Contents

Introduction: Jewish Religion, Jewish Ethnicity—The Evolution of Jewish Identities
ZVI GITELMAN — 1

Part I Jewishness and Judaism in the Premodern Era — 5

1 Secularism, Hellenism, and Rabbis in Antiquity
YARON Z. ELIAV — 7

2 What Is a Judaism? Perspectives from Second Temple Jewish Studies
GABRIELE BOCACCINI — 24

3 Crypto-Jewish Criticism of Tradition and Its Echoes in Jewish Communities
MIRIAM BODIAN — 38

4 Spinoza and the Origins of Jewish Secularism
STEVEN NADLER — 59

Part II Challenges of Secular Jewishness in Modern Times — 67

5 Yiddish Schools in America and the Problem of Secular Jewish Identity
DAVID E. FISHMAN — 69

6 Beyond Assimilation: Introducing Subjectivity to German-Jewish History
SCOTT SPECTOR — 90

7 Jewish Self-Identification and West European Categories of Belonging: From the Enlightenment to World War II
TODD ENDELMAN — 104

8 People of the (Secular) Book: Literary Anthologies and the Making of Jewish Identity in Postwar America
JULIAN LEVINSON — 131
### Part III  Secular Jewishness in Israel Today  147

9  Secular-Jewish Identity and the Condition of Secular Judaism in Israel  
**Charles S. Lieberman and Yaacov Yadgar**  149

10  Beyond the Religious-Secular Dichotomy: Masortim in Israel  
**Yaacov Yadgar and Charles S. Lieberman**  171

11  What Kind of Jewish State Do Israelis Want? Israeli and Arab Attitudes toward Religion and Politics  
**Mark Tessler**  193

12  The Construction of Secular and Religious in Modern Hebrew Literature  
**Shachar Pinsker**  221

### Part IV  Secular Jewishness in the Diaspora Today  239

13  Jewish Identity and Secularism in Post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine  
**Zvi Gitelman**  241

14  Judaism, Community, and Jewish Culture in American Life: Continuities and Transformations  
**Calvin Goldscheider**  267

15  Beyond Apikorsut: A Judaism for Secular Jews  
**Adam Chalom**  286

Conclusion: The Nature and Viability of Jewish Religious and Secular Identities  
**Zvi Gitelman**  303

Contributors  323
Index  325
Secularism, Hellenism, and Rabbis in Antiquity

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Participants in current discussions, inside and outside academia, about the nature of Judaism often present the conflict between ancient Judaism and Hellenistic culture as the earliest prototype for the antagonism and tension between Jewish religion (particularly in its orthodox, halachic manifestation) and the modern secular world. Ironically, this model appeals to both participants in the current cultural debate. For example, in the days preceding Hanukah, it is common to hear teachers in ultra-orthodox educational institutions or community rabbis in synagogue sermons prefigure the battle of religion against secularism as the struggle of the Hasmoneans against both the Greek kingdoms and Jews inclined toward a Hellenistic way of life. This paradigm places mityavnim (Hellenizing Jews) and modern secular (as well as acculturating and assimilating) Jews on the same side of a great divide. Many orthodox Jews seem eager to depict themselves as comrades-in-arms of the Hasmonean pietists in Judaism’s age-old campaign against its nemeses. Similarly, on the other end of the polemical spectrum, secular Jews, inclined toward and sustained by the ideological characteristics of Western civilization, empathize with the supposed Hellenistic bedrock of that tradition. Adherents of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Jewish enlightenment appealed to Hellenistic trends in ancient Judaism, which they identified even among the rabbis of the Talmud. They argued that Judaism should incorporate the positive elements of non-Jewish society, eschew traditional Jewish separatism, and indeed reconstruct the Jewish religion entirely.¹

The rise of Zionism complicated matters even further, adding a fascinating angle fraught with internal contradiction to the discussion. Advocates of an independent Jewish state that would empower the Jewish people and end their dependence on the protection of other nations harked back to the image of the Maccabees (as well as Bar Kochba); after all, the Zionists considered them to be the last independent Jewish rulers before the modern state of Israel. The Zionist movement transformed Hanukah into a national festival, overflowing with symbols of freedom and Jewish might. Such tendencies impacted, for example, the choice of name for the major Zionist youth movement in 1926: the Young Maccabees (Makkabi ha-Tsa’ir), and for the Jewish Olympics: the makkabiyah. The same tendency is evident in Israel’s choice of the menorah—the seven-branched candelabrum from the Jewish Temple famously kept alight by the Hasmonean rebels—as the national emblem.²
However, I suggest that these modern notions about religion and secularism have little, if any, precedent in the ancient world and in the historical encounter of Jews with the Hellenistic, Greco-Roman cultures. To substantiate this assertion, I will first address religious consciousness and experience in the ancient world. A student of early periods must always remain cognizant of the fundamental differences that separate the modern era from previous ages. This is particularly true with regard to the study of religion. The dramatic advances in the natural sciences, the technological-industrial revolution, and the replacement of devout belief with secularism have radically transformed the religious environment. In ancient times, people perceived reality through categories that today we would call “religious.” The cosmology of the Greco-Roman Mediterranean basin was replete with divine beings: deities, goddesses, spirits, souls, angels, demons, and mythological monsters.  

Today we know these entities only from the realm of special effects in Hollywood cinema, but in the classical era they surrounded people everywhere, from the heights of the temples on Mount Olympus, through the abstractions of philosophical writings, down to the latrines in which people relieved themselves. One of these latter facilities, for example, discovered almost intact in Pompeii, contains a fresco of the goddess Fortuna in all her glory. The graffito to her right reads “caca tor cave malum” (defecator, beware of evil), and beneath it a man crouches over a small altar, probably moving his bowels. To contemporaries of the fresco, this depiction resembled neither a sacrilege nor a derisory caricature. On the contrary, the elementary human function of excretion, with its concomitant odors and physical exertion, demanded expression, just as bathroom graffiti, for all their humorous and scatological intent, demonstrate today. However, in the ancient mind, this basic act was understood in the language of religion, incarnated (in the Roman case) in the guise of Fortuna. Keith Hopkins has captured this quintessential aspect of the ancient world succinctly in the title of his recent book, *A World Full of Gods.*

Pervasive and invasive, religious mentality shaped the lens through which the people of the Roman world viewed their surroundings and performed their everyday routines. Religious vocabulary and imagery seeped into every strata of language, assisting people in mediating, explaining, and interpreting their interactions with their environment. Names and characteristics of gods, myths, legends, and folk beliefs fashioned the cognitive templates that granted validity both to natural phenomena and human situations, just as scientific “truth” shapes the contours of our present world. Although they worshiped one God, ancient Jews shared with their neighbor polytheists the plurality of divine expression—that is, an all-encompassing religious mentality.

Therefore, the historical relationship between Judaism and Greco-Roman culture has nothing to do with the conflict between religion and secularism that modern Jews, troubled by and fixated on the issues of their time, have projected onto it. I will try to place the story of Judaism, Hellenism, and the rabbis in historical context. The subsections of this chapter will examine issues of cultural interaction, identity, and worship during the five hundred years following the destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem—the era some call (rather misleadingly) the rabbinic
period. A twofold claim runs throughout these discussions: First, secularism does not provide a meaningful category for the understanding of ancient Judaism. Second, ancient Jewish religion and way of life are far removed from the rabbinically centered Judaism of the Medieval and Modern eras, even in the eyes of its opponents.

**Hellenism and Judaism: General Context**

Few events affected the history of the ancient world as profoundly as the conquests of Alexander, son of Philip the Macedonian, also known as Alexander the Great, in the thirties of the fourth century B.C.E. For nearly one thousand years, until the appearance of Islam in the first half of the seventh century C.E., the Mediterranean world in general and its eastern shores in particular—the regions of Phoenicia, Syria, and Palestine-Israel—participated in a great cultural experience that came to be known as Hellenism. A precise elucidation of the multifaceted, convoluted, and complex civilization of this era is beyond the scope of this essay. However, we may take note of its central features: a syncretistic religious landscape in which worship of Greco-Roman gods and belief in Greco-Roman mythologies melded with the worship of local deities; the Greek language gradually becoming the lingua franca of the eastern Mediterranean and functioning alongside the indigenous Semitic dialects as the cohesive element in an otherwise disparate environment; and, most important, a cultural and social milieu structured by a colorful blend of Western and native elements—in architecture and art (and the aesthetic realm in general); in government (in its legal, political, and economic manifestations); throughout the various strata of social hierarchy and affiliations; and in the mundane details of leisure and daily life. In a gradual process that spanned centuries, Hellenism touched and significantly altered almost every aspect of life.

One cannot overemphasize the relevance of these developments to the formation of ancient Judaism. Most, if not all, of the major components of ancient Judaism crystallized during this period; for example, the Bible, as a central sacred composition believed to encompass the direct revelation of God; Jewish law, as a system that directs the lives of its members; and the synagogue, as the communal institution that networks these people. These elements took shape, although in a remarkably fuzzy process, within or in close proximity to the Greco-Roman world. This stands in striking contrast to the underlying tendency in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Jewish scholarship to describe ancient Judaism according to the famous biblical rubric “Am levadad yishkon” (a nation that dwells apart).

Until recently, most textbooks portrayed Judaism throughout its ancient history as a coherent, if not homogeneous, unity. Despite internal conflicts, disputes, and differences over both minor and major issues, according to this view the Jewish people ranged themselves steadfastly against the outside world in its Greek guise. Judaism, in the view that was accepted then and, to a large extent now, was based on monolatry values in stark contrast to Greek polytheism. This contrast prevailed in all other areas of life, such as daily behavior, language, literature, and legal and governing institutions. Consequently, by defining Hellenism and Judaism as two
distinct, separate, and largely hostile categories, these modern writers went on to define the connection between them in terms of influence, a category usually carrying negative connotations of assimilation. Some Jews willingly and consciously "Hellenized"—that is, they adopted some aspects of Greek culture, such as language or personal name, or worse, abandoned their original way of life entirely and went to graze in foreign fields. Elsewhere I have characterized this portrayal in modern scholarship as the image of "two fighters in the boxing ring." In other words, despite their mutual influence and cross-fertilization, Judaism and Hellenism were suspicious of and antagonistic toward one another, locked in a perpetual battle that often led to violent conflict and bloodshed.

Current scholars have rejected most of the elements of this view, especially with regard to the Second Temple period—the first four hundred years of the Jewish-Hellenistic encounter. They have shown that the nature of the relationship between the Jews and Greek culture was much more complex, and that Greek-Hellenistic culture percolated into, and in many cases molded, the most basic components of Jewish life. Even the first Hasmoneans, portrayed in I and II Maccabees as the saviors of Judaism from the grips of Hellenism, were immersed in the fundamentals of the Greek worldview. Legal and governing institutions, such as the Sanhedrin (a Greek word), and even the most inward levels of human experience, such as perceptions of the world and nature, not to mention the Jewish God, were imprinted with the general cultural textures of the Mediterranean basin, namely Hellenism.

But did this cross-fertilization and mutually influential relationship persist in the period after the Second Temple, from 70 C.E. to the Muslim conquest at the beginning of the seventh century? The rest of this chapter endeavors to illuminate this period. By conservative estimates, scholars assess the population of the Roman Empire at the beginning of the first millennium C.E. to have been between fifty to sixty million, inhabiting the lands around the Mediterranean basin. An educated guess numbers about five (conservative estimates say two) million Jews among them. Between 10 and 20 percent of the empire's Jewish population lived in present-day Israel or Palestine, then a Roman province, first called Judea and later Syria-Palestina. The rest lived in cities and villages throughout the Mediterranean world, in Egypt and North Africa, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, Rome, and beyond, in Gaul (today France) and the Iberian peninsula—noncontiguous islands of Jewish habitation usually referred to as the Diaspora. These numbers, albeit imprecise, and their geographical distribution establish the Jews as the largest and most widely dispersed ethnic minority under Roman rule. Such noticeable presence immediately raises questions about the nature of this community, the substance of its life, and its relation to the world in which it existed. Thus we turn from geography and statistics to politics, society, culture, and religion.

Identity and Lifestyle

The question "Who is a Jew?" has been answered in myriad ways, and defining Jewish identity in the ancient world involves no less complexity or difficulty. The
rubric "Jewish" (yekudi), which began as a geographical-tribal marker (one who lived in the territory called Judea or who belonged to the tribe of Judah), had developed into a signifier of cultural, religious, and national identity by the second century B.C.E. (2 Macc. 2:21 offers the earliest testimony). 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 discernable historical heritage anchored in ancient times. These sources confirm the existence of a definable Jewish identity while simultaneously assailing the signifiers of Judaism. But, most important, the texture and content of that identity remained fluid for centuries. Jewish identifying marks, such as dress and language, which later demarcated the boundaries between members of this group and others, had not yet matured into sharp identifiers in antiquity. In a cultural environment in which identity is not hermetic, a person could be "a good Jew," at least by self-definition, while being an Idumean and a Roman at the same time. Alternatively, a Jew could also be a Christian and vice versa.

Theologically, and in hindsight, it may be possible to locate clusters of ideas that could represent the nucleus of ancient Judaism, or at the very least denote a certain strand within it. Yet clearly no consensus beyond the superficial level has ever been reached on such notions; various groups and sects differed among and within themselves about any number of principles. Even if all acknowledged the importance of a given tenet in the world of Judaism, such as belief in the God of Israel and the traditions conveyed about him by the scriptures (that is, he created the world, brought Israel out of Egypt, gave the Torah, and so on), 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 who nearly rubbed shoulders with Bar Kochba's armies, according to some rabbinic tales. And both of these images fall far from the heavenly, sometimes dualistic God who emerges in many mystical and apocalyptic works. Yet it seems that if we brought Philo and Bar Kochba together (even though historically impossible) and overcame the language gap between them (Philo spoke and thought in Greek, whereas Bar Kochba's mother tongue was Aramaic), both would have agreed that they believed in the same deity—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who granted the Torah to Israel.

But even this kind of (modernly constructed) 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 grocires eclectically and without product loyalty (at least not in modern terms). Instances of unabashed gentiles who believed in the God of Israel and took part in worship of him in synagogues are well documented. 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.
Finally, many (or even all) Jews took part at some level or other in the Roman experience (*romanitas*) that pervaded the Mediterranean and did not necessarily see their participation as contradictory to Judaism. For example, some Jews who held official positions in municipal administrations must have participated actively and centrally in the city cult, which was the norm in those days, even if certain Roman legislation pronounced their exemption from such obligation\(^{18}\). 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.\(^{19}\) These instances point to the messiness of the cultural environment of the ancient world. In this context, the very act of searching for a coherent ancient Jewish theology is fundamentally mistaken, and is perhaps an outgrowth of the theological intensity of Christianity. For reasons beyond the scope of this essay, Christian thinkers tended to arrange the set of ideas that defined their way of life into an organized system by Late Antiquity and even more so in the Middle Ages. In this sense, premedieval Judaism was, with a handful of exceptions, a nontheological religion. If a certain framework did exist, it encompassed amorphous and noncompulsory traits.

More than theology, ancient Judaism featured 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 who had been enslaved in Egypt, taken out of bondage with signs and wonders, 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 smaller and larger details that shaped the time and space of the individual and the family, weaving the practitioners, even if only loosely, into what was called “the Jewish people.” In addition to the Temple, which already lay in ruins by this period, and the Jewish God, who naturally attracted much attention, this way of life included the following components:

1. the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week on which labor was prohibited, a day devoted to prayer, family feasts, and rest;
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 supplemented frequently in our sources with references to burial practices, the sabbatical year, and annual festivals. Jewish writers of different strands articulate this almost obsessive tendency to encapsulate Judaism in practical paradigms, and itemize its essence in (what we now call according to the Rabbis) “halachic” details. The roots of this legal propensity are found in the sacred writings that Second Temple Jews revered as their foundation texts: first among them, the Five Books of Moses, also known as the Torah. At their core, these scriptures convey the God of Israel’s requirement that his subjects observe strictly his precepts (the *mitsvot*). The Torah communicates these guidelines as legal stricatures,
dictating permitted and forbidden actions for God’s people. Through the mitsvot, the Torah endeavors to shape the Jew’s entire way of living—from his diet to his farming, his family, the marketplace and economy, not to mention his army and its wars. Of course, the Torah also devotes much attention to the laws that lay out the proper procedures for the sacrificial process of the Temple, the highest institution in the life of ancient Jews (see below). It also specifies a series of annual feasts, which 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 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 way of life. Philo endowed the laws with allegorical-philosophical meaning; Josephus explained them in language comprehensible to his Greek-Roman readership; while other books, such as Jubilees, addressed a solely Jewish audience. The brevity and ambiguity with which the Torah formulates its decrees stimulated Jewish groups in the Second Temple era to interpret and shape them in varied ways, each group disputing the interpretations of the other. The Judean Desert (or “Dead Sea”) scrolls provide a lively example of such a legal-polemical debate. Many of the messages the authors of the canonical Gospels attribute to Jesus also express his disagreement with 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 the mitsvot in his world (contrary to later Christian claims that Jesus rejected the Torah’s practical commandments and advocated their replacement with a spiritual doctrine). The Sages built upon this legal tendency and enhanced it in the years after the destruction.

However, one caveat is necessary in this regard: many modern scholars are not sufficiently sensitive to the necessary distinctions between the function of Jewish law in ancient Judaism and the supremacy of rabbinic halacha in the medieval and early modern world. Clear-cut and considerable differences set these two historical moments and their legal systems apart. Ancient Jewish law existed in a relatively rudimentary, and therefore amorphous, state; at the time, no one had yet produced a legal code that would regulate Jewish life beyond the important but rather vague statements of the Torah. By contrast, through the Middle Ages, the great rabbinic legal scholars including Rabbi Isaac of Fez (1013–1103), Maimonides (1135–1204), and Rabbi Jacob ba’al haturim (died c. 1340) produced any number of codices, each expanding, elaborating, and clarifying their predecessors. Furthermore, Jews in antiquity lived in a relatively flexible and unenforceable legal environment. They were able to navigate more freely than their medieval descendants, who lived according to a much more organized written system of halacha that predominated and determined Jewish religious experience (even if, as some scholars convincingly claim, the system was not as rigid as we tended to think in the past). 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, intentionally or otherwise.

Yet another characteristic of Jewish life in the Roman world distinguished it from both earlier and later periods. Like other minorities at the time, and unlike the Jews of the medieval world, when firm boundaries encompassed many facets of daily routines and alienated Jews from Christians, Jews in the Roman era lived in a relatively open and commonly shared cultural environment that extended to even the furthest reaches of the empire and embraced its members regardless of their ethnic or religious orientation. Two examples from Asia Minor illustrate this point: In the city of Aphrodisias, some high-ranking non-Jewish city officials (called theosebeis or God-fearers in the Jewish inscription of the story) cooperated with their Jewish neighbors in the establishment of a public kitchen for the needy. Toward the center of Asia Minor, in the 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.

The same social and cultural dynamics emerge from an examination of the Roman bathhouse. Scholars who have reconstructed Jewish life in the Roman world by applying norms developed later could not conceive of Jews participating in the cultural milieu that transpired in the bathhouse. After all, this institution encapsulated the essence of the romanitas, with its nudity, sports, and hedonistic fixation on the human body. In fact, the opposite is true. Not only did Jews attend the bathhouse regularly, they also lauded its benefits and partook in its cultural proceedings. 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 Greco-Roman urban landscape. Rabbinic literature expresses surprisingly lenient and diverse attitudes to these statues. The rabbis’ views about three-dimensional sculpture are articulated in accordance with common modes of viewing sculpture throughout the Mediterranean. Magic is yet another feature that Jews happily shared with other constituents of the ancient world, as could be seen vividly in 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. Such shared cultural textures undermine the modern scholarly view which reconstructs the encounter between Jews and Hellenistic, Greco-Roman culture as two distinct and predominantly hostile entities that at the most negotiated with and influenced each other. At least with regard to Late Antiquity, this model must be revised.

Ritual

This period also witnessed a total revision of the ritual system of the Jewish world, one of the most significant revolutions ever undergone by any religion. The worship of gods was one of the basic and indispensable elements of human experience
in the ancient world. At their core, Israelite and subsequent Second Temple Judaism were cultic religions, which means they exhibited two basic components:

1. the existence of Temple or Temples;
2. the worship of God through offerings—mainly animal sacrifices, but also vegetarian offerings (called “meal offerings,” especially all kinds of grain breads) and liquids (like oil and wine, or “libations”).

In this respect, Judaism resembled all other religious systems in the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world, which formed the cultural environments of the Israelite tradition and Judaism, respectively. While sacrifices and offerings may seem fetidistic, if not primitive, to the modern observer, to ignore them is to overlook a fundamental aspect of the ancient Jewish experience. On the grounds of the Temple, up to one hundred animals a week (thousands during the major holidays) were butchered, skinned, and burned on a huge altar. The odor of flowing blood, massive quantities of spoiling meat, and thousands of pounds of scorched livestock was overpowering. This is what ancient religious procedures consisted of, and for contemporaries of these rituals, the odor was 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 smoke coiling up from the altar prompted the highest joy from the populace (e.g., Sir. 50:16–9). After all, it signified that God had received their sacrifice. This seemingly simple act embodied no small achievement in a world that had not yet witnessed the modern technological-industrial revolution, which 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, and thus everyone strove to be in their favor.

Ancient people, in general, and Israelites and then Jews, in particular, conceived of the 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 within.28 Simultaneously their doctor, lawyer, financial advisor, and psychiatrist, God existed beyond immediate reach but remained accessible nevertheless. Accordingly, the common belief held that God must dwell among his people. Judaism differed from other religions throughout the Roman Mediterranean in that the latter viewed their gods as a human or semi-human figure, and therefore placed their images in the temples. The Torah insisted on the non-anthropomorphic nature of God, and thus prohibited his depiction. So the Temple in Jerusalem stood naked, devoid of statues. Instead, ancient Israelite thinkers formulated the elusive concept of Shechina (presence), meaning that only the intangible essence of God inhabited the sanctuary. Beyond this difference, however, all ancient religions shared common practices with 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 heichal, containing the sacred vessels (furniture). The vessels included the menorah, a golden table holding a dozen loaves of bread, and a small bronze altar for incense (analogous in the domestic conceptuality to electricity, a pantry with food, and a ventilation system to dissipate the potent smell). The huge altar for sacrifice stood just outside the entrance to the building (functioning as the “intercom” that established communication).

Another important aspect of the cultic religion involved the location of the masses during worship. They were neither permitted to enter the Temple, which was considered “sacred” (i.e., off-limits), nor were they allowed to participate in the sacrifice of their own offerings. These privileges were granted exclusively to the priests (kohanim in Hebrew), who were seen as God’s servants and in charge of maintaining the house (Temple) and implementing the entire sacrificial process. The populace would gather in the courts and the huge compound surrounding the Temple, and bring their offerings to a certain point to hand over to the priests. They then watched the procedures from a distance. Thus the individual was separated from the core of religious activity, and the encounter with God remained indirect through a sacrifice handled by someone else.

In the ancient world nearly everyone (as far as we know) 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. 11:15–9 and parallels)—criticized the priests who controlled it or disapproved of the corruption that developed around it. Notwithstanding these occasionally dissonant voices, by the last centuries of the First Temple period (seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E.), the Temple had become the most beloved institution of the people of Israel. In the days of the Second Temple, this popularity reached an unprecedented peak. 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. On the conceptual level, the Temple served as a fundamental and, in their minds, irreplaceable element of the encounter with God, i.e., 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 upon its existence. It is no surprise, therefore, that the Temple exceeded its practical religious status and became the best-known emblem of the nation of Israel.

Although not instantly, all of this changed after the destruction of the Temple. Beyond the horrendous physical blow—tens, if not hundreds, of thousands dead (a number doubled and tripled by later rebellions) and the loss of property and land—the Jews remained without the institution that had enabled their lives. It is no surprise that many Jews (although certainly not all) concluded that Judaism had reached its end. 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 nourished by that union terminated. The paucity of sources from this period prevents us from measuring fully the circulation of such beliefs. I surmise it is no
coincidence that it is in this period when Jewish groups that believed in Jesus formulated their first comprehensive narratives about his teaching. These accounts should be seen, at least in part, as responses to the vacuum created by the Temple destruction. The gospel accounts offer a formula of redemption in place of the security the Temple provided. The halachic framework of the Sages also sought in a fundamental way to supplant 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. The origins of this institution reach back to centuries prior to the Temple's destruction, which explains the stories about Jesus 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 C.E., the synagogue's appearance and role changed dramatically. Although we cannot firmly date the stages of its development, the synagogue gradually became (as it remains) the prime locus for the worship of the God of Israel, and unquestionably the most important institution in Jewish life.

The ancient synagogue emerges as a multifunctional cultic and communal establishment, diversified in appearance and substance. In addition to the worship of God through prayer and the housing of the torah scroll in a special ark, some communities, for example in the Bosphorous kingdom, practiced and documented the manumission of slaves in this institution. Other synagogues held the public archives of the people associated with it (non-Jews included?) and housed other functions of community life such as schools for the youth. Most of all, the building embodied the spatial layout so central to ancient identity—its iconography (most but not all of which is later to the period discussed here), brought to life and perpetuated the memories of a shared past as communicated by the scriptures; and a space for various Jewish celebrations, such as the Sabbath, annual holidays, marriages, and other local festivities, as well as for the pronouncement of local hierarchy and power (evidenced by who sat where, honors inscribed on stone or mosaic, etc.).

To summarize, the synagogue, a religious institution par excellence in the modern world, functioned on many levels of communal life that would be labeled secular today. More importantly, ritual and worship in their ancient context were not confined to the realm of religion, but rather were an essential component of human experience, an existential mode that transcended the boundaries of a particular faith or conviction. This point of view blurs the dividing lines between Jewish and Hellenistic, Greco-Roman institutions of worship. Apart from the essential (though trivial) fact that people invoked different divinities in these institutions, they all partook in the same human experience of the ancient world and its most basic sensibilities, in which gods were everywhere, and everyone worshipped something.

The Rabbis in Antiquity

The Rabbinic Movement (generally called in Hebrew HAZAL, an acronym for “our sages, may their memory be blessed”) is the anachronistic title given to the men
who created rabbinic literature. The term intends to exalt and set them apart as a homogeneous group with a distinct ideology and systematic philosophy of life, which shaped the character of Judaism, its institutions, and its way of life to the present. According to this view, rabbinic literature contains 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. Thus the common label in collective Jewish memory for the centuries after 70 C.E. was the rabbinic period (or, in some cases, the period of the Mishnah and the Talmuds, after the two major rabbinic texts). The foundation of this view lies in the Middle Ages (although doubted by some modern scholars), when most streams in the Jewish public accepted rabbinic literature as a cornerstone of Jewish life and as the soul of Judaism. The leaders of Jewish communities in the Medieval Jewish Diaspora viewed themselves as the successors and followers of the rabbinic sages who created this literature. Accordingly, they adopted for themselves the collective title of “rabb,” which they had bestowed upon their predecessors.

The veneration of rabbinic texts ensured their preservation from one generation to the next—first as handwritten scrolls and then codices—and also assured their printing in thousands of copies. Yet this 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 the texts were composed. In fact, many times the process entirely distorted that context. The result is that most current scholars reject the view that emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth century: that most Jews in the ancient world defined themselves and lived their lives according to the ideas and instructions found in rabbinic literature.

The sages’ status in antiquity was much more modest, and their authority—if they had any at all—was 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 from the third century, in the Persian Empire (or “Babylonia,” now part of Iraq; a few of these scholars arrived there even earlier). Like other intellectuals throughout history, both Jewish and non-Jewish, the rabbis seem to be animated by their natural proclivity toward learning. 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, which did not preclude other branches of learning, such as philosophy and mysticism, although these latter do not seem to stand out in the rabbinic material. 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, rabbinic legal scholarship grew into an all-embracing legal system. They named it Halacha—God’s way of life.

The small group of intellectuals who crafted the rabbinic tradition had limited impact on the Jewish public in Palestine, and even less on the Jewish communities elsewhere in the Mediterranean region. There were never more than a few dozen
active at any given time, and sometimes even fewer. At first, and for several generations, the sages functioned as individual scholars, teachers who gathered small numbers of students 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 C.E. with the project of redacting and publishing the Mishnah, the first comprehensive compilation of rabbinic legal material. Dating from approximately 200 C.E., the Mishnah is a legal text, a type of compendium (or legal anthology) to which there are 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 the Mishnah is a type of legal codex, a charter or rule of behavior addressed to the public at large and meant to lay out and dictate the Jewish way of living, should be roundly rejected. Texts of such pragmatic nature are well known in the Middle Ages; for example, Maimonides’s Mishneh Torah and Joseph Karo’s Shulkhan Aruch. The earliest such works date back to the end of the Byzantine period and were discovered in the Cairo Genizah, a repository of ancient Jewish texts discovered in the nineteenth century. The genre continued to evolve in Persia after the rise of Islam under the guidance of a group known as the Geonim, hundreds of years after the Mishnah.

However, the editors of the Mishnah executed an entirely different agenda, evident in the fact that the work does not provide clear and unambiguous legal ruling on nearly any subject. On the contrary, its editors gathered and then offered several opposing positions on every issue. Those who wished to conduct their life according to the Mishnah would find themselves quickly at a dead end. Whose views should they follow? Rabbi Eliezer’s, Rabbi Yehoshua’s, Rabbi Meir’s, or Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohkai’s? Lacking the sophisticated hermeneutic tools that developed in much later generations and which enabled choice between opposing positions, there was no way to decide between the dissenting voices of the Mishnah. The editors were apparently uninterested in reaching such a verdict. Furthermore, as shown in the work’s first line, the text ignores the larger public. It requires prior knowledge of nuances and complex legal concepts 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. The original target audience of the Mishnah were the sages themselves.

Thus the Mishnah was the creator (or at least the instigator) rather than the creation of the rabbinical movement. It 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—thus acknowledging its appreciation of the older work. In the third century, centers of learning (yeshiva) were organized, some with dozens of students who arrived from distant communities such as Persia to hear the teachings of the sages and study the Mishnah. Some students 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—the Midrash—began to appear at this time as well. The third century is the first period where one can discern a movement led by the sages, even if they still had a long way to go until accepted by most, if not all, strata of the Jewish public, and until the legal products of their scholarship—the halacha—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.

**Conclusion**

History plays a tricky game with modern analogies, blurring what from a distance of time might seem like clear-cut dichotomies, and churning the various constituents of current discussions into unfamiliar blends. This is particularly true when present debates are modeled on ancient precedent, such as the one that stirred around the role of secularism in Jewish society. Here I have striven to nuance and complicate (and to a large degree dismiss) the too-neat picture of continuity that locates the roots of the strife between Jewish religion, in particular in its orthodox, rabbinic form, and secularism in the ancient world. First, as I have shown, there was no secular experience in the ancient world, at least not in the way this category is grasped today. The various facets of Jewish life in antiquity reviewed here, including the practical aspects of daily routines, ritual procedures, and more abstract notions of consciousness and identity, were overwhelmingly anchored in the religiosity of the time. Secularism does not find a place along the gamut of Jewish manifestations in ancient times. Nevertheless, the decisively religious world of antiquity was nothing like the orthodox, predominantly rabbinic version that governed the Jewish sphere from the Middle Ages and on. No firm lines separated the Jews from their fellow Mediterraneans, and even the most intimate aspects of the worship of God shared large conceptual ground with other forms of worship. Moreover, the rabbis of that time were quite different from orthodox figures of today; it would be unimaginable, for example, for a present-day haredi rabbi to attend a Roman bathhouse. The so-called rabbinic version of Judaism and the ascent of rabbinic figures to social and political power were practically nonexistent in those early days, and were perhaps only in a rudimentary stage of development that by no means could have been the core of Jewish life. Thus from every angle, the modern paradigm that ties disputes around secularism to the ancient world should be abandoned.
NOTES


2. Another source for the menorah’s significance in modern Zionist symbolism comes from its appearance on the arch of Titus, which ties it to the same paradigm of freedom/power; see Rachel Hachlili, “The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-Armed Candelabrum: Origin, Form and Significance,” Journal for the Study of Judaism Supplement Series 68 (2001).

3. An illuminating articulation of this all-embracing religious spirit that prevailed in the ancient world, with emphasis on the period under discussion, can be found in Peter Brown’s extensive work on the subject. See, for example, the chapter on religion in Peter R. L. Brown, The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 49–112; and his recent article “Christianization and Religious Conflict,” in The Cambridge Ancient History XIII: The Late Empire, A.D. 337–425, ed. Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 632–664. There he has characterized the “religious common sense” of the period as “a spiritual landscape rustling with invisible presences—with countless divine beings and their ethereal ministers” (632).


7. Among the numerous examples, see the classic Haim H. Ben-Sasson et al., A History of the Jewish People (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976). For more recent scholars who have continued to apply this model, see my study in the following note.


10. An example of a recent study that makes these arguments rather convincingly for the Second Temple period is Erich S. Gruen, Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).


15. Philo Quod Deus est immutabilis, PT Ta’an. 68d.


21. The best example is the text known as the Halachic Letter (MMT: 4Q 394–399); see Elisha Qimron and John Strugnell, eds., Qumran Cave 4, Discoveries in the Judean Desert X (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).


28. GenR. 68:12 (Theodor and Albeck 784–786) is one rabbinic articulation of this idea.


32. E.g. 2 Bar. 10 (Charles 39–41), 44 (Charles 60–61); Sotah 15:10–15 (Lieberman 4.242–4).


40. A fascinating development occurred in tandem with the invention of print, which allowed the wide dissemination of rabbinc texts among many strands of society, to the extent that even young children gained access to this overly difficult material. Many of the new consumers of rabbinc literature, by and large intellectually unequipped to wrestle with these texts, endorsed alternative methods to engage with them. In other words, they conceived a learning system for rehearsing the texts without fully understanding them, in which melodies, *pilpel*, and other means replaced comprehension.

41. For recent reconsideration of this text and its relationship with the Mishnah, see Judith Hauptman, "The Tosefta as a Commentary on an Early Mishnah," *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal* 3 (2004): 1–24.