A COMPANION TO THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Edited by
David S. Potter
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Patriarch’"). Peeling away the myths and legends that collected around this character in later generations, we encounter a member of the patriarchal family, perhaps the richest clan in Palestine, who found his way to Rabbinic circles, first as a student and later as an esteemed teacher. I have already argued that the production of the Mishnah supplied the impetus for the amalgamation of the class of sages, rather than vice versa. The Mishnah wove the fabric that brought together individual intellectuals who had previously been linked, if at all, only loosely and informally, and turned them into a group founded on recognition of the importance of the text it had created.

The third century opened a new stage in the history of the sages. First, they diverted their intellectual focus from the scriptures to the Mishnah itself. Some of the rabbis, apparently displeased with the final product, launched a supplementary work, the Tosefta. But this new composition assumed the Mishnah’s internal organization — six “orders,” each covering a large category of subjects, and further divided into subsections called tractates — so acknowledging its appreciation of the older work. In the third century we also hear, for the first time, of organized centers of learning — the yeshiva — some with dozens of students, who arrived from distant communities, like Persia, to hear the teachings of the sages and study the Mishnah (L. I. Levine 1989: 25–9; cf. Hezser 1997: 195–214). Some of them even transported the Mishnah outside the borders of the Roman Empire and founded centers of study in Sasanid Persia. Other works amassing the sages’ commentaries on the Bible — called “midrash” — began to appear at this time as well. It is in the third century that we can first really talk about a movement led by the sages, even if they still had a long way to go until they were accepted by all strata of the Jewish public and the legal products of their scholarship — the halakha — became the obligatory infrastructure of Jewish life. That happened only after the rise of Islam, outside the traditional borders of the Roman world, in Persia, and from there back to Palestine, and thence to North Africa and Europe.
of ancient Jewish texts that was discovered in the nineteenth century), and the genre continued to evolve in Persia after the rise of Islam under the guidance of a group known as the Gaonim, hundreds of years after the Mishnah. The editors of the Mishnah executed an entirely different agenda, evident in the simple fact that the work does not provide a clear and unambiguous legal ruling on nearly any subject. On the contrary, its editors gathered and then offered several opposing positions on each and every issue. Those who wish to conduct their life according to the Mishnah would quickly find themselves at a dead end. Whose views are they to follow? Rabbi Eliezer’s, Rabbi Yehoshua’s, Rabbi Meir’s, or Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai’s? Lacking the sophisticated hermeneutic tools that developed in much later generations which would enable them to choose between opposing positions, there is no way of deciding between the disagreeing voices of the Mishnah, and the editors were apparently uninterested in reaching such a verdict. Furthermore, from the work’s first line, the text ignores the larger public (most of whose members did not, in those days, know how to read: Hezser 2001). It requires prior knowledge of nuances and complex legal concepts that the sages had developed. The Mishnah itself does not convey this preliminary knowledge, and without it the text is accessible only to those conversant with the sages’ legal thinking—a doctrine so difficult to grasp that the untrained person could hardly understand it. The Mishnah contains no hint that its editors presumed, expected, or hoped that their text would turn out to be what it eventually became, a Jewish foundation document of the same, and in some cases even higher, standing than the Torah itself.

Apparently, the original target audience of the Mishnah was the sages themselves. The work sought to collect and summarize their legal project. Understanding this is inextricably linked to a balanced appreciation of the sages’ position in Jewish society after the destruction of the Second Temple. As noted above, I view them as individual intellectuals, with at most a handful of them gathered at any given time around a revered teacher (Hezser 1997). They were legally inclined, erudite scholars who devoted their lives to the study of the Jewish scriptures, and to examining them through legal paradigms. They developed methods for explicating and interpreting texts, some very original; others had been known to previous learned Jews in the Second Temple period (such as the people of Qumran); still others were borrowed from the Mediterranean non-Jewish intellectual milieu, which itself had a long tradition of textual and legal analysis (Lieberman 1941: 47–82; and somewhat differently in the articles collected in Hezser 2003). The destruction of the Temple, and the fact that the Romans prevented its rebuilding, produced an existential challenge that spurred and nourished the sages’ creative work. It posed a key question that lay at the foundation of their enterprise: What constitutes Jewish life in the absence of the Temple?

Individual sages pursued their study for several generations until, at the end of the second and the beginning of the third centuries, the conditions were right for the collection, editing, and production of a summary document. It was a huge undertaking that required intense organization and significant financial support. Emissaries had to be sent out to gather the material; scholars had to elucidate, arrange, organize, and edit it; scribes had to copy it and produce drafts. Carrying out this endeavor required a figure of authority and vision. Apparently all these conditions came together in the persona of Rabbi Judah “the Prince” (ha-Nasi, also translated “the
spiritualized forms of worship. In this context, the rabbis felt that an existential mode consisting of two conflicting registers — longing for the past and strong assurance about the present — epitomized the formula that could keep Judaism going.

Stepping back from Rabbinic sensibilities, the ancient synagogue emerges as a multi-functional cultic and communal establishment, diversified in its appearance and substance. Alongside the worship of God through prayer and the housing of the Torah scroll in a special ark, some communities in the Bosporan kingdom, for example, practiced and documented the manumission of slaves in this institution (E. L. Gibson 1999). Other synagogues housed the public archives of the people associated with it (non-Jews included?) and other functions of community life such as schools for the youth. Most of all, the building embodied the spatial layout so central for ancient identity — its iconography, most of which, but not all, is later than the period discussed here, brought to life and perpetuated the memories of the shared past as communicated by the scriptures, and its space provided for the various Jewish celebrations such as the Sabbath, annual holidays, marriages, and other local festivities, as well as for the enactment of local hierarchy and power (who sat where, whose honor was inscribed on stone or mosaic, etc.).

6 The Intellectual Dimension: The Sages and Their Literature

A discussion of Judaism in antiquity must include an evaluation of the sages’ literary and intellectual endeavor. As noted above, the social power and political prestige that later rabbis gained, in particular after the Muslim conquest, and the canonical status of their writings at that later time, complicates any examination of their origin and development in the period under discussion here. As mentioned above, we need not accept the somewhat romantic and certainly anachronistic position voiced in the past, according to which the sages became the leaders of the Jewish people immediately or soon after the destruction of the Temple, constituting a kind of supreme council that steered the ship of Judaism and shaped its way of life. Even so, one cannot ignore the enormous literary project of the rabbis and their profound, mainly intellectual, achievements in the first centuries of the Common Era (S. Safrai 1987; Strack and Stemberger 1996).

First and foremost stands the Mishnah, the earliest known literary accomplishment of the sages. Dating from approximately 200 CE, it is a comprehensive legal text, a type of compendium (or legal anthology) to which we have but few parallels from this early period. The quality and precision of its phraseology and scrupulous editing combined with its intellectual vigor rank the Mishnah at the top of the ancient world’s legal documents. The view, embraced by some modern scholars (as well as orthodox Jews), that sees the Mishnah as a type of legal codex, a charter or rule of behavior addressed to the public at large, meant to lay out and dictate the Jewish way of life, should be roundly rejected (Goldberg 1987: 213–14). Texts of such pragmatic nature are well known in the Middle Ages, for example Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah and later on Joseph Karo’s Shulhan Arukh. The earliest such works date back to the end of the Byzantine period and were discovered in the Cairo Genizah (a repository
spiritual one. Finally, without sacrifices, the priestly class lost its unique status as well as its base of social power and wealth.

On another level, however, despite these contrasts, many traits of the synagogue deliberately recall the Temple, and are meant to sharpen the sense of its loss. In doing so they necessarily fuel the expectation of the Temple’s return. Despite their diversity in structure, art, and probably, although less documented, in content, almost every level of synagogue experience patently exhibits Temple-oriented elements, from the organization of the synagogue’s spatial layout to the substance of its rituals. Many, although admittedly not all, synagogue buildings face Jerusalem, fixing the attention of the attendants on that distant ruin that they all expect to be rebuilt “soon, in our own days,” as the closing pericope of the popular ‘amidah prayer states. Prayer procedures in the synagogue (preserved only in Rabbinic compilations and thus to be treated with caution) were modeled on, and thus propagate the memory of, the Temple’s daily sacrificial liturgy. The services borrowed their names from the two main daily offerings of the Temple worship – shaharit (morning) and minhah (afternoon) sacrifices. Sabbaths and festivals included an additional service, musaf, named for the extra sacrifice offered on those days. Even more significantly, the content of the prayers evoked the Temple sacrifice and fostered an emotional longing for its return (Fine 1997: 79–94). Finally, the synagogue’s furnishings duplicated the Temple’s in many, although not uniform, ways. At the front of the hall, placed on a platform (and usually enclosed by a chancel screen: Fine 1998) separating it from the congregation, stood the ark of the Torah, reminiscent of the Ark of the Covenant that resided, also removed from the public, in the Temple’s Holy of Holies. A freestanding Menorah, a replica of the Temple’s, decorated many synagogues in the past and to this day. Even more significantly, synagogue art in the shape of numerous mosaic floors, the most common ornamentation of these buildings, regularly depicted sacred objects associated with the Temple, as well as motifs from its liturgy (such as the binding of Isaac, with its strong connotations of sacrifice).

Was the synagogue meant to be a definitive replacement for the Temple, or was it intended to be a temporary substitute that kept the memory of the real, beloved institution fresh in the minds of the Jews? The answer is probably both. Rabbinic literature, the sole literary evidence from this period, reflects this complexity and sophistication. (It should be noted that we have no clear evidence to support the traditional claim that the rabbis shaped the institution of the synagogue; many of the available sources actually seem to contradict this notion: L. I. Levine 2000: 440–70). The rabbis simultaneously embraced two opposite tendencies. They praised and exalted the past eminence and glory of the Temple, yet at the same time created a new future without it. Such an approach proved essential for people who felt they had lost everything with the destruction, and even more for a religious system that lacked its most prominent institution. Thus the synagogue embodies two utterly contrasting claims. On the one hand, the Temple is not lost, it is here in miniature (and indeed a Rabbinic tradition labels the synagogue “a little/lesser temple,” bMegilah 29a). On the other hand, refashioning the Temple as the synagogue actually presupposes and institutionalizes its absence forever. But there was more to it. The rabbis read the historical map correctly and understood the huge changes of their time. The Jewish people who were scattered all over the world lacked a strong center to look to. Other religious systems, like Christianity, were eschewing animal sacrifice and creating
therefore, that the Temple exceeded its practical religious status and became the best-known emblem of the nation of Israel (Horbury 1991).

All this changed, though not instantly, after the destruction of the Temple. Beyond the horrendous physical blow—tens if not hundreds of thousands of dead (a number that was doubled and tripled by later rebellions), the loss of property and land—the Jews remained without the institution that in their mind made life possible. It is no wonder, then, that many of them (although surely not all) concluded that Judaism had reached its end. In their mind, with the eradication of the mechanism that had linked them with God, Israel’s connection with its protector had been cut off and the way of life that had been nourished by that union had terminated (e.g. 2 Bar 10 [Charles 39–41], 44 [Charles 60–1]; *Toledot* 15:10–15 [Lieberman 4.242–4]). The paucity of sources from this period does not allow us to fully measure the circulation of such beliefs. I surmise that it is no coincidence that it is in this period that Jewish groups that believed in Jesus formulated their first comprehensive narratives about his teaching. These accounts should be seen, in my view, at least in part, as responses to the vacuum created by the destruction. The gospel accounts offer a formula of redemption in place of the security that the Temple had provided. The halakhic framework of the sages also sought, in a fundamental way, to redeem the loss of the Temple by providing an answer to the question of what constituted a Jewish way of life in its absence.

In time, the synagogue filled the spatial void left by the Temple’s destruction (much of the following is loosely based, although not without disagreement, on L. I. Levine 2000; S. Cohen 1984b; Fine 1997; Rajak 2002: 301–499). The origins of this institution stretch back to the centuries prior to the Temple’s destruction, which explains the stories about Jesus that are set in synagogues. At that time, the synagogue was a gathering place for a local community, mainly for the sake of reading the Torah publicly on the Sabbath. But after 70 CE the synagogue’s appearance and role changed dramatically. Although we cannot firmly date the stages of its development, it is safe to say that the synagogue gradually became, as it remains today, the prime locus for the Jewish worship of God, and unquestionably the most important institution in Jewish life. This role, grafted on to its original function, makes the synagogue a fascinating combination of apparent contradictions.

On one level, the synagogue seems to reverse the attributes of the Temple. Whereas the Temple occupied an exclusive and remote location that required worshipers to make a special effort to reach it, synagogues can be found in every Jewish community. A standard city averaged more than a few. In the Temple, a priestly caste served as mediators between the common people and God, while synagogue worship allowed each devotee to approach the divine equally and directly. The institution’s name, combining the Greek συν (“together”) and ἀγώγε (“bringing in”), literally meaning a coming together of people, or the place in which this occurred, reflects this egalitarian tendency. The congregation as a whole invokes God within the building and plays an equal part in his worship. This probably amounts to one of the most significant changes in the history of religions, and signals an important departure from the ancient hierarchical cultic world to the new, although not yet modern, anthropocentric religious system. Finally the liturgical routine and its agents also changed dramatically. The destruction of the Temple marks the termination of the sacrificial system, and eventually prayer replaced animal offerings. This change embodies a second, no less radical transformation, inasmuch as it replaces a physical means of worship with a
God existed beyond immediate reach, but remained accessible nevertheless. Accordingly, the common belief in those days held that God must dwell among his people. Judaism differed from the other religions throughout the Roman Mediterranean in that the latter viewed their gods as human or semi-human figures and therefore placed their images in the temples. The Torah insisted on the non-anthropomorphic nature of God, and thus prohibited its depiction. So the Temple in Jerusalem stood naked, devoid of statues. Instead, ancient Israelite thinkers formulated the elusive concept of Shekhina (“presence”), meaning that only the intangible essence of God inhabited the sanctuary (this notion finds an intriguing parallel in the Graeco-Roman conceptualization of the divine presence in statues; see Eliav 2003). Beyond this difference, however, all ancient religions shared common practices in regard to the spatial organization of worship. The Jewish Temple resembled a huge house, consisting of two main chambers: the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant stood and God’s presence resided, and the outer chamber called kodesh or heikhal, containing the sacred vessels (furniture) – the menorah (a seven-branched candelabrum lit with oil), a golden table holding a dozen loaves of bread, and a small bronze altar for incense (analogous in the domestic metaphor to electricity, a pantry with food, and a ventilation system; the smell was, after all, quite potent). The huge altar for sacrifice stood just outside the entrance to the building (Busink 1970–80).

Another important aspect of the cultic religion involved the location of the masses while conducting worship. They were neither permitted to enter the Temple, which was considered “sacred” (i.e. extra-territorial, off limits), nor were they allowed to participate in the sacrifice of their own offerings. These privileges were exclusively granted to the priests (Hebrew: kohanim), who were seen as God’s servants and were in charge of maintaining the house (Temple) and taking care of the entire sacrificial process. The populace would gather in the courts and the huge compound that surrounded the Temple and bring their offerings to a certain point only to hand them over to the priests and watch the procedures from a distance. Such measures resulted in the separation of the individual from the core of religious activity, the encounter with God remaining indirect through a sacrifice that was handled by someone else.

Nevertheless, in the ancient world almost everyone seemed happy with this arrangement. Jews everywhere revered the Temple of God, even if some – like Jesus, who according to the Gospel writers overturned the tables in the Temple’s court (Mk 11:15–19 and parallels) – criticized the priests who controlled it or disapproved of the corruption that developed around it (C. A. Evans 1992; Larsson 1993). Notwithstanding these occasionally dissonant voices, the Temple had, by the last centuries of the First Temple period (seventh and sixth centuries BCE), become the most beloved institution of the people of Israel. This popularity reached an unprecedented peak during the days of the Second Temple. Hundreds of thousands flocked to its compound during the Jewish holidays to be in the vicinity of God. From all over the world Jews voluntarily raised a special annual levy, called the “half-shekel,” for the maintenance of the Temple (Schürer 1973–87: 2: 270–2). On the conceptual level, the Temple served as a fundamental and, in their minds, irreplaceable element of the encounter with God, the hub of the religious experience. Prayers were directed towards the Temple, sins were absolved through the offering of sacrifice, and in general the practice of Judaism was dependent on its existence. It is no surprise,
two distinct and predominantly hostile entities that at the most negotiate with and
influence each other. At least with regard to late antiquity, this model must be revised.

5 Ritual

The worship of gods was one of the basic and indispensable elements of human
experience in the ancient world. The period under discussion here witnessed a total
revision of the ritual system in the Jewish world, one of the most significant revolu-
tions that any religion has ever undergone. At their core, Israelite and subsequent
Second Temple Judaism were cultic religions, which means that they encompassed
two basic ingredients:

1 the existence of a Temple(s);
2 the worship of God through offerings – mainly animal sacrifices but also vegetar-
ian offerings (called “meal offerings,” especially all kinds of grain breads) and
liquids (like oil and wine, called “libations”).

In this respect, Judaism resembled all other religious systems in the ancient Near East
and the Graeco-Roman world, which respectively formed the cultural environments
for the Israelite tradition and Judaism. While sacrifices and offerings may well seem
fetishistic, not to say primitive and absurd, to the modern observer, to ignore them is
to overlook a fundamental aspect of ancient Jewish experience. To put it bluntly: on a
daily basis, on the grounds of the Temple, up to a hundred animals a week (rising to
thousands during the major holidays) were butchered, skinned, and finally burned on
a huge altar. Try to imagine, for example, the odor – of flowing blood, of quantities of
meat left out for too long without refrigeration, and the smell of thousands of pounds
of scorched livestock. This is what ancient religious procedures entailed. For people
of the past, these smells were sweeter than the finest perfume. In fact, a Jewish tradition
configured the spatial layout of the Temple as “Mount Moriah,” from the Hebrew
“mor” – myrrh, a kind of perfume. Ancient texts tell us that the appearance of the
smoke coiling up from the altar prompted the highest joy to the populace (Sir.
50:16–19 [Ziegler 359–40]). After all, it meant that God had received their sacrifice.
This seemingly simple act embodied no small achievement in a world that had not yet
witnessed the modern age’s dramatic advances in the natural sciences, technological–
industrial revolution, and its replacement of devout belief by secularism, all of which
have radically transformed the religious landscape. In the ancient Mediterranean,
gods supplied the necessary safety nets in an environment replete with agony and
insecurity. They helped people interpret, understand, and control their fate. Everyone
strived to be on their good side.

Ancient people in general and Israelis and then Jews in particular conceived a
temple as the house of a god, any god. Within this domestic conception of sacred
space, sacrifices functioned as the “communication lines” through which the public,
standing outside the house (a gap representing the cosmological breach between the
human and the divine), could connect with the godly entity who resided inside
( GenR 68:12 [Theodor and Albeck 784–6] is one Rabbinic articulation of this
idea). Conceptualized as doctor, lawyer, financial advisor, and psychiatrist all in one,
legal systems apart. Ancient Jewish law existed in a relatively rudimentary, and therefore amorphous state; consider only the fact that at the time, no one had yet produced a legal code that would regulate Jewish life beyond the rather vague statements of the Torah, whereas through the Middle Ages the great Rabbinic legal scholars including Rabbi Isaac of Fez (1013–1103), Maimonides (1135–1204), and Rabbi Jacob ha’al baturim (died c.1340) produced countless codices, each expanding, elaborating and clarifying its predecessors. Jews in antiquity lived in a relatively flexible and unenforceable legal environment. They were able to navigate much more freely than could their medieval descendants, who lived according to a well-organized written system of halakha that predominated and determined Jewish religious experience. Jewish life in antiquity should be seen as a diversified and porous continuum on which individual Jews and groups (families, communities, geographical settings) located themselves differently, appropriating some aspects of Jewish law and rejecting others, either intentionally or obliviously.

Yet another characteristic of Jewish life in the Roman world distinguished it from both later and earlier periods. Like other minorities at the time, and unlike the Jews of the medieval world (when firm boundaries, encompassing many facets of daily routines, alienated Jews from Christians), Jews in the Roman era lived in a relatively seamless cultural environment which extended to even the far edges of the empire and embraced its members regardless of their ethnic or religious orientation. Here are two examples from Asia Minor: at Aphrodisias in Caria some high-ranking non-Jewish city officials (whom this Jewish inscription calls thesebes, i.e. God-fearers) cooperated with their Jewish neighbors in the establishment of a public kitchen for the needy (Reynolds and Tannenbaum 1987: 5 line 1, 26–7). In the inland city of Acmonia, one Julia Severa, a high priestess of the house of the divine emperors and president of the city’s competitive games, donated the “house” of the local synagogue (Rajak 2002: 463–78).

The same social and cultural dynamics emerge from the examination of the Roman bathhouse. Scholars who have reconstructed Jewish life in the Roman world by applying norms that developed later on could not conceive of Jews being part of the cultural milieu that existed in the bathhouse. After all, this institution encapsulated the very essence of the Roman way of life (romanitas), with its nudity, sports, and the hedonistic fixation on the human body (Fagan, this volume). In fact, the opposite is true: not only did Jews visit the bathhouse regularly, they also lauded its benefits and partook of its cultural proceedings (Eliav 2000). This flexibility applied even to features of Roman life that at first glance seem to be highly problematic for Jews, such as the numerous statues that permeated the Graeco-Roman landscape. Rabbinic literature expresses surprisingly lenient and diverse attitudes to these statues. Even more importantly, the rabbis’ views about three-dimensional sculpture are articulated in accordance with common modes of viewing sculpture throughout the Mediterranean (Eliav 2002). Magic is yet another feature that Jews happily shared with other constituents of the ancient world, as is perfectly apparent from the many magical texts (a full Jewish recipe book of magic formulae survived in the Cairo Genizah – Sefer ha-Razim), amulets, and curse tablets that exhibit Jewish traits, as well as numerous references to magic, not all unfavorable, in Rabbinic literature (Schaefer 1997). Such shared cultural textures undermine the prevalent modern view which reconstructs the encounter between Jews and Graeco-Roman culture as
2 Dietary laws, which proscribed certain foods, in particular specific types of meat and especially pork, a common ingredient in the Roman diet;
3 Circumcision.

These core practices are frequently supplemented in our sources with references to burial practices, the sabbatical year, and annual festivals. Jewish writers of different traditions articulate this almost obsessive tendency to encapsulate Judaism in legal paradigms, and itemize its essence in (what we now call after the Rabbis) "halakhic" details. The roots of this legal propensity go back to the sacred writings that Second Temple Jews revered as their foundation texts; first among them are the Five Books of Moses, known as the Torah. At their core, these scriptures convey the God of Israel’s requirement that his subjects strictly observe his instructions, God’s precepts (the mishvot). The Torah communicates these guidelines as legal strictures, dictating permitted and forbidden actions for God’s people. Through the mishvot the Torah endeavors to shape the Jew’s entire way of life – from his diet to his farming, from his family to the marketplace and economy, not to mention his army and its wars. Of course, the Torah also devotes much attention to the laws laying out the proper procedures for the sacrificial process of the Temple, the highest institution in the life of ancient Jews (more on this below). It also specifies a series of annual feasts that created a link between agriculture and the changing seasons of the year on the one hand and the nation’s mythological-historical heritage on the other, producing a Jewish dimension of time, a calendar. These holidays included festivals in memory of the exodus from Egypt (Passover), receiving the Torah (Shavu’ot), and later also the victories of the Hasmoneans (Hanukkah), as well as fasts and days of mourning commemorating the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the nation.

Many Jewish writers from the Second Temple period recognize the importance of the divine law. Philo endows the laws with allegorical-philosophical meaning, Josephus explains them in language comprehensible to his Greco-Roman readership, while other books, such as Jubilees, address a solely Jewish audience (Philo, Spec. Leg.; Jos. AJ 4.196). The brevity and ambiguity with which the Torah formulates its laws stimulated different Jewish groups in the Second Temple era to interpret and shape them in different ways, each differing and disputing the interpretations of the other. The Judaean Desert ("Dead Sea") scrolls provide a lively example of such a legal-polemical discourse (esp. in the text known as the Halakhic Letter [MMT; 4Q394-399]). Many of the messages that the authors of the canonical Gospels put in the mouth of Jesus also express his disagreement with the legal interpretations that the Pharisees, one of the central groups at the end of the Second Temple period, bestowed upon the Torah. Yet, at the same time, they confirm the centrality of legalistic behavior (the mishvot) in his world (Fredriksen 2000: 98–106; in contrast to later Christian claims that Jesus rejected the Torah’s practical commandments and advocated their replacement with a spiritual doctrine). The sages, as will be shown below, built on this legalistic mentality and enhanced it in the generations after the destruction.

One caveat is necessary in this regard: many modern scholars are not sufficiently sensitive to the distinctions between the function of Jewish law in ancient Judaism and the supremacy of Rabbinic halakha in the medieval and early modern world. Clear-cut and considerable differences set these two historical moments and their
But even this kind of consensus does not resolve the problem of identity. Diversity and flexibility characterized the ancient marketplace of faiths and views, and people mixed and matched their spiritual groceries eclectically and with no product loyalty (at least not in modern terms). Instances of unabashed gentiles who believed in the God of Israel and took part in his worship in synagogues are well documented (Trebilco 1991: 127–66). Likewise, many of those who professed Jesus’ messianic status retained their adherence to the God of Israel and continued to observe his laws in later generations, even when criticized by other Christians who felt that the very meaning of their faith involved separation from Judaism (Fredriksen, this volume). Finally, many (all, in my opinion) Jews took part in the Roman experience (romanitas) that pervaded the Mediterranean at one level or another, and did not necessarily see this as something that contradicted their Judaism. For example, some Jews who held official positions in municipal administrations must have actively and centrally participated in the city cult, the common norm in those days, even if certain Roman legislation pronounced their exemption from such obligations (Linder 1987: 103–7, 120–4). Jewish communities that chose to depict the image of the sun god Helios mounted on his chariot and bearing identifying attributes on the mosaic floors of their synagogues offer another example (Goodman 2003). All this points to the messiness of the cultural environment of the ancient world. In such a context, it seems to me that the very act of searching for a coherent ancient Jewish theology is fundamentally mistaken, perhaps an outgrowth of the theological intensity of Christianity. For reasons that lie outside the scope of the current study, Christian thinkers tended, already in late antiquity and even more so in the Middle Ages, to arrange the set of ideas that defined their way of life into an organized system (see Edwards, this volume). In this sense, pre-medieval Judaism was, with a handful of exceptions, a non-theological religion, and to the extent that a certain framework exists it encompassed amorphous and non-compulsory traits.

More than theology, in my opinion, Judaism features a shared historical heritage, based freely and without concrete obligation on the biblical ethos. Jews identified themselves and were perceived by their gentile neighbors as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, members of a nation that had been enslaved in Egypt, that had been taken out of bondage with signs and wonders, that had received the Torah at Sinai, and whose twelve tribes had inherited the land of Canaan.

In this pre-theological environment, Jewish experience centered on a way of life, a long list of details, small and large, that shaped the time and space of the individual and the family, weaving the practitioners, even if only very loosely, into what was called the Jewish people. Aside from the Temple, which in the time under discussion already lay in ruins, and the Jewish God, who naturally attracted much attention, Greek and Roman authors who wrote about the Jews took note of the unique law (the nomos) that set this group apart (a full collection of the material in M. Stern 1974–84); as mentioned before, Hellenistic and then Roman legislation recognized this way of life and alluded to its importance to Jews (Pucci ben Zeev 1998; Linder 1987). Its central components were:

1 The Sabbath, the seventh day of the week on which labor was prohibited, a day devoted to prayer, to family feasts, and to rest;
appreciation and admiration that most, though not all Jews had for this institution (Jacobs 1995).

4 Identity and Lifestyle

The question "who is a Jew?" has been answered in myriad ways over the generations. Defining Jewish identity in the ancient world involves no less difficulty, and perhaps even more. The rubric "Jewish" (yehudi) which began as a geographical-tribal marker (a person living in the territory called Judaea or belonging to the tribe of Judah) had by the second century BCE (2 Mc 2:21 offers the earliest testimony) developed into a signifier of cultural, religious, and national identity. Roman law (and before that Hellenistic imperial correspondence), as well as many non-Jewish authors, acknowledged a Jewish reference group with unique characteristics, and a respectable historical heritage anchored in ancient times (Pucci ben Zeev 1998; Linder 1987; M. Stern 1974–84). These sources confirm the existence of a definable Jewish identity, while at the same time assailing the signifiers of Judaism. But, more importantly for our purposes, the texture and content of that identity continued to be fluid for centuries more. Jewish identifying marks, such as dress and language, that later in history demarcated the boundaries between the members of this group and others, had not yet matured and were not sharp identifiers in antiquity. In a cultural environment in which identity is not hermetic, a person can be a good Jew, at least in his own eyes, while also being an Idumaean and a Roman, all at the same time (S. Cohen 1999b; Herod, the Jewish king of the last part of the first century BCE, represents a classic example: S. Cohen 1999b: 13–24). Alternatively, a Jew could also be a Christian and vice versa (Boyarin 2004).

Theologically, and with the aid of hindsight, it may be possible to locate clusters of ideas that could epitomize the epistemological nucleus of ancient Judaism, or at the very least denote a certain strand within it. Beyond a very superficial level, however, no consensus has ever been reached on such notions; various groups and sects differed among themselves, and within themselves, about any number of principles. Even if all of them acknowledged the importance of a given tenet in the world of Judaism, such as the belief in the God of Israel and in the traditions that the scriptures convey about him (that he created the world, brought Israel out of Egypt, gave the Torah, and so on), different people perceived the nature and essence of this God in contradictory ways. Philo of Alexandria’s philosophical divinity, for example, modeled on the high god of Greek paideia and his subordinate agent (the logos), was nothing like the concrete, almost flesh-and-blood God that nearly rubs shoulders with Bar Kokhba’s armies, according to some Rabbinic tales (Philo, Quod Deus est immutabilis; PT Ta’an. 68d). Both of these, in turn, are far from the heavenly, sometimes dualistic God that stands out in many mystical and apocalyptic works. Yet it seems to me that if we could bring Philo and Bar Kokhba together (even though historically impossible) and overcome the language gap between them (Philo spoke and thought in Greek, whereas Bar Kokhba’s mother tongue was Aramaic), the two of them would have agreed that they believe in the same deity – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who granted the Torah to Israel.
of this institution, its nature, and the source of the patriarch’s authority remain unclear, and are the object of speculation by modern scholars. Some believe that the Romans created the position in order to fill the vacuum left in the local government of the Jews in Palestine after the destruction of the Temple (Goodblatt 1994: 218–31). Others argue that the patriarchate was created from below, from the Jewish public (Goodman 1992), or as others maintain, only from the Rabbinic circles, and was only afterwards accorded de facto recognition by the Romans (Schwartz 1990). Advocates of all these views link the patriarchate intimately, at least at its beginning, to what is generally called “the Rabbinic movement.” But this hardly needs to be taken as unassailable fact. Presenting a strong and early bond between the patriarch and the sages served the latter’s agenda in the third and fourth centuries, as a self-conscious group seeking to strengthen their positions in society and increase their influence over Jewish life. Good relations with the patriarch, whose authority was of greater antiquity, scarcely hindered such aspirations. But the question of whether to believe this image, which derives from ostensibly historical traditions in Rabbinic literature about early patriarchs who came from among the sages, remains open at best. Simeon Bar Kosiba, the leader of the Bar Kokhba revolt, signed his letters, some of which have been uncovered in the Judean desert, with the Hebrew title nasi, or patriarch (e.g., Yadin et al. 2002: 44, 45, 46, 54), and he certainly did not belong to the circle of the sages.

The later history of the patriarchate, between the fourth century and the elimination of the post by Christian emperors in the third decade of the fifth century, is easier to reconstruct. Roman law recognized the patriarchs’ power to collect special taxes, as well as to appoint and remove community leaders both in Palestine and the Diaspora (e.g., Linder 1987: 132–8, 186–9, 196–7, 204–11). A variety of sources, both hostile—such as the writings of Christians like Eusebius, Epiphanius, and Jerome—and more sympathetic and admiring ones—such as the letters of the well-known Syrian-Greek rhetorician Libanius of Antioch—testify to the growing eminence and wide sway of the patriarchs over the generations, and about the expansion of their political and economic networks. Jewish inscriptions from synagogues and cemeteries in Palestine and the Diaspora supplement the picture, demonstrating the
his entourage, with an army (most of the time) under his command (Ando, this volume; Lintott 1993). On occasion, the Romans bestowed power and authority on individual local figures, whether “as kings and friends of the Roman People” (what are sometimes misleadingly called client-kings) or as priests. This was the case in Judaea, when Julius Caesar recognized the high priesthood office of the Hasmonean Hyrcanus II. He also granted him the status of ethnarch of the Jews, and at the same time designated the local Jewish-Iudamaean Antipater a procurator of Judaea (Jos. AJ 14.143–91). By the same token, the Roman Senate acknowledged Herod’s loyalty and promoted him to the rank of king of the Jews (Jos. AJ 14.385); later, the Jewish patriarch (*nasi*) also held the title of ethnarch (see discussion below). The same set of recognitions resonates in the official status of the high priests during the final generations of the Second Temple.

It seems, however, that the centuries immediately following the destruction witnessed a different situation. In Palestine, the Roman governor managed the province’s business from his capital in Caesarea, while city councils along the coastal plain, the central hill region, Galilee, and Transjordan oversaw local affairs. When it comes to the multitudes living outside Palestine, since Jewish existence in antiquity should not be reconstructed as a monolithic, homogeneous entity (like the Jewish nation imagined in the romantic-nationalist historiography of the nineteenth and early twentieth century), we need not amalgamate all its constituents into a single coherent hierarchy. Jews were both scattered through and embedded in the multicultural and multiethnic landscape of the Roman world, in the cities of the Mediterranean basin. They were known as an ancient and honorable, if sometimes annoying, minority, united, like other religious groups and municipal associations, principally around their cultic institutions (synagogues) and communal life. The vast amount of epigraphic material from all over the Roman Empire, sporadic and vague as it may be, offers occasional glimpses into the administrative textures of these local, self-contained communities. Honorary and burial inscriptions mention time and again the “father (and at times the mother?) of the community of the Jews,” “archon of the Jews,” “head of the synagogue (*archisynagogus*),” as well as other Jewish dignitaries, many of whom also hold high offices in the municipal administration of their cities (conveniently and exhaustively collected in Horbury and Noy 1992; Noy 1993–5; Noy et al. 2004).

As early as the Second Temple period some informal (i.e. for the most part lacking official recognition) elements in Jewish society amassed status and power. The best known of these are the Pharisees, of which Josephus writes that their influence “is so great with the masses” that the people adhere to their guidance over the commands of the king (AJ13.288). Yet the direct link that modern scholars created between Second Temple Pharisees and post-70 sages does not stand up on close examination (e.g. S. Cohen 1984a: 36–43; 1999a). Excluding instances of their self-portrayal (which tend to be found in later texts), nowhere do we find that the Rabbinic sages held the official reins of leadership in the early generations after the destruction, although they might have enjoyed some sporadic communal influence in Palestine, especially in “religious” (i.e. not civil or criminal) matters and over their own disciples/followers (Goodman 1983: 93–111; S. Cohen 1992; Hezser 1997: 329–489).

At some point – the earliest well-founded sources date to the beginning of the third century – a new form of leadership emerged: the patriarch (Jacobs 1995). The origins
third century (see Potter, chapter 8, this volume), offered myriad opportunities to cast off the yoke of the central government and join in any of the frequent insurrections that surfaced during this time. The silence of the sources regarding any participation of the Jews in these upheavals is telling. Likewise, unlike the Samaritans, who rebelled on numerous occasions in the fifth and sixth centuries to contest restrictions imposed on them by the Byzantine authorities, the Jews remain quiescent. We can only speculate as to the reasons for this peculiar reconciliation, but the outcome is clear—serenity facilitates prosperity. The archaeological and epigraphical record from the period, in the form of many dozens of Jewish villages, both in northern Palestine and in numerous cities along the Mediterranean coast, testifies to a cultural and communal flourishing of Judaism.

3 Leadership

Misled by the harmonious portrait of Jewish society discussed above, modern scholars overrated the question of leadership after the destruction of the Second Temple. The view of Jews in that era as a homogeneous group with the rabbis at the helm compelled modern investigators to seek factors to account for this situation. This effort is superfluous. In the Second Temple period, especially during the final generations of that period (for which there is a broad spectrum of documentation), the Roman regime recognized the Temple in Jerusalem as the central institution of the Jewish minority throughout the Roman Empire. Thus they allowed the collection, both in Judaea and in the Diaspora, of the half-shekel, an annual tax which funded the daily and public sacrifices, as well as the day-to-day operations of the Temple (Schürer 1973–87: 2: 570–2). The natural corollary of this, which is also in keeping with a Jewish tradition that goes back to the beginning of the Second Temple period, is that the Temple’s premier official, the high priest, functioned as the formal leader of the Jewish public in Judaea. He also enjoyed great influence, even if less formal power, in the Diaspora (Goodblatt 1994: 6–56). After the Temple was destroyed, Roman authorities decided, unlike their practice in regard to temples demolished elsewhere, not to allow the renewal of the sanctuary in Jerusalem. As a result, the institution of the high priest lost its base of power and legitimacy. This does not mean, however, that the priesthood ceased to exist. A variety of sources testify to the persistence of the priestly status and its high social prestige up until the end of antiquity and beyond. The hope to rebuild the Temple continued to beat in the hearts of many generations of Jews (manifesting itself, for example, in the Bar Kokhba revolt), thus sustaining the role of the priests. On the other hand, we no longer hear of priests holding any official position, at least not in the three centuries discussed in this chapter (Irshai 2004).

By the same measure, there is no need to assume that an alternative leadership of the entire Jewish “nation” emerged immediately, whether by Roman fiat or spontaneously from within the populace. The Roman imperial system had always functioned, along the ancient Greek-Hellenistic model, as a two-headed system integrating local government, in the form of city councils and assemblies with municipal administrative powers as well as the right to enforce (to a certain extent) indigenous constitutions, and imperial rule, in the form of the provincial management headed by a governor and
Figure 28.2a  Imperial celebration of the capture of Jerusalem is reflected in the issue of Judaea Capta coinage under Vespasian (RIC Vespasian 424; ANS 1947.2.430-rev) (Photo courtesy of the American Numismatic Society)

Figure 28.2b  The imperial issues were echoed on local coinages in the reign of Titus. Coin of Caesarea with Titus on the obverse, and Nike holding a shield on the reverse with the legend IOUDAIAS ELAKÓSUIAS [Judaea Capta] (editor’s collection)

The violent intensity that characterized the history of the Jews throughout the Mediterranean in the first century CE and the first half of the second century stands in stark contrast to the political tranquility of the next 200 years, persisting, to a large extent, although not absolutely, through the rest of late antiquity. The political and economic unrest throughout the empire, especially in its eastern portions, during the
rule in Judaea, accompanied by ethnic tensions between Jews and other national
groups in the region (Samaritans, the inhabitants of the Phoenician-Greek coastal
cities, and others), erupted in a local-national revolution, called the Great Rebellions,
in 66 CE. Fighting broke out in Judaea and adjacent areas to the north and the east.
The Romans, at the time preoccupied with their internal affairs – after Nero’s suicide
in 68, the imperial throne bounced between four men in just 18 months – took close
to four years to suppress the uprising. It was not until 70 CE that four legions under
the command of the future emperor Titus conquered Jerusalem and burned the
Jewish Temple.

We know almost nothing about the state of affairs related to the Jews or the
substance of their lives in the Roman Empire during the generation and a half after
the destruction of the Temple, beyond haphazard archaeological finds that merely
 testify to their existence here and there. But in 115, at the peak of the emperor
Trajan’s campaign in Mesopotamia (today’s Iraq), a second Jewish rebellion broke
out. This time it started in Egypt and Cyrenaica in North Africa, ignited by violent
clashes between Jews “and their Greek fellow-citizens” (Euseb. Eccl. Hist. 4.2.2;
Schürer 1973–87: 1.529–34). The uprising quickly spread to other Jewish commu-
nities throughout the Mediterranean region, and compelled the emperor Trajan to
appoint one of his best generals, Marcus Turbo, to suppress it.

The last, most ferocious, and best-planned of the insurrections broke out in 132,
during the reign of Hadrian, and is known from the name of its leader as the Bar
Kokhba rebellion. The few lines that the historian Cassius Dio devotes to document-
ing this clash convey the intensity and horror of the conflict (Dio 69.12.1–14.3).
Tens if not hundreds of thousands died on both sides, entire villages were razed, and
once densely-populated Jewish areas in Palestine were only sparsely inhabited for
many generations thereafter (Isaac and Oppenheimer 1985).

These 60 years of bloody confrontation between Jews and the Roman Empire find
no parallel anywhere else in the Roman world. Although the threat posed by the
Germanic and Scythian tribes, for example, during the second century far exceeded
the trouble caused by the Jews, and although the Romans also faced many other
upheavals within the empire’s borders (including Boudicca’s rebellion in Britain and
serious uprisings in Gaul), the Jewish uprisings were more persistent and extensive.
Scores of Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean suffered from the
conflicts, or encountered the suffering of fellow Jews, whether through the death
of family members, their sale into slavery or prostitution, or the official confiscation
of property and land. Imperial propaganda, especially of the Flavians but also of
Hadrian, spread the word of Jewish defeat and hardship even further in the form of
“Judaea Capta” coinage and by legislation; it was also advertised through triumphal
art and architecture (the arch of Titus being the most famous example). The horren-
dous outcome of these conflicts became a fundamental component of the experience
and consciousness of the generations that followed, shaping the Jewish historical
heritage, collective memory, and sense of identity. In my view, it is impossible to
understand the history of the Jews in the early centuries of the Common Era without
reference to this context. Many historians who address the tension between early
Christianity and the empire as expressed, for example, in the phenomenon of mar-
tyrdom, often forget that the discord between the Jews and the Romans was harsher
and far bloodier.
religious development." Therefore, he wrote, "one could travel, metaphorically, from Rabbinic Jew to Christian along a continuum where one would hardly know where one stopped and the other began" (Boyarin 1999: 8–9; Becker and Yoshiko-Reed 2003).

All this leads, in my opinion, to the need for a radical change in our historiographic expectations. We must recognize that, given the sources currently available to us, certain questions, some of them central and fundamental, must remain unanswered. On the other hand, such an understanding allows for a more cautious, and thus more balanced, evaluation of Jewish history in this era.

2 The Historical Framework

The contours of the era are reasonably clear. It begins with two generations of violent confrontations between Jews and the Roman Empire. Decades of unstable provincial
Another question that causes researchers a great deal of trouble is the nature of Jewish–Christian encounters. Modern scholars have often projected the medieval picture of two diametrically opposed religions separated by a theological abyss, not to mention hostility, loathing, and violence backwards into the Roman period. Excessive reliance on the contentious rhetoric of the church fathers has also contributed to the common view that colors the religious and social milieu of late antiquity in bold shades of segregation and conflict. Many of these dichotomies have come under attack in the last generation. The problem, as Daniel Boyarin states, is that Judaism and Christianity in this period “shared crisscrossing lines of history and
should ignore Rabbinic sources altogether. On the contrary – Rabbinic material, if properly used, contains a wealth of information about Jewish life in antiquity. But it must be studied with caution and within the wider context of the ancient world.

Downgrading the role of the rabbis in ancient Jewish society requires rethinking the nature of the Jewish world in the High Empire and Late Roman periods. If the sages did not set the agenda for Jewish life, and if their worldview was not generally held by their coreligionists, how did Jews live in those days? As it happens, these questions are much more complicated than we once thought. Although we would now tend to reject the centrality of Rabbinic thought to Judaism in the Roman and Byzantine periods, it must also be conceded that efforts to replace that model have not won universal assent. For example, Jacob Neusner, one of the first and sharpest critics of the old view, reconstructs many “Judaisms” that, in his view, existed side by side in those days. His approach, based on methodology from the school of intellectual history (heavily influenced by Protestant scholarship) links texts to social groups. According to Neusner, different works, even within the Rabbinic corpus, as well as certain artistic depictions (for example the mosaic floors of synagogues), represent all-inclusive religious and even social entities with independent conceptions and identities of Judaism. This equation is artificial and forced, and thus has not found many supporters in the scholarly community (e.g. Neusner 1995: 1: 117–72; S. Cohen 1983).

Archaeological discoveries add another important layer to our understanding of the period, but do not reduce its ambiguities. The most significant remains belong to ancient synagogues (L. I. Levine 2000), a subject I will deal with in greater detail below. The synagogue originated as an institution during the Second Temple period, but after 70 CE it gradually filled the vacuum left by the destroyed Temple as the central space for the performance of Jewish ritual and worship and as the prime location for communal organization. But even here the picture remains vague. Archaeologists differ about the dating of the dozens of synagogues that have been excavated throughout the Mediterranean basin, many of them in modern Israel. The artwork found in these structures presents researchers with another series of challenges. Many of the mosaic floors contain manifestly pagan motifs. The image of Helios mounted on his chariot, or the 12 signs of the Zodiac, all quite popular images in synagogue iconography, often accompany biblical motifs and narratives (such as the binding of Isaac), depictions of Temple vessels (such as the Menorah and other objects associated with this institution), and illustrations of its liturgy. What conclusions are we to draw from this about the character of the Jews who used these buildings and about the nature of the Judaism they practiced? Seth Schwartz has proposed that Judaism entirely evaporated in the early centuries after the destruction of the Temple, and was reborn only under the sponsorship and at the initiative of the Byzantine rulers. He bases his claim largely on, first, a late dating of most of the excavated synagogues and, second, on the “pagan” character of the early material evidence, such as coins from cities generally thought to have had vast Jewish populations (such as Tiberias and Sepphoris), and burial inscriptions from the 150 years after the destruction (Schwartz 2001). But his view is equally untenable (Elia 2004). Beyond some serious methodological flaws that undermine Schwartz’s thesis, many sources, especially Roman legal material (such as Linder 1987: 103–6), as well as abundant archaeological information, demonstrate a vibrant Jewish existence during this period.
future generations what happened during their time. This makes even more challeng-
ing the work of the modern investigator who seeks to draw out details from Rabbinic literature and assemble them into a historical narrative.

The sages’ status in antiquity was much more modest and their authority – if they had any at all – more meager than the traditional view would allow. The creators of Rabbinic literature were learned Jews – scholars – who were active in Palestine in the generations after the destruction of the Second Temple, and later, from the third century, also in the Persian Empire (“Babylonia” as they called what is now Iraq and Iran). Like other intellectuals (whether Jewish or not) throughout history, the rabbis were animated by their personalities, in particular the natural proclivity towards learning that singles out some individuals early in life. They devoted their lives to scholarship and erudition. The focus of their studies, the foundation texts of their curriculum, consisted of the Jewish scriptures, which later became the Bible. Their preferred “field” of study centered on legal discourse (unlike other ancient Jewish scholars, who engaged in other branches of learning, such as philosophy and mysticism). Accordingly, Rabbinic sages endeavored to channel what they believed to be the eternal truth of God, as articulated in the Torah (the first five, most important, books of the Bible), into meticulous and well-structured legal formulae. In a long and gradual process, extending well beyond the limits of this chapter, Rabbinic legal scholarship grew into an all-embracing legal system. They named it Halakha, “the way” – God’s way of life (cf. S. Safrai 1987: 121–209).

The small group of intellectuals who crafted the Rabbinic tradition had limited, if any, impact on the Jewish public in Palestine, and even less on the Jewish communities elsewhere in the Mediterranean regions. There were never more than a few dozen of them active at any given time, and sometimes even fewer (L. I. Levine 1989: 66–9). Moreover, it is not at all clear, during the 150 years after the Temple’s destruction, whether the sages were an organized movement, with self-awareness, well-defined political goals, and a coherent conceptual outlook on Jewish life. It seems more likely to me that the opposite is true (Hezser 1997: 185–224). At first, and through several generations, the sages functioned as individual scholars, teachers who gathered small numbers of students around them on a personal basis. Whatever links existed among them were loose and limited, and generally restricted to intellectual interests and scholarly debates. The situation began to change, slowly, only at the beginning of the third century CE with the project of redacting and publishing the Mishnah, the first comprehensive compilation of Rabbinic legal material. Judah the Patriarch, the official political leader of Jewish Palestine, who exercised considerable authority and prestige among Diaspora communities as well, initiated, and to a great extent funded, this huge undertaking. It was only by chance that this particular patriarch also belonged to the circle of the sages. In my view the Mishnah was the creator rather than the creation of the Rabbinical movement.

These seemingly minute nuances greatly affect our interpretation of Rabbinic texts. For one, they clog the traditional channels of information about this period. Almost no one in scholarly circles nowadays would accept Rabbinic material as a straightforward representation of contemporary Jewish life in antiquity; many Rabbinic depictions tend to exaggerate (or idealize) the role and stature of the rabbis, their practices, and their legal rulings. Other material, also of a legal nature, addresses highly theoretical issues, far removed from real life. This does not mean that one
Josephus, as well as a rich variety of other writings – wisdom literature, philosophy, exegesis, polemics, apocalyptic works, fiction, and poetry (Stone 1984; Schürer 1973–87: 3: 177–889). This wealth of sources enabled scholars to reconstruct a vibrant picture of an era riven with controversies, some of them violent.

After 70 CE, the evidence soon becomes far less plentiful. True, we have a series of compositions that articulate the world of those who believed in Jesus as the messiah – people who should, through most of this period, be viewed as Jews in every sense of the word (Fredriksen, this volume). But other than texts relating to the followers of Jesus, and a small number of other works, most of what has survived is the corpus known today as Rabbinic literature. This category comprises some 40 documents of various sizes, most of them of a legal nature (called halakha, from the Hebrew verb “to go” – in the sense of “the way in which we live”). Some of these, labeled “midrash,” are commentaries on the scriptures; the other non-legal material – stories, homilies, parables, proverbs, and other genres – are grouped under the general heading of aggadah (“telling”). Through a long and convoluted process spanning the first centuries of the common era, about which much remains a mystery, the figures we call rabbis produced, and then gathered, collected, and edited these works (S. Safrai 1987; Strack and Stemberger 1996). The utility of these sources for the reconstruction of Jewish life at this time poses grave challenges to the modern historian.

The “Rabbinic Movement” (in Hebrew HAZAL, an acronym for “our sages may their memory be blessed”) is the anachronistic term given to the men who created this literature. The term intends to exalt and set them apart as a homogeneous group with a distinct ideology and systematic philosophy of life that shaped the character of Judaism, its institutions, and its way of life from then until now. According to this view, Rabbinic literature contains within it the essence of Judaism after the destruction of the Temple, a way of life developed, honed, and led by those who wrote these works – the rabbis. Hence the common label of the centuries after 70 CE in collective Jewish memory – the Rabbinic Period (or, in some cases, the Period of the Mishnah and the Talmud[s], after the two major Rabbinic texts). The foundation of this view lies in the Middle Ages, when most segments of the Jewish population accepted Rabbinic literature as a cornerstone of Jewish life and as the very soul of Judaism. The leaders of Jewish communities in the medieval Jewish Diaspora (and in many cases until our day) viewed themselves as the successors and followers of the Rabbinic sages (the hakhamim) who created this literature. Accordingly, they adopted for themselves the collective title of “rabbi” that they had bestowed on their predecessors.

The veneration of Rabbinic texts ensured their preservation from one generation to the next – first as hand-written codices, and finally printed in thousands of copies. Yet this very process of perpetuation undermined the ability of modern scholars, many of whom came from circles that revered the rabbis, to reconstruct the context in which their texts were composed. In fact, the process of composition often completely distorted that context. The result is that most members of the current generation of scholars now reject the view that emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, that Jews in the ancient world defined themselves and lived their lives according to the ideas and instructions to be found in Rabbinic literature (Hezser 1997: 1–42, 353–404). To this we must add the recognition that the Rabbinic literature was never intended to be read as if it were history. The sages sought mostly to record and document their intellectual, legal, and midrashic discussions, not to tell
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Jews and Judaism 70–429 CE

Yaron Z. Eliav

By a conservative estimate, scholars assess the population of the Roman Empire at the beginning of the first millennium CE to have been 50–60 million, inhabiting the lands around the Mediterranean basin. An educated guess counts among them about five million Jews, more or less (Hopkins 1998; Schwartz 2001: 10–11, 41; cf. McGing 2002). Something between 10 and 20 percent of the empire’s Jewish population lived in the area now called Israel or Palestine, in those days a Roman province first called Judaea and later Syria-Palestina. The rest lived in cities and villages throughout the Mediterranean world, from Egypt and North Africa, through Syria, Asia Minor, and Greece, to Rome and even beyond it in Gaul (modern-day France) and the Iberian peninsula, non-contiguous islands of Jewish habitation usually referred to as the Diaspora. These numbers, imprecise as they may be, and their geographical distribution, establish the Jews as the largest and most widely dispersed ethnic minority under Roman rule. This immediately raises questions about the nature of this community, which in turn takes us from geography and statistics to politics, society, culture, and religion. The answers to these questions are not as simple as one might think.

1 The Sources and their Problems

A variety of different but interrelated factors undermines the historian’s efforts to recount straightforwardly the story of ancient Judaism and the Jewish people in the centuries following the destruction of the Second Jewish Temple (in 70 CE). First and foremost stands the situation of the sources. The last three centuries BCE and the first two generations of the first century CE – a time span known in Jewish history as the Second Temple period (more broadly dated from 586 BCE to 70 CE) – produced a large number of documents that have come down to us, in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. These include historiographical works, such as the books of the Jewish historian Flavius