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The Matrix of Ancient Judaism


Seth Schwartz’s *Imperialism and Jewish Society* offers a fresh look at the various factors—political, social, and religious—that shaped Judaism in the Greco-Roman and subsequent early Byzantine worlds. Although the book centers on history rather than literature, it holds far-reaching implications for any study of ancient Jewish texts (and art). Literary production does not operate in a vacuum: the historical context in which ancient authors created their texts is critical for the modern scholar’s understanding of these writings. A story exhibiting the Rabbis as community leaders, for example, the likes of which are found throughout talmudic and midrashic literature, would be read differently if one believes that the protagonists in fact held such roles or if they were struggling with only limited success to achieve leadership. Schwartz’s book, therefore, is essential for modern readers of ancient Jewish literature. As Frank Kermode has taught, the interaction between literature and its historical contexts is a subject calling for subtlety and caution. Indeed, much of Schwartz’s discussion deals with what can and cannot be extracted from literary sources about how ancient people lived, organized their societies, and shaped their religious and cultural landscapes. In doing so, he himself becomes a particular reader of texts, utilizing tools from the literary disciplines in his historical analysis of the sources. Among its many assets, Schwartz’s book is important both for its claims regarding the historical context of Second Temple and late antique Jewish literature and for the methodologies and strategies that inform his own reading.

In the twentieth century, historians of the ancient world operated on two tracks: one, fastidious in its attention to detail and restricted in its focus (its critics
rate it as anywhere from deathly dull to entirely expendable); and the other, general and widely embracing the full historical spectrum. Advocates of the first believe that the whole contains only what its constituent elements impart to it. Historians writing in this mode fasten their attention to sources and submerge themselves in minute details—deciphering them, teasing out information, cross-checking them, identifying and resolving contradictions. Only then do they attempt to integrate these details into a broader picture. Menachem Stern's *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* represents a classic product of this school.\(^2\) The second approach seeks to illuminate a more expansive and complete picture of the past, in which the whole imbues the details with significance. The ultimate objective of these works lies not in a particular source or subject, but rather in a comprehensive reconstruction of the past, drawing on many sources. Schwartz's book fits solidly into this latter model, as he himself states: "[H]ypotheses about the society that produced the artifacts must necessarily accompany the 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" (1; emphasis added).\(^3\)

The mast around which Schwartz has rigged his sails, if for the most part loosely, is the relation between imperial power—Persian, Greek-Hellenistic, Roman, and finally Byzantine—and Jewish society. He is particularly interested in the influence that imperial recognition of the Jews had on the crystallization of Jewish society, its character, and its identity. He fills his sails with a good measure of claims and diagnoses about Jewish experience in the ancient world, the forces that acted within that civilization, and the trends that set its direction. From these, he produces a new story of the Jewish people's history in the thousand years between the Hellenistic conquest and the rise of Islam.

The story that Schwartz tells in *Imperialism and Jewish Society* is one of collapse and revival. In a sense, Schwartz operates within the traditional historiographic model that portrays the first century C.E. and the beginning of the second century C.E. as a great divide in Jewish history: the failure of the two great rebellions and the loss of the Jerusalem Temple and its sacrificial cult, on the one hand; and a recasting of Judaism in a new mold centered on a communal and religious center, the synagogue, on the other. Other changes: the rise of the Rabbis; the establishment of rabbinic literature—the Mishnah and Talmud—as the basis for Jewish life; and the
emergence of Christianity. But Schwartz complicates this model, eliminating some of its components and changing others, with very novel and even revolutionary results. On Schwartz’s telling, the Second Temple period was the time in which a general Jewish identity was formed, an identity founded on a three-pronged ideology, whose elements were Torah, Temple, and God (49–50). Schwartz reasons that imperial recognition played a constitutive role in this development. In the Persian period, “Some version of the Torah became the authorized law of the Jews,” and it was imposed by the imperial regime on the Jews. Later, all Hellenistic and Roman rulers (with the exception of Antiochus IV Epiphanes) until 70 C.E. recognized the Temple in Jerusalem and reinforced its status (52), in particular by preventing the construction of other temples to the God of Israel (and largely, if not completely, pagan temples) in Judaea. These rulers evinced a similar attitude toward Jewish law, which was based in one form or other on the Torah (55). The Torah thus amounted to a kind of Jewish constitution, and “[i]ts authority rested not simply, and initially perhaps not at all, on the consensus of the Jews, but on the might of the imperial and native rulers of Palestine” (56). This process reached its fullest expression in the first century C.E., when the various Jewish communities in Palestine internalized the Temple and the Torah as a symbolic system that represented and defined their way of life (59).

More radical still is Schwartz’s account of post-70 Jewish history. Schwartz argues that Jewish society collapsed during this period, dissolving into a voiceless entity. The imperial Roman power that established hegemony over Palestine during these years suspended the authority of the now-dismantled Temple and the Torah (103), and as a result, Judaism evaporated, that is, ceased to exist, a claim that Schwartz repeats several times (e.g., 104, 127). So what happened to the hundreds of thousands of Jews who remained in Palestine at the time? They became “indistinguishable” (127) from their non-Jewish neighbors and assimilated into Roman urban culture. Schwartz admits that some Jews (such as those we call Rabbis) preserved the Torah as a vital factor in defining their way of life and consciousness. But these people remained marginal, lacking any significant position in society, although they continually sought to enhance their status (103–4).

Schwartz’s marginalization of the Rabbis during this post-70 period has far-reaching ramifications for any engagement of rabbinic literature, the body of texts
that constitutes the major literary artifact of the period. Schwartz's account of the status of the Rabbis, or lack thereof, raises profound questions as to the historical reliability of the claims made, both implicitly and explicitly, by the rabbinic corpus. Descriptions of the Rabbis as national leaders, or even as accepted legal authorities, are, for Schwartz, little more than wishful thinking, and it is this part of the study that makes it relevant not only to the historian of the period, but to any student of rabbinic literature.

The final phase involves Christianity's rise to power in the Roman Empire, a gradual process that began in the fourth century C.E. Over time, according to Schwartz, Christianity detached the largely assimilated Jews from imperial sources of patronage and presented them with two alternatives: to continue to assimilate (the price being Christianization), or to carry on as Jews. In establishing religion as a defining category, Christianity forced at least some Jews to readopt their religion in order to remain Jews. In his provocative way, Schwartz calls the Judaism of this time "repackaged Christianity" (179). Two principal sources support Schwartz in this part of his argument. On the Roman side, he reexamines the imperial, Roman-Byzantine laws that were devoted to the Jews. While the accepted view holds that Byzantine legislation sought to preserve the Jews' traditional status, Schwartz sees in it a manifestly novel approach that legally recognizes—and thus reestablishes—the Jews as a separate entity (187). On the Jewish side, Schwartz points to the nearly uniform presence of synagogues in every Jewish settlement, even the smallest, in Byzantine Palestine, a fact that, he suggests, signifies the "re-Judaization" of this society around the model of the community. He invests a great amount of scholarly effort in uncovering the religious ideology that stood behind this pattern. In the end, he sees it as almost a new, anti-rabbinic, religious (e.g., 199, 227–38, 259) that clusters around communal experience, the community functioning as an autonomous organism of sanctity.

In elucidating this broad thesis, Schwartz covers the length and breadth of Jewish historiography of the ancient world, considering nearly every major issue and often providing fresh observations and original insights. He discusses, inter alia, the encounter between Judaism and Hellenism (his conclusion: Greek culture was generally accepted peacefully [22]); the ideological strains that shaped the religious experience of those times (chap. 2); the social and spiritual context for the rise of the

emergence of Christianity. But Schwartz complicates this model, eliminating some of its components and changing others, with very novel and even revolutionary results. On Schwartz's telling, the Second Temple period was the time in which a general Jewish identity was formed, an identity founded on a three-pronged ideology, whose elements were Torah, Temple, and God (49–50). Schwartz reasons that imperial recognition played a constitutive role in this development. In the Persian period, "Some version of the Torah became the authorized law of the Jews," and it was imposed by the imperial regime on the Jews. Later, all Hellenistic and Roman rulers (with the exception of Antiochus IV Epiphanes) until 70 C.E. recognized the Temple in Jerusalem and reinforced its status (52), in particular by preventing the construction of other temples to the God of Israel (and largely, if not completely, pagan temples) in Judea. These rulers evinced a similar attitude toward Jewish law, which was based in one form or other on the Torah (55). The Torah thus amounted to a kind of Jewish constitution, and "[i]ts authority rested not simply, and initially perhaps not at all, on the consensus of the Jews, but on the might of the imperial and native rulers of Palestine" (56). This process reached its fullest expression in the first century C.E., when the various Jewish communities in Palestine internalized the Temple and the Torah as a symbolic system that represented and defined their way of life (59).

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sects; the rise of the institution of the Nasi; synagogue mosaics and liturgy; Hebrew liturgical poetry (*piyyut*); and, perhaps most controversially, the Rabbis. Schwartz minimizes, to the point of dismissal, the power and status of the Rabbis in the first centuries after the destruction, carrying on a scholarly trend that has its roots in the critical works of Jacob Neusner in the 1970s and 1980s. Schwartz also discusses at length the integration of the Rabbis into the urban fabric of Roman Palestine and illuminates the cultural dynamic that accompanied this process (chap. 5).

*Imperialism and Jewish Society* represents some of the most novel developments in the recent study of ancient Judaism. Throughout the book, Schwartz draws on the analytical tools of the social history school, which serve him principally to produce parameters and frameworks for organizing, investigating, and finally reassembling the material that he has gathered into a coherent historical narrative. In applying these tools, Schwartz takes great care to place the discussion in the Greco-Roman context of the East. These two elements complement each other and are the book's highest achievement. In this writer's opinion, they are his major contribution to scholarship, and while one may dispute his diagnoses, Schwartz repeatedly demonstrates the efficacy of one fundamental principle of the study of this period: that ancient Jewish society acted and operated like any other society of those times.

Schwartz also strides the line between the historical positivism that characterized the study of ancient Judaism in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries and the extreme critical approach typical of Neusner's school, which rejects the utility of many ancient sources, rabbinic literature in particular, for historical purposes (a position that Schwartz considers "less plausible than the one it replaced" [8]). Schwartz's minimalism (his term) serves him in good stead, as time and again he enlightens us, challenging common wisdom and marking out the boundaries of our knowledge about the ancient period. So, for example, he accepts the decisive impact of the Torah and Temple in shaping the ideology of Second Temple Judaism. But he distinguishes this role from the distribution of these ideas and their manifestations within the daily lives of the Jews of the time. He quite rightly comments: "It is much easier to establish the likelihood that many or most Palestinian Jews in the first century considered God, the Temple, and the Torah important factors in making them what they were than to determine what exactly
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Another example from the period after the destruction figures in the criticism Schwartz directs at the prevailing tendency in the study of ancient synagogues. Scholars invest tremendous energy to identify the origin of this institution, and having done that, they recount the synagogue's history as a pageant of gradual change and development. In his razor-sharp language, Schwartz calls this "obsession with origin" (215). He ably demonstrates that, even if the institution existed in the Second Temple period and was not invented in the Byzantine period, it makes no difference when it comes to the revolution and innovation that it represented in the latter period. Only then did it become the principal establishment in the Jewish world. Schwartz's skepticism serves as a scalpel that enables him to cut away at the foundations of the thematic model, which has guided, and still guides, the historical narrative of ancient Judaism.

At times, however, Schwartz's argument is more provocative than well-founded, as though he were trying to disturb his readers rather than convince them. Already his position on the early period, according to which the Persian authorities imposed a Jewish constitution modeled on the Torah (20; a claim that he later repeats on p. 56 with regard to the Hellenistic rules), appears rather forced. The use of the term "imposed" connotes an external agency of imperial force in the crystallization of Jewish identity, which is the core of the book's hypothesis. But why can we not suppose that the Jews themselves, or at least many of them, wanted the law, and that the rulers simply consented, or supported them? A firm foundation for his argument requires him to demonstrate that the Jews were not interested in accepting the Torah as a constitutional framework and that the gentle rulers forced it on them. But the book supplies not a single piece of evidence to support such a position and to prefer it over the other possibility. Schwartz here stumbles into a pitfall that he himself calls guesstwork.

But the most challenging of Schwartz's claims regards the disintegration of Judaism in the few centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple. In light of its importance, his portrayal of this era in Jewish history will be the focus of
much of what follows. It should be noted at the outset that Schwartz’s radical hypothesis concerning the disappearance of Judaism after 70 C.E., and especially in the second and third centuries C.E., is not without its problems. Schwartz bases this bold assertion largely on a survey of second- and third-century archaeological material, from areas and cities that, in his opinion, hosted a considerable Jewish population. He points out that Jews during this period did not produce idio-synchronically Jewish art, and he demonstrates that the city coins from Tiberias and Sepphoris, as well as the inscriptions and art from these locations, represent the residents’ identity as almost completely pagan. From this, he deduces that the Jews of that time lacked any sense of distinctiveness and then ties this loss of identity to the collapse of the fundamental ideology of Second Temple Judaism after the destruction, and in particular following the disastrous failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt (103). The evidence for this disappearance is, however, flimsy, resting as it does on the lack of distinctive Jewish artifacts, an archaeological *e silentio* argument, rather than on solid findings. Such a methodological model that equates lack of distinctive archaeological findings with a collapse in identity bears grave problems. For what would we have known, for example, about a Second Temple Jewish sense of distinctness without the written sources of the time, most of them preserved through Christian channels, or in the unanticipated discoveries of Qumran? In Caesarea, for example, a much more fully excavated site than Tiberias, archaeologists have unearthed almost no material evidence or epigraphy from the city’s early, Second Temple Jewish community. Without Josephus, a modern historian might argue (as Schwartz does for the second and third centuries) that there was no Jewish community in the city at the time of the Second Temple! Obviously, such a claim would be utterly unfounded. Significantly, Schwartz’s sources for the “defining ideology” of Second Temple Judaism are textual, while the absence of Jewish identity in the second and third centuries is attested by (the absence of) archaeological evidence.

There is, moreover, archaeological evidence that flatly contradicts Schwartz’s position. To his credit, he is aware of this evidence, such as the cemetery at Beth She’arim, which is full of Jewish features, or the water installations at Sepphoris, many of which served, in the opinion of many scholars, as ritual baths. Furthermore, Roman law from the second half of the second century and the beginning of the
third addresses groups maintaining clear-cut Jewish identity. Schwartz calls the findings in Beth She'arim “atypical” (153), while he rejects the claim of ritual baths in Sepphoris and identifies all of them as “bathtubs” (144). But note the absence of comparative analysis: were such “bathtubs” common in other places, or is Schwartz’s Sepphoris the center of some sort of bathtub culture? Clearly, proposing a hypothesis and rejecting evidence to the contrary as “atypical” runs the risk of circular argument.

But the problems run deeper still. Confirmation of such an extreme thesis requires attention to a much broader spectrum of details than the archaeological/artistic elements on which Schwartz founds his structure. He neglects simple questions, such as: Did the Jews of the second and third centuries observe the Sabbath? Did they circumcise their sons? Did they pray to the God of Israel? And if they in fact abandoned all these practices and ceased to think of themselves as Jews (which is what Schwartz implies, e.g., on p. 273), why did they resume the observance of these customs in the fourth century? Is there any precedent for such a phenomenon—a way of life vanishing almost entirely and then, 150 years later, suddenly reemerging, in full force, just where it left off? And what of the texts written during this interval? Schwartz raises important questions about this period, especially regarding the relation between the archaeological record and the culture that it reflects, and some of his insights are surely valid: there were certainly many who abandoned Judaism, and it is reasonable to suppose that the status of the Sages and of the Nasi was not as elevated as previous scholars have assumed. But many texts reflect an ongoing, lively Jewish environment. This is true of Jewish sources, such as the Mishnah and Tosefta (even if Schwartz is correct that the group that produced them was not as central to Jewish life as scholars once thought), as well as Christian works, such as Justin Martyr’s dialogue with Tryphon and the Epistle of Barnabas.

Furthermore, the absence of comparative analysis is critical. When drawing conclusions from the sources’ silence rather than from their explicit content, as Schwartz not infrequently does, comparative analysis—the occurrence of similar phenomena in other periods or among other contemporary groups—is crucial. Schwartz should have compared the Jews of the second and third centuries with contemporary groups in urban Palestine and elsewhere in the Roman Empire that
maintained clear and distinct identities. What would we know, for example, about the Christians of Caesarea in the third century, the golden age of Origen and Pamphilus, if we based ourselves solely on the material finds turned up by archaeologists? Nothing. Similarly, the catacombs of Rome yield abundant evidence for Jewish and Christian societies in the late third and fourth centuries, but next to nothing about the early communities of these groups. This seems to indicate (and there is some proof to support such a conclusion) that the Jews and Christians of Rome in the second and most of the third centuries shared the burial practices—and even more important, the iconography—of the surrounding pagans. In Schwartz's terms, such practices would deem the Jews and Christians of Rome "indistinguishable." But does this mean that these did not exist or that their identity and ideological system collapsed? No! Rather, in the words of one scholar, "The surviving evidence suggests the earliest Christian communities did not find this practice unacceptable." The archaeological material alone cannot prove a lack of identity. As shown in the examples above, records of such nature are likewise absent for groups and for times whose identity is well established. One can propose various reasons that would have caused the findings in Tiberias and Sepphoris to exhibit Roman character: Schwartz's theory of a Jewish ideological subsidence is only one possible explanation, but not necessarily the most plausible.

Similar problems plague Schwartz's discussion of rabbinic culture in its later manifestations. Schwartz devotes chapter 5 to explicating the encounter between the Rabbis and the paganism of the Roman cities. He builds the chapter on the assumption that the life advocated by the Rabbis was wholly incompatible with the urban texture of a Roman city: "It must finally be admitted that the culture of the Greco-Roman city and the Judaism of the rabbis contradicted each other both essentially and in superficial detail" (163). At the same time, Schwartz asserts that the Rabbis aspired to reside in the cities, the centers of power and social activity in those times (164), despite the cultural discord. So they developed, he maintains, a method that he calls "misprision" of the pagan milieu of the times. Schwartz bases this idea on an analysis of the famous story about Rabban Gamaliel visiting the bathhouse of Aphrodite in Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:4, which he sees as "unusual in the context of the Mishnah in that it lacks any clear legal content" (167). While in the bathhouse, a "philosopher" approaches Rabban Gamaliel and challenges his
presence there, suggesting that it involves prohibited benefit from idolatry. Schwartz construes this question as a challenge with which the “rabbis” (as if this were a single homogeneous group) sought to cope. In his opinion, Rabban Gamaliel’s first response—“I did not come within her limits; she came within my limits”—is difficult to understand, thus leading to a subsequent answer: “[People] do not say ‘let us make a bath for Aphrodite,’ but [rather] she, Aphrodite, is made an ornament for the bath.” According to Schwartz, with this formulation Rabban Gamaliel dismisses the statues in the bathhouse as “mere decoration” (169), an approach that Schwartz labels “reductive” (170), “anachronistic” (171), and, earlier, “misprision.”

The analytical tactics that Schwartz implements in deciphering the passage from the Mishnah ignore several elementary principles of the study of ancient texts in general and of tannaitic halakhah in particular. Had he, for example, taken into account the methodical research process that Christine Hayes displays so vividly in her book (a study that Schwartz approvingly cites on more than one occasion), he would not have arbitrarily detached a rabbinic passage, which functions within a concrete legal framework, from its immediate context and interpreted it as if it were a free-floating incident. Chapter 3 of tractate Avodah Zarah sets out, in an intricate but ordered way, a series of positions (in the plural! and not as a single abstract “rabbinic” stance, as Schwartz maintains) regarding the statues that pervaded the urban landscape of Roman Palestine. In keeping with rabbinic textual procedures, the anecdote about Rabban Gamaliel operates as a kind of legal precedent, relating to one of the views in the chapter (that of the majority in the first halakhah), developing, elucidating, fleshing out, and ultimately balancing it.

Furthermore, in his inclination to alienate the Rabbis from the Roman world, Schwartz overlooks the parallels between the different rabbinical positions in chapter 3, including those embodied in the Rabban Gamaliel incident, and widespread notions about statuary in the Roman world. In fact, there is no need to interpret the position reflected in Rabban Gamaliel’s second reply as “mere decoration.” On the contrary, the writer’s use of the Hebrew term noi corresponds to the Latin ornamentum—which, for many in the Roman world, signified a statue that had not been transformed in the formal process of consecratio into a sacred artifact (res sacra). In the mind of the ancients, these procedures instilled the statue with the “holy spirit”—pneuma (or its Latin equivalent, the numen, i.e., the divine
power, presence, and will)—of one of the gods or, alternatively, the numen or genius of one of the emperors.\textsuperscript{11} The rabbinic author of this passage is therefore not distorting Greco-Roman realities but rather articulating them in a rabbinic voice and using his knowledge of this environment to mark halakhic boundaries between permitted (noei/non-consecrated) and forbidden (res sacra) sculpture.

All in all: Seth Schwartz has produced an audacious, revolutionary, and thought-provoking study about how imperial power affected Jewish society in the ancient world. Yet ultimately, Imperialism and Jewish Society founders on the author’s insistence on stating radical conclusions that are not borne out by the evidence. For the modern reader of rabbinic texts, the upshot is not as radical as Schwartz suggests. While (almost) no one would suggest a return to a naïve historical reading of rabbinic literature, Schwartz has not succeeded in showing that post–70 C.E. Judaism disappeared, with all that would entail for our understanding of the rabbinic corpus. So while the book contains numerous important insights, they are liable to be obscured by Schwartz’s misconstrual of both literary and material evidence.

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\textbf{Notes}


3 Unless otherwise noted, the page references in the body of this essay refer to Schwartz’s book.

4 Schwartz’s insistence on the indispensable role of outside forces in the consolidation of Jewish identity has important implications for the current post-Zionism debate. In many ways, his book demystifies the traditional notion that internal factors,
whether nationalistic power or vigorous learning and religious observance, were the sole factor in preserving the Jewish people. See Schwartz’s ruthless attack on what he labels as “Jewish historians [who] are writing from deep inside some sort of romantic nationalistic ideology, nowadays usually Zionism” (5 ff.). With few exceptions, he includes in this category all Israeli scholars of ancient Judaism(!).

5 It is unclear, however, why Schwartz fails to apply this approach more uniformly. For example, when he discusses the effects of the Hasmonean conquests and the adherence of other nations to Judaism (in his opinion, more willing than coerced), Schwartz argues that the Edomites not only “assimilated” into Judaism’s central streams but also influenced them. The claim itself seems wholly reasonable. To support it, however, Schwartz cites the custom of burial in niches (kokhim), which in his opinion spread from early Hellenistic Idumaea to Jerusalem of the end of the Second Temple period (42 and again on 52). But, as a minimalist, we would have expected Schwartz to be careful of making such an unequivocal statement. When it comes down to it, how much do we know about Edomite or Jewish burial practices during this period? Not much, if anything at all. There is niche burial in the necropolis of Marisa, a site with many Hellenistic traits, and where many of the dead were Phoenician immigrants from the northern coastal cities. Does that entail that the custom is Edomite? Furthermore, what evidence do we have that the kokhim in late Second Temple tombs in Jerusalem were “imported” from there?

6 For a survey of the archaeological record, see the various summaries in E. Stern, ed., The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and Carta, 1993), 1:270–91. The epigraphic material is collected and painstakingly elucidated in C. M. Lehmann and K. G. Holmes, The Greek and Latin Inscriptions of Caesarea Maritima (Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2000). By the way, Schwartz errs in stating (32) that Tiberias cannot be excavated because it has been continually settled since its establishment in the first century C.E. After the Roman-Byzantine city was destroyed in an earthquake during the early Arab period, it was rebuilt to the north of the Roman city, where it has remained to this day. The area to the south of the present city conceals the Roman and Byzantine city under its soil. The site is a treasure trove awaiting the archaeologist to excavate it.

7 For an exhaustive and accurate presentation of this fascinating issue, see L. V. Rutgers, Subterranean Rome: In Search of the Roots of Christianity in the Catacombs of the Eternal City (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), quotation on 87.

8 This is the place to note that the position that Schwartz attributes to the scholars who preceded him, and especially his understanding that Saul Lieberman viewed the relations between Rabbis and Greco-Roman culture as “normalcy” (162), is far
from being precise. Lieberman’s thinking on this issue is more complex. It is sufficient to observe that, while Lieberman sought to demonstrate Hellenistic influences on the Rabbis, he also argued that “[t]he learned and pious Rabbis did their utmost to prevent the people from becoming thoroughly Hellenized.” See S. Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (1941; repr., New York and Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1994), 91. It should also be noted that, ironically, Schwartz’s claim that the Rabbis “distorted” the Greco-Roman experience to “allow” themselves to live in the cities places him quite closely on the thematic scale to Urbach’s argument that the Rabbis were “lenient” in the laws of idol worship in order to allow their flocks to earn their livings.


11 Of course, this does not mean that individuals could not themselves set aside statuary to the gods—a process known as *dedicatio*—or interact in a ritual way (by, for example, bringing a sacrifice) with a figure that was devoid of a holy spirit. Such informal practices, even if fundamentally distinct from formal consecration, were endemic in the religious life of the time. They took place on various levels, ranging from waving the hand in the direction of a statue (any statue), an act perceived as “religious,” through an endless range of possible gestures, some of them local and brief (touching, kissing, etc.), others more complex and requiring preparation. These latter could even include the erection of an informal, small altar, dedicating it to a particular statue and, after receiving permission from the authorities (in the framework of the *lex arae*), even placing it in a city street or the forum. Yet statues of this sort were not considered *res sacra*, and they differed from consecrated items in a whole range of ways. For example, a person who slights such a statue is not guilty, under Roman law, of *sacrilegium* (sacilege).