably larger numbers of occasional supporters. But for most Jews, Judaism may have been little more than a vestigial identity, bits and pieces of which they were happy to incorporate into a religious and cultural system that was essentially Greco-Roman and pagan. Most Jews may have been Jews in much the same (tenuous) way as people like, for example, Lucian of Samosata, the satirical writer of the second century who, despite his mastery of the classical tradition and of Greek style, and his possession of Roman citizenship, nevertheless regarded himself as irreducibly “other”, were Syrian.¹⁹

The third part of the book concerns the Christian empire, still a centralizing (though weaker) state, but one in which the Jews had for theological reasons a special status. The law codes demonstrate that the Christian state had an interest, which the pagan Roman state had lacked, in regarding the

¹⁹ See S. Swain, *Hellenism and Empire: Language, Classicism, and Power in the Greek World, AD 50–250* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), pp. 298–329.

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Jews as constituting a separate and discrete religious community. This is one reason, though not the only one, for the revival of Judaism in late antiquity to which archaeology and an explosion of literary production testify.

This revived Judaism was Torah and synagogue centered. One of its chief manifestations was the widespread conviction, absent or rare as far as we can tell in the Second Temple period, that the village was a religiously meaningful entity. In this part I trace the spread of the synagogue and the ideology of the religious community, attending to the ways in which they are characteristically late antique—not only a consequence of state policies but also ways in which the Jews shared general (i.e., Christian) cultural norms but appropriated them and marked them as distinctively Jewish. I do not see the late antique revival of Judaism as in any way a product of rabbinic influence, though the revival may in the long run have contributed to the rabbis' medieval rise.