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ISSN 0047-2212
THE ROMAN BATH AS A JEWISH INSTITUTION: 
ANOTHER LOOK AT THE ENCOUNTER 
BETWEEN JUDAISM 
AND THE GRECO-ROMAN CULTURE 

BY 

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The discussion of the relationship between ancient Judaism and Hellenism is as old as the study of Jewish history itself. Much effort has been invested in an attempt to decipher the nature of this encounter and elucidate its characteristics. Scholars have examined the interaction between Jews and all the cultures that surrounded them, but their association with the Greek world (including its subsequent development in the Hellenistic and Roman realms) has received the most attention. One factor leading to this heightened research is that the Jewish-Hellenistic relationship occurred during the period when the Christian dimension of Western culture was being formed. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, Jews and Christians in Europe and the United States, as well as Israelis in the reborn Jewish State somewhat later, investigated the attitudes their ancestors had toward Greek culture for more than purely scholarly reasons. Beyond the attempt of those scholars (and perhaps ours today) to comprehend the ancient world, they were aspired to cope with the challenges of their own time.1 

* I wish to thank Prof. Martha Himmelfarb for her insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

1 See, e.g., Lee I. Levine, Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity: Conflict or Confluence? (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1998) 3-4: “... many Jewish Scholars were especially interested in exploring this realm (i.e. the encounter between Judaism and Hellenism Y.Z.E.) owing to their religious biases.” The way that the relationship between Judaism and Hellenism was perceived in Western European thought, in both Jewish and Christian circles, is discussed at length (with bibliography) in Yaacov Shavit, Athens in Jerusalem: Classical Antiquity and Hellenism in the Making of the Modern Secular Jew
In the past, the encounters between the Jewish and the Greek cultures were usually depicted as a collision course. The studies of Martin Hengel and Saul Lieberman (both prominent contributors to this subject in the last generation) emphasized the overwhelming influence that Hellenism had upon the Jews. Although their points of departure are different, the periods that they examine do not overlap, and even the corpora of sources they use are not identical, their basic outlook is the same. In their opinion, the two cultures faced each other as fighters in a boxing ring. Although at times they waved to one another or shook hands, they often sparred. In other words, despite their mutual influence and cross-fertilization, Judaism and Hellenism were suspicious and antagonistic of one another, and this often led to violent conflict and bloodshed.2

Was there really extensive conflict all along the "demarcation line" between Jews and their neighbors? Does our perception of constant tension between Jews and Pagans, and its continuation in the three-fold conflict between Judaism, Paganism and Christianity, truly reflect what transpired in ancient times, or is this only a small part of the reality of this period? Recently, along with a renewed examination of ancient Jewish society, Jewish attitudes towards Hellenistic-Roman


2 Martin Hengel, Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period (trans. John Bowden; 1974; reprinted Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981). Saul Lieberman, Greek in Jewish Palestine (1941; reprinted New York and Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1994); id. Hellenism in Jewish Palestine (1950; reprinted New York and Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1994). My argument here introduces a broader common denominator of scholars' position on the issue of the encounter between Hellenism and Judaism. In general, today's scholars tend to be divided into two camps in regard to Hellenism's influence on the Jews—minimalists and maximalists. A good example of such an understanding of scholarship is Levinc, Judaism and Hellenism, 17-8. However, in my opinion, even the foremost maximalists also presuppose the constant underlying discord between the two cultures. They speak of absorption and assimilation, but present them in patterns of "conflict." In this respect, there is somewhat of a correlation with the minimalist camp. See Jonathan Goldstein, "Jewish Acceptance and Rejection of Hellenism," in E.P. Sanders et al., eds., Jewish and Christian Self-Definition, vol. 2: Aspects of Judaism in the Greco-Roman Period (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 64: "The Greek confronted the Hebrew. Judaism confronted Hellenism. Thus runs the conventional wisdom of our time." A good example of the Jewish-Greek relationship being described in terms of hostility can be found in the above-mentioned book by Hengel. His work illustrates Hellenism's influence on Judaism in a variety of ways, but in fact strives to clarify the "conflict's" peak in the "the first round"—when it erupted in Antiochus' IV decrees against the Jewish religion. Many have understood Hengel's view in a similar way. See e.g.: Stern's
civilization have, once again, been reevaluated. The goal of this reexamination has been to form an image of Jewish society that depicts its diverse strata and sheds light upon groups that were inadequately represented in the surviving sources. Some scholars have demonstrated that there is a need to abandon the model of “sparring cultures,” and to explore the contact between Hellenism and Judaism in terms that are not absolute. In their opinion, the encounter between the two cultures was shaped on more complex models than the absolute designations of “positive” and “negative.”

Archaeology and research into daily life, that is to say, a study of the interaction between people and the physical reality in which they functioned, should be primary tools in this reexamination of ancient Jewish society. In this paper I intend to show how an investigation of the Jewish experience as it relates to the Roman bath-houses in Palestine can contribute to our knowledge of the process in which Jews adopted elements of the Pagan-Gentile world. It will also illuminate one particular aspect of the relationship between Judaism and Greco-Roman civilization.


Lieberman has a comparable outlook. Although on one hand the Greek influence on Jewish society is evident on every page of his previously-cited studies, on the other, he regularly emphasizes that “The learned and pious Rabbis did their utmost to prevent the people from becoming thoroughly Hellenized” (Greek in Jewish Palestine, 91 and many more). For another recent exposition of these same categories see: Seth Schwartz, “Gamaliel in Aphrodite’s Bath: Palestinian Judaism and Urban Culture in the Third and Fourth Centuries,” in Peter Schafer, ed., The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture (Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 71; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998) 206: “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.”

These developments among scholars are well-summarized in Robert A. Kraft and George W.E. Nickelsburg eds., Early Judaism and its Modern Interpreters (The Bible and its Modern Interpreters 2; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986). For studies which put the emphasis on peripheral groups in Jewish society, and their methodological and theoretical roots, see Yaron Z. Elia, “A ‘Mount without a Temple’—The Temple Mount from 70 CE to the Mid-Fifth Century: Reality and Idea” (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 1999; Heb.).

An instructive example of this trend is presented by Martha Himmelfarb, “Judaism and Hellenism in 2 Maccabees,” Poetics Today 19 (1998) 19-40. Himmelfarb shows that the negation of Greek culture in one of the earliest texts dealing with this phenomenon, the Book of 2 Maccabees, is itself presented in terms derived from the culture that it negates! The present paper, although concentrating on Jewish society in Palestine, attempts to pursue this route from the perspective of daily life. See also the above note. For an up-to-date and comprehensive summary of research on the confluence of Judaism and Hellenism see Levine, Judaism and Hellenism, 3-32.

For theoretical definitions of daily life research and its usefulness in reassessing the
The public bath-house is a clear instance of a Greco-Roman institution. Its foundations lay in two popular establishments of the Greek world dating back to the fifth century BCE: the Greek bath-house (βαλανεῖον) and the gymnasium. The palaestra of the Roman bath-house was derived from the Greek gymnasium. It was an open court usually encircled by columns (περίστυλος) supporting a ceiling which created a narrow covered strip around the courtyard. Exercise, a common activity in the Roman bath-house, followed the sports tradition of the Greek institution as well. There is evidence that bathing took place at the gymnasium. Nonetheless, only the Romans incorporated bathing as a central permanent activity of this establishment.6

The institution of the bath reflects the engineering and architectural competence of the Romans, their cultural practices and social customs. The prime manifestation of Roman engineering abilities in the bath-house was their water heating system. The basic method used to create such a system had been utilized beforehand; however, the Romans transformed it into a comprehensive and well-defined system, which could be widely duplicated. It employed a series of fixed components:

1. The hypocaust (derived from ὄψωκα στό υπό, to heat from underneath) was a crowded mass of small pillars (pilae) usually made out of round or square shaped bricks and at times from monolithic pillars, which supported ceramic or stone tiles.

2. On top of the hypocaust came layers of mortar and plaster above which an elevated floor (suspensura) was placed (this is the reason behind the bath’s name balneae pensiles—“hanging baths”). Hot air from the

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furnace (*praefurnium*) circulated in the cavity that was created underneath.

(3) The bathers advanced through a series of rooms which had different functions based mainly on the amount and type of heat they provided. The main rooms were *apodyterium* (the dressing room), *caldarium* (the hot room), and *frigidarium* (the cold room). Occasionally, another room was added between the latter two, which was termed *tepidarium* (the tepid room). Other elements of the bath-house included the various steam baths, the dry steam room (*laconicum*), the wet steam room (*sudatorium*), the toilets (*latrina*), the palaestra, and the pools (*piscinae*, or *natatio* as they were named at the imperial baths).  

The Romans used their knowledge of architecture and technology to add splendor to the bath-houses. Lofty vaults, and at times even round domes, supported by massive piers and columns rose over immense halls. Towering windows flooded the structures with light. Aqueducts buttressed by arches brought water from long distances. Mosaic floors, frescoes, stucco, *opus sectile* ornamentation and a multitude of statues decorated the bath-house’s interior. Once the Romans had consolidated their instruction techniques (as reflected in Vitruvius’ writings from the first century BCE) various styles of baths were built and the plans for these were rapidly disseminated. Bath-houses were erected throughout the Roman Empire, from Britannia in the West to Dura-Europos on the Persian border in the East.

Nonetheless, the physical edifice and its literal purpose tell only half the story. Sources that mention the baths, which go back to the first

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7 There is an extensive body of research on the activities and structure of the baths. For a bibliography see Hubertus Manderscheid, *Bibliographie zum römischen Badewesen* (München: by the author, 1988). See also the monographs mentioned in the previous note. Compared to the abundance of research on the Roman bath-houses, there are relatively few studies about the Palestinian bath-houses. For a partial and dated summary see Mordechai Gichon, “Roman Bath-Houses in Eretz-Israel,” *Qadmoniot* 11 (1978) 37-33 (Heb.).

After I concluded this paper, another important study concerning the Roman bath-house in Jewish circles appeared. See Martin Jacobs, “Römische Thermenkultur im Spiegel des Talmud Yerushalmi,” in Schäfer, *The Talmud Yerushalmi*, 219-311. In the notes that follow, I have made a special effort to incorporate references to this extensive, and at times stimulating, research. In the beginning of Jacobs’ paper, he updates the summary of archaeological findings, but there is still much to be done.

8 On the statuary of the bath-house see the discussion below and note 28. For a broad summary of the distribution of the baths, accompanied by maps, see Nielsen, *Thermae*. 
century BCE, indicate that for the Romans this activity encompassed more than the physical act of cleansing one’s body. Over the course of time, it became essential to the people’s way of life. For the average free Roman, whether he lived in Rome, another city or a large village anywhere in the empire, going to the baths, especially in the afternoon, was routine act, an integral part of his daily activities. The lower classes and even the very poor could also enjoy the imperial baths, although less frequently, since these were partially or totally subsidized by the authorities or by patrons.

Contrary to the opinion held by some modern historians, the Romans did not turn this pleasure into an ideology. Going to the baths was no more than an indulgence. They would anoint their bodies with perfumed oils, recline for a massage, or enjoy a ball game or other sports activity in the palaestra. Finally, when the tintinnabulum announced the opening of the hot baths, they would proceed to a fixed series of pools and tubs, each of which offered a different level of heat, for relaxing, swimming and washing. This might be interspersed with visiting the sauna, drinking wine or tasting the delicacies sold by peddlers who crowded the establishment. Those who so desired could find sexual satisfaction with prostitutes. The giant imperial baths in Rome (thermae) and those in a small number of other places offered an even broader range of entertainment possibilities. These included gardens, conference halls, lectures and even libraries. To the Romans the bath were essential to the “good life.”

Criticism of the baths was not lacking. It focused on laziness, pampering, and sexual licentiousness that went along with them. Nevertheless it should not obscure the main fact—practically everyone attended the baths. As the famous and popular saying went: Balnea, vina, venus corrupunt corpora nostra, sed vitam faciunt (baths, wine, and women corrupt the body, but they make life [worth living]).

How did the Jews of Palestine feel about this institution? Prima facie, it would be expected that a general disapproval of the Greco-Roman world and a rejection of its culture would result in the Jews relinquishing the baths. Ostensibly, they should have considered it a negative and repugnant establishment. Was this actually their attitude? My

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9 E.g., CIL, VI, 3, no. 15258 (which contains references to literary and epigraphic parallels as well as to secondary literature). On bathing as a component of Roman culture and about the practices that became affiliated with it see: Katherine M.D. Dunbabin, "Baiamum grata voluptas—Pleasures and Dangers of the Baths," Papers of the British School at Rome 57 (1989) 6-46; Yegül, Baths, 30-47.
position, which has already been presented in detail elsewhere, can be
summarized in one word: No! There is no evidence substantiating an
all-inclusive rejection of the bath-house, either in the Late Roman
Period (also referred to as the mishnaic and talmudic period), or in
the hundred years prior to the destruction of the Second Temple, when
the Roman bath-house was introduced into Palestine. The opposite is
ture—peculiar as it may seem to those maintaining the view of “wide-
spread disapproval of the Greco-Roman world.” Sources inform us that
the bath-house was an inseparable and fully legitimate constituent of
Jewish life in those days.10

Two comparisons further corroborate this conclusion: one with other
groups who rejected the bath-house, mainly among Christians, and the
other with institutions that were indeed rejected by the Jews, such as
the theater and amphitheater.

10 Yaron Z. Eliav, “Did the Jews at First Abstain from Using the Roman Bath-
House?” Cathedra 75 (1995) 3-35 (Heb.). The assumption that there was an essential
conflict between the Roman bath-house and the Jewish way of life has become entrenched
in many studies. It was exhaustively discussed by Ronny Reich, “The Hot-Bath House
(halneum), the Miqveh and the Jewish Community in the Second Temple Period,” JJS
Zara (Cambridge: University Press, 1911) 13-14; Erwin R. Goodenough, Jewish Symbols
in the Greco-Roman Period (Bollingen Series 37; 13 vols.; New York: Pantheon House,
1953-68) 4. 17. Note the opposite conclusions of Goodenough and Reich. While Reich
asserts that the contradiction between Judaism and the baths caused the Jews to avoid
that institution, at least at its inception, Goodenough believes that the Jews went to the
baths but did not observe the halakhah; Nielsen, Thermae, 103 n. 56; Ephrat Habas-Rubin,
n. 35. Contra these, see Gerald J. Bildstein, “R. Yohanan, Idolatry, and Public Privilege,”
JSJ 5 (1974) 154-61. Bildstein states that the baths were a “...treasured opportunity
that the Jews highly esteemed (155).” And, in another place, he presumes that there
were “unobjectionable bath houses” (157) in Tiberias. In that respect, my conclusions
in this article concur with his (however, see my reservations regarding his understand-
ing of the sources infra, n. 37). On the other hand I find it hard to grasp Jacobs’ ini-
tial assumption (“Römische,” 220): “… liegt die Annahme nahe, daß sich am Beispiel
der Bäder die Auseinandersetzung der Rabbinen mit dem Lebensstil der römisch-hellenisti-
schen Gesellschaft besonders gut veranschaulichen läßt.” This is especially puzzling
since he raises this possibility only a few lines after mentioning my paper (Eliav,
“Did the Jews”) which dealt with precisely the same question and proved the opposite
(and see also Jacobs, “Römische,” 226 and n. 45). All in all, we seem to agree regard-
ing the first half of his conclusion (311: “… die römische Badekultur im Jerusalmi
in hohem Maß reflektiert und weitgehend positiv beurteilt wird”), but go in different
directions to interpret it. Jacobs suggests that the rabbis consented to assimilation (“... die Rabbinen keineswegs grundsätzlich gegen die ‘Assimilation’ der palästini-
schen Juden an die herrschende zeitgenössische Kultur ankämpfen”), while the present paper advances a rather different interpretation.
The Roman Bath as a Jewish Institution

Officially, Christianity never declared a sweeping prohibition of the baths. Accounts of Christians attending this establishment go back to the very beginning of this religion in the second century. Tertullian's apology, utilizing Christians' attendance to the baths in order to refute the popular claim of their supposedly retreat from society, are especially well-known. After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, bath-houses were still being built and they continued to function for hundreds of years. Sources contain reports of distinguished Church figures who frequently attended the baths. Not all visited as often as Bishop Sisinius of Constantinople, who, according to the church historian Socrates, bathed twice a day, and when asked about his habit, replied that he settled for a double visit because he did not have time for a third! Even if not all Christians haunted the baths so zealously, pious Christians such as John Chrysostom did not eschew using the baths when needed. Consequently, the fact that public baths were owned by the Church, with their revenues going into the holy pot, should not be surprising.

Some major Church figures, however, did express objections to the institution of the bath. At the end of the second century, Clement of Alexandria listed the evils of the bath-house which, in his opinion, corrupted people's morals, and was not physically beneficial. Finding no reason to visit this establishment, he succinctly concluded: οὐκ οὖν εἰ

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14 E.g.: *Liber Pontificalis* 39 (Duchesne 213 l. 2), 42 (id. 222 l. 3). See: Yegül, *Baths*, 314.
πρὸς τι ὁφελεῖ τὸ λουτρόν ἡδη, σφᾶς ἐκλυτέον αὐτῷ (Therefore, if the bath has no real benefit to offer, it should be completely avoided).  
Two hundred years later, Jerome expressed a similar notion in reference to monastic life which lacked baths: *sed qui in Christo semel lotus est, non illi necesse est iterum lavare* (He who was bathed once in Christ does not need to bath again). During approximately the same time, Augustine depicted the famous thermal baths at Baiae, south of Naples, as a symbol of worldly vanities, and asserted that a person who has had the truth revealed to him would surely want to avoid them. Likewise, his older contemporary from the East, Epiphanius of Salamis, pointed out the decadence at the therapeutic baths of Hammat Gader.

There is a tone of rigid opposition to the institution of the bathhouse in the preceding examples, and it is precisely this note which is not heard in the chorus of sources representing Judaism. This disparity seems to reflect the distinct differences in the nature of Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity. Generally speaking, Christianity was a social group that had only recently been born. In the process of consolidating its new identity, it renounced elements which had formerly been integral parts of its existence. Judaism was a long established society, and therefore more comfortable to introduce portions of the surrounding cultures into its life.

The second comparison contrasts the Jews’ attitude to the baths with their attitude toward other institutions of the Roman world. The institutions that I will be looking at in this examination are other entertainment

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15 Clemens Alex. *Paed.* 3.9.46.4 (Stählin [GCS 12] 263 I. 16-17); trans. Simon P. Wood, *Clement of Alexandria: Christ the Educator* (FC 23; New York: Fathers of the Church, 1954) 237. Even though the translation is not literally exact, it is an accurate expression of the mood of the text. The malicious character of the baths is depicted in chapter three. For further discussion of Clement’s position regarding the baths and the philosophical context of his remarks see Ward, “Women,” 142-143.

16 Hieronymus *Epistula XIV: Ad Heliodorum monachum* 10 (Hilberg [CSEL 54] 60). Apparently, the monastic disapproval of the baths dates to a much earlier period and could be found, for example, in the account of Hegesippus concerning James, the brother of Jesus, as early as the second century. In this source, James is portrayed as a Nazarite (i.e. the Biblical prototype of a monastic) and one of his customs is said to be: βαλανεῖον ὀνέεροστο. See: Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 2.23.5; Zellinger, *Bad*, 47-67. On the continued condemnation of the baths by later monastics see Magoulas, “Bathhouse,” 234. But cf. Berger, *Das Bad*, 35-6; Yizhar Hirschfeld, *The Judean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992) 44.

establishments—the Roman theater and amphitheater (which Jewish sources term *isticion*).

Josephus' noted account of Herod's theater construction in Jerusalem is presented by scholars as proof for Hellenistic infiltration into Jewish territory of Palestine. Less recognized is the Jewish viewpoint reflected by Josephus; he portrayed these establishments in a very negative light, designating Herod's initiative an abandonment of the native law (ἐξέβαινε τῶν πατρίων ἑθῶν). Josephus determined that in these two structures Gentile customs (ξενικὰ ἑπιτηδεύματα), were celebrated (which were incompatible with piety (ἡ ἔσεβεσα), and that their adoption would ravage the old way of life (ἡ πάλα ταῦτα κατάστασις). Thereafter, Josephus declared that the theater and amphitheater opposed Judaism since they were foreign to the Jewish way of life (κατὰ τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἑθῶς ἀλλότριος). Finally, he presented a detailed description of the events that took place in these establishments, which included theatrical performances, athletic competitions, horse races, and gladiator fights. At first glance, his description appears to be a paean, exalting a dignified royal enterprise, but then Josephus reverses his perspective and explains the way the Jews viewed these institutions. His clear-cut statement cannot be mistaken:

... to the natives it meant an open break with the customs venerated by them (τὰ τιμῶμενα ἑθη). For it seemed glaring impiety (ἀσεβης) to throw men to wild beasts for the pleasure of other men as spectators, and it seemed a further impiety to change their established ways for foreign practices.

It is hard to avoid the striking resemblance between these notions and those found in rabbinic literature. In the tosefta a *halakha* is conveyed that utterly objects to the *isticion*, and asserts: "He who sits in an amphitheater, this one is guilty of bloodshed." A similar concept is expressed in the midrash: "... Why then does scripture say 'nor shall you follow their laws' (Lev. 18:3)?... for example going to their theaters, circuses and amphitheaters." Elsewhere, this disapproval is put into more practical terms, such as R. Simeon b. Pazi's statement: "Happy is the man that hath not walked' (Ps 1:1) i.e. to theaters and circuses of the Gentiles", or the words R. Abba B. Kahana puts in the

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mouth of Knesset Israel: "Lord of the ages, in my entire life, I never went into theaters and circuses..." 19

These two elements regarding the theater and amphitheater—an intrinsic condemnation of their essence, and consequently the instruction that one should avoid attending such places (without delving into the question of compliance)—resemble the position of the Church fathers concerning the baths. However, they are entirely missing in Jewish sources that deal with the bath-house. The above comparisons, therefore, corroborate my argument that unlike the theater and amphitheater, and contrary to some of the Church fathers’ opinion about the baths, the Jews of Palestine absorbed the Roman bath-house without any reservations or hesitation to frequent them.

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The discrepancy between what we expect to find and the actual views of the Jews concerning the bath-house indicates, in my opinion, that the traditional “cultural strife” model cannot inclusively define the encounter between Judaism and the Greco-Roman way of life. I would like to suggest an alternative model, which can be termed “filtered absorption” or “controlled incorporation.” The argument at the foundation of this thesis is that many foreign elements—components of the pagan-gentile civilization adjacent to the Jewish domain in Palestine—were absorbed by the Jewish population in a controlled manner, omitting or neutralizing certain aspects which offended their traditional practices. This process was not uniform and there was no authoritative

power enforcing it. The elements were absorbed gradually and vari-
able—both woven into societal developments and influenced by them. The process featured a partial adaptation to foreign and new com-
ponents, while simultaneously reshaping them in conformance with the new system in which they had to function. The acceptance of the Roman bath-house into Jewish society, and its establishment therein, provides a good example of this process.

The title of this paper, "The Roman Bath as a Jewish Institution," seems to embody a fundamental contradiction: how can an institution be concurrently Jewish and Roman? At this point, it should be clarified how the cultural identity of a physical structure, such as the bath-house, can be determined.  

Is architecture the sole factor in defining cultural identity? In other words, does the typical model designed by the Romans—a series of bathing rooms built more or less according to the same plan and method, and heated by the hypocaust technology—mean that this particular edifice is Roman? The answer must be negative. Especially when referring to the cultural identity of a structure, the fact that its architectural-physical characteristics are derived from a certain culture is insufficient to attribute that structure to that culture.

Examining an unquestionably Jewish institution—the synagogue—can help to substantiate this conclusion. Does anyone consider the synagogue a Roman institution? After all, many of its physical features are based upon the Roman architectural model for public edifices—the basilica, consisting of a rectangular main hall, divided into three by two rows of columns, with walls lined by benches and a semicircular apse which emphasizes the façade. Despite these architectural features, clearly

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20 Obviously, throughout this paper I am using the term "Roman" for things that partake of Romanitas and not for neutral aspects of the culture of the Roman world. The question here is not of features of the Roman world that an institution might share (which the synagogue definitely does), but rather whether or not it embodies the essence of that culture.

In the following theoretical discussion, I am dependent on studies from the field of urban psychology. Although usually written from a contemporary perspective, their discussions of the basic cognitive process that shape human perception of the environment are useful. See mainly: Kevin Lynch, The Image of the City (Cambridge Mass.: Technology Press and Harvard University Press, 1960) 6-13, 118-120; Edward Krupat, People in Cities: The Urban Environment and its Effects (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). I am especially grateful to my friend Nimrod Luz of the Hebrew University Geography Department, who patiently led me through the infinite twists and turns of these theoretical studies.
everyone would agree that the synagogue is not a Roman institution. Hence, architecture by itself cannot define a structure's identity.

Consciousness and content determine the cultural identity of an institution. Consciousness is the way that people who frequent the establishment perceive it, while content is the sum of features associated with its existence—activities and customs, folklore, its variegated nature as reflected in literary works, and sundry artistic expressions. Its architectural appearance is also a factor, but only one among many. According to these principles, it follows that a synagogue built according to Roman architectural standards and methods is a Jewish institution in almost every way. On the other hand, ancient theaters and amphitheaters even when situated in exclusively Jewish cities, such as Jerusalem before its destruction and Tiberias in the third and fourth centuries, were, undeniably, Roman institutions. How does the bath-house rank on this scale?

Jews surely associated the bath-house with the Romans. A well-known talmudic tradition lists the construction of bath-houses among the "fine (or corrupt; depending on the speaker) works" of the Roman nation. Without entering into the debate as to whether this story genuinely expressed the sages' views, it surely reflects the common knowledge of the public, who credited the bath-house to its founders and inventors. Jewish sources of Antiquity evince a keen awareness of many Roman characteristics of the bath-house. The building's interior,

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21 b. Shabbat 33b. For a short summary of the debate concerning the historicity of such passages in rabbinic literature see Eliav, "Restic." For a specific discussion regarding the historical value of this source, see Israel Ben Shalom, "Rabbi Judah B. Ilai's Attitude towards Rome," Zion 49 (1984) 9-24 (Heb.), and for the debate that developed following this article see Zion 52 (1987) 107-13. The opinions assigned to the tannaim in the text are not relevant to their attitudes about the morality of the institutions listed there; they are pertinent to their stand regarding the Roman authorities. Bear in mind that even R. Simeon B. Yohai, who takes the most negative position in the above-mentioned passage, has only one reservation about the baths—that the Romans built them "to rejuvenate themselves." And what is so depraved about that? Perhaps the flaw that he finds is that they wanted to rejuvenate "themselves" and not others. Another possibility is that the source airs views rejecting bodily pleasures per se, similar to what prevailed later in the monastic movement, and in Christianity in general. The story's continuation in the Talmud describes a "monastic act"—a long sojourn in a cave and so forth—in which B. Yohai was involved.

22 For a comprehensive collection of rabbinic literary sources that deal with the baths see: Samuel Krauss, "Bad und Badewesen im Talmud," Haskel 1 (1907-8) 87-110, 171-94; 2 (1908) 32-50; idem, Talmudische Archäologie (3 vols.; 1940; reprint Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1966) 1. 209-33. In the following notes, references will be made to the latter study, although it is a concise summary of the former, since it is more popular with readers; Julius Preuss, Biblisch-talmudische Medicin: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Heilkunde und der Kultur überhaupt (Berlin: S. Karger, 1911) 617-42; M.R. Hanoune, "Thermes
consisting of a series of rooms, each designed for a different function of the bather’s routine cycle, is the setting for the halakhic three-fold division of the bath into “a place where people stand dressed,” “a place where people stand naked,” and “a place where people stand both naked and dressed.” Another source designates the various parts of the bath as the “inner rooms,” “outer rooms,” “the furnaces room,” “the cloakroom,” “storage room for the woods” and also mentions “towers” and “pools.”

The heating technique of the hypocaust system, and its various architectural elements—the pillars, the raised floor, etc.—provided a talmudic author with the raw material for the legendary anecdote concerning the miracles that occurred to R. Abbahu in the bathhouse of Tiberias. Certain activities that took place in the bath-house, such as sport exercise and oil massage, became its trademarks, and these activities are referred to, although at times vaguely, in rabbinic literature. Moreover, as will be explained below, Jews were also familiar with seemingly problematic elements from their standpoint, such as the statues that decorated the bath-house and mixed nude bathing. These factors were interwoven in their perception of the bath-house.

Finally, even folkloristic details regarding the bath, which dispersed


23 t. Ber. 2.20 (Lieberman 10); t. B. Batra 3.3. (Lieberman 139); Neusner’s translation (Neusner, The Tosefla..., Niezuin, 158) is ignorant of the Roman bath-house reality. For suggestions regarding the identification of the various rooms see: Krauss, Talmudische, 1.218-9; Saul Lieberman, Tosefta Kifshutah: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta (10 vols.; Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1955-88) 10.363-4. See also his remarks on p. 360; Jacobs, “Römische,” 237-48.

24 y Tom-tov 1.60c; b. Ber. 60a; b. Ketub. 62a. for a detailed discussion see: Eliav, “Realia.”

25 Sports—Tractates Derekh Erets: Perqa ha-nikhmas la-nerhats 2 (Higger 300). Although, as far as I know, this is the only rabbinic source directly relating sports exercise to the baths, it seems that other halakhot dealing with exercise in general should be understood in a like manner. E.g. m. Shabbat 22.6, and my discussion on this passage: Yaron Z. Eliav, “Pylé—Puma—Sefat Medinah and a Halakha Concerning Bath-houses,” Sidra 11 (1995) 18 n. 39 (Heb.). Others have preceded me in this insight. See e.g.: Samuel Krauss, “Le traité talmodique Dérêch Erêq,” REJ 36 (1898) 212. But c.f. Lieberman, Greek in Jewish Palestine, 92-7; Jacobs, “Römische,” 309-10. Other sports activities that Jews took part in are not explicitly associated with the baths in rabbinic literature. Ball games are an ample example. On this see Joshua Schwartz, “Ball-Playing in Jewish Society and in the Greco-Roman World,” Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division B:1 (Jerusalem: The World Union of Jewish Studies, 1994) 17-24. In fact, the issues that concerned Jews about sports activities in the Greco-Roman world are similar to those discussed here regarding the baths. On a Jewish athlete who trained in the nude at a gymnasium, apparently in Alexandria, see Allen Kerkeslager, “Maintaining Jewish Identity in the Greek Gymnasium: A Jewish Load’ in CJF 3.519,” JSJ 28 (1997)
all around the Roman world, were also manifested in Jewish circles. The popular belief in demons who resided at the baths, widespread among pagans and Christians alike, is a striking example. According to a legend in the Palestinian Talmud, R. Judah the Patriarch and R. Samuel b. Nahman encountered the demon of the baths, *Anguicaris*, and did not spurn his magical help. The demon placed his forces at their disposal in a series of miracles, in which he prodigiously controlled the bath’s fire and was able to regulate its heat. Similar notions are found in *Sefer ha-Razim*, a Late Antique Jewish magical composition from Palestine which was retrieved from the Cairo Geniza. One of its passages offered a method of extinguishing the glowing fire that heated the bath, utilizing salamanders (lizard-like amphibians), oil and magical rituals.26

Thus, both constituents of the cultural identity formula, consciousness and content, seem to define the bath-house as a Roman institution, both in the way in which the Jews viewed the establishment, as well as the activities and customs that were associated with it. However, this is only a superficial assessment. As I shall argue below, in a range of issues, the baths operating among the Jews transcended the conventional practice in the Roman Empire. On one level, Jews neutralized factors that did not conform to their standards of conduct. On another level, some of their unique practices, manners and customs became correlated with the baths. Thus, the bath was remodeled.

This process of change did not occur at the same rate in every locality. Just as in regard to other subjects the Jewish civilization in Palestine during Antiquity was not uniform, but rather a diversified variety, likewise their positions concerning the bath-house and its features were probably disparate. Nonetheless, judging by the extant sources, the unique character of the Jewish bath-house can be delineated. The following will demonstrate this argument in relation to three issues.


Oil massage—t. Ter 10.10 (Lieberman 162); t. Shabbat 16.16-7 (Lieberman 78-9); y. Sheb. 8.38a; Tractates Derekh Erets: Peres ha-niknas la-merhats 1-2 (Higger 298, 302). See also Krauss, *Talmudische*, 1.229-30.

Statues adorned the Roman baths, constituting an unavoidable part of the environment encountered by the visitor. Statues that were chiseled on the pediment or standing full size on its tip (*acroterion*), or that were placed on the cornice welcomed the bather at the building’s façade. Inside they were situated at almost every possible spot. There were reliefs engraved on friezes, busts (*protomai*) carved out of the *abaci* (the square slabs at the top of the column’s capital), life-sized three-dimensional images arranged on beams spanning the columns, in special niches in the wall or scattered around on pedestals. The subject repertoire of the statues was diverse: emperors, benefactors, gods, mythological scenes, and important figures who were memorialized for various reasons.

Like the large number of statues that stood on almost every street corner of the Roman city, the bath-house statuary was intended for decorative purposes, not for worship. In many ways the bath-house was a secular establishment (as much as anything could be secular in a world as permeated with religion as the Roman civilization). There were no ritual practices in connection with the baths’ statues, sacrifices were not offered, and religious ceremonies were not conducted there.

Nonetheless, the statues’ religious status is not clear-cut. Firstly, as just mentioned, the ancient world was saturated with religion. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that a statue of a god, even if not within the religious context of a temple, was still perceived as a religious figure. The many inscriptions unearthed in bath-houses throughout the empire demonstrate the abundant spirituality that was intrinsic to the baths. The steps of the bath-house were personified as gods and goddesses, and nymphae were housed there as well. Rooms and sometimes entire bath complexes were named after gods (perhaps this is the meaning of the mishnaic idiom “A bath-house of Idolatry”). Secondly, it is known that the “Emperor’s cult,” which commingled religion with realpolitik, was promoted at the baths (although most of the time it did not have a ritual aspect but rather it was confined to what we

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27 The discussion here is limited to the statuary of the bath-house. On the broader issue of the sages’ overall view regarding statues see Schwartz, “Gamaliel,” 206-17.


29 *m. 'Aboda Zarah* 4.3. but cf.: Hanokh Albeck, *Shisha Sidrey Mishnah* (6 vols.; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute and Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1958) 4.337. The existence of such a combination of pagan temple and public bath-house as suggested by Albeck has no basis in history.
would call “propaganda”). Thirdly, ceremonial aspects of religion were unquestionably practiced at the thermal baths. Similar to other medicinal establishments (such as the *Asclepieion*), these baths were patronized by the curative gods, and the healing process included a ceremonial thanksgiving offer to the god in charge.\(^{30}\)

This complex situation was expressed in Jewish sources as well. On the one hand, the Mishnah considers the statues at the bath to be idols (אבות, אבות), and consequently it even prohibited construction of the “vault” (אבות; niche?) where they are positioned. Obviously, according to this line of thought the statues themselves are totally prohibited.\(^{31}\) Apparently this was also the position of Proklos when he challenged R. Gamaliel’s attendance at the bath of Aphrodite in Acre (Aphrodite was the most popular goddess who inhabited the baths).\(^{32}\) Rabban Gamaliel’s response introduces the other side of the coin. In his opinion, Aphrodite is “adornment for the bath” and being in the presence of such decorative statues does not constitute idolatry. The concluding statement of the dialogue further elucidates this point:

If you were given much money, you would not enter before your idol naked, or suffering a flux, nor would you urinate in its presence. Yet this (idol) is standing at the head of the gutter and all the people urinate in front of her. It is said only “. . . their gods” (Deut. 12:3)—that which one treats as a god is prohibited, but that which one treats not as a god is permitted.\(^{33}\)

In other words, this statue of Aphrodite that embellishes the bath-house has no ritual context; therefore it is not considered idolatry. There is no need to seek a harmonious compromise between R. Gamaliel’s view

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\(^{30}\) Dunbabin’s study (“*Baia rum,*” 12-32) illustrates this phenomenon, especially note her summary (31-2). However, Schwartz’s annotations (“*Gamaliel,*” 215) make matters unduly extreme. Even though (as I stated above) the ancients’ perception of reality was rooted in religion, they did distinguish between “religious” statues intended for aesthetic purposes and statues used for pagan worship. Apparently, such a distinction was made by both the elite and people on the street. For a comprehensive study of the iconography of statues in the baths and their significance in integrating the Emperor’s Cult into this establishment see: Janet DeLaine, *The Baths of Caracalla* (Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series 25; Portsmouth RI, 1997) 77-84.

\(^{31}\) *m. 'Aboda Zara* 1.7. For later sources that hold the same opinion and appear to be based upon this mishnah see Eliav, “Did the Jews,” 15 n. 60.

\(^{32}\) Manderscheid, *Die Skulpturenausstattung*, 32-3; Dunbabin, “*Baia rum,*” 23-5.

\(^{33}\) *m. 'Aboda Zara* 3.4; trans. partially based on: Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A new Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988) 665. For the numerous studies written on this mishnah, including a discussion of the identification of Proklos
and the above-cited *halakha* forbidding even the construction of a niche for a statue. As in other texts,\(^{34}\) the mishanic editor incorporated an anecdote that did not conform to the primary *halakha* (perhaps to express his reservations about the totality of the prohibition). Thus, another viewpoint about attendance at the baths was presented here—the blamelessness of visiting this institution even when it was decorated with statues, as long as they have no explicit ritual context.

Tertullian, a major patristic writer from approximately the same time, had a similar two-fold approach. On one hand, he listed the bath-house among the dubious sites decorated with idols (*Ceterum et plateae et forum et balnea et stabula et ipsae domus nostrae sine idolis omnino non sunt*). On the other hand, since it was clear that Christians frequented the bath-houses, Tertullian developed a theological formula to permit this (and which even allowed entry to pagan temples), on the condition that they did not go there for pagan worship (*Loca nos non contaminant per se sed quae in locis sunt*).\(^{35}\)

In amoraic literature (the rabbinic corpus that follows the above-mentioned tannaitic literature and generally dates from the third to the fifth centuries) R. Yohanan expressed a similar viewpoint when advised by R. Simeon b. Lakish about people (who might not have been Jewish) “sprinkling (wine, oil?) in honor of that (statue) of Aphrodite” at the bath-house of Bostra. Such acts, though uncommon, did happen, and Tertullian’s account indicates that he too thought of the statues at the bath-house entrance as pagan in nature.\(^{36}\) R. Yohanan’s response, “a

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34 Professor Yonah Fraenkel of the Hebrew University has often pointed to this phenomenon in his lectures; however, I have not been able to find anything he wrote about it.

35 Tertullian *De spectaculis* 8; trans. T.R. Glover (*LCL*; Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press and London: Heinemann, 1977) 233-3. For more on Tertullian’s view of the baths see above n. 11. The connection between Tertullian and the passage regarding R. Gamaliel has already been pointed out by Dunbabin (“Baia rum,” 32).

36 Aside from the source in the previous note see also Tertullian *De idololatria* 15 (Reifferscheid and Wissowa [*CSEL* 20] 48 l.17–18). Eusebius relates that during times of religious persecution, guards were placed at the entrance to the baths who would force visitors to taste meat from the sacrificial offerings of idol worship. See Eusebius *De martyribus Palasstinae* 9.2 (Schwartz [*GCS* 9.2] 928 l. 16–18). The passage on the baths appears only in the abridged Greek version and is missing from the extended Syriac version.
thing of (done by) the public is not forbidden," indicates that the statue of Aphrodite was not used regularly for idol worship, and that the event seen by Resh Lakish was a circumscribed action initiated by visitors to the bath-house. Consequently, the prohibition of idol worship could not be applied to the bath-house.37

The above discussion has focused on the most common type of Roman bath-houses which were decorated with statues. But were all the bath-houses adorned with statues? What about the baths that were constructed by the Jews themselves in dozens of homogeneous Jewish settlements throughout Judaea and Galilee—did they also contain statues? The answer to this question is probably, at least partially, affirmative. Within the diverse Jewish society of Palestine, there were those who did not believe that erecting statues was religiously inappropriate. Such a view is intimated, for example, in the tannaitic halakha relating (negatively, of course) to "An idol . . . of an Israelite." The halakha proceeds to speak of " . . . cutting off the tip of its ear or the end of its nose . . . ," making clear that it refers to a three-dimensional statue.38 Bath-house statues within the Jewish sphere seem compatible with the following account:

37 Y. Sheb. 8.38b-c; for the trans. cf. Alan J. Avery-Peck, The Talmud of the Land of Israel: Shehiit (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991) 293. Although not explicitly mentioned, it is clear that the story took place in the bath-house, mainly because of the talmudic context which deals with a tannaitic halakha concerning the bath. Cf.: Levine, Judaism and Hellenism, 109. The parallel in the Bavli (b. 'Aboda Zarah 58b-59a) blurs the background of the event and does not indicate a bath-house setting. Cf. Lieberman's commentary on this story (Hellenism, 132-3), where he suggests that the bath-house mentioned here was also a "pagan sanctum" to Aphrodite. However, as previously stated (see above n. 29), such an institution was unknown in the Roman world. See also: Schwartz, "Gamaliel," 216-7 n. 33; Jacobs, "Römische," 267. In my opinion, Baidstein's explanation ("R. Yohanan," 155-6) that Rabbi Yohanan's sanction is due to the public nature of the site, misses the mark. If it had been built for idolatry, then its "public use" would not enable it to be sanctioned. Hence, the dispensation must be due to the fact that the statue was not made for idol worship in the first place, but rather to embellish the baths. That is why the locals' sprinkling would not obligate the rabbis to prohibit the bath-house as idolatrous. Such an argument also solves the other problem raised by Baidstein—the failure of Resh Lakish and R. Yohanan to rely on the mishnah regarding R. Gamaliel in Acre. In my opinion, the reason is simple. In R. Gamaliel's case, idolatrous acts were not performed in the baths. Instead a statue of Aphrodite was simply placed in the baths (as were many other statues). R. Gamaliel's act could not be used as precedent in a case where people actually did decide to perform an act of pagan worship before one of these statues. Therefore, it could not assist the amoraim.

38 m. 'Aboda Zarah 4.4-5.
R. Yohanan said to Bar Derosai: “Go, break all idols that are in the public bath-house (יוֹסֵפִים),” and he went and broke all of them except for one.\(^{39}\)

The above quote apparently describes an event that took place at Tiberias, the domicile of Rabbi Yohanan. The public baths of Tiberias provided the background scenery for other stories in rabbinic literature as well.\(^{40}\) Hence, even though R. Yohanan was not very pleased about it, evidently there were statues in the bath-house of this city, which had a majority of Jewish inhabitants during this period.\(^{41}\)

Thus, it seems beyond doubt that bath-houses with statues did operate in Jewish communities. However, in my opinion, the more significant question is were there also bath-houses that lacked statues? I would argue, that such bath-houses did exist. The negative attitude of many contemporary Jews toward statues is well known. Clearly, the fact that the majority of Jews during the Second Temple period viewed statues unfavorably has been documented by various sources and is solidly supported by archaeological findings. The Jews as “a whole” (even if such a body never existed) rejected figurative art during the Second Temple period.\(^{42}\) The exceptions to this rule that were discovered, such as fragmented figures in painting or relief that can be attributed to Jews, do not include three-dimensional figures (i.e. statues), which are never heard of or found among the Jews. Jewish society was united in its protest against Caligula’s plan to erect an idol in the sanctuary of the Temple. The Jews were even upset that the Roman Legion entered Jerusalem with standards that were decorated with figures. Thus, the Jews surely would have been upset about statues being placed in their bath houses.


\(^{40}\) See: Eliav, *Sites*, 22-32.

\(^{41}\) The same conclusion has been reached by Blidstein, “R. Yohanan,” 157 n. 13.

\(^{42}\) This topic has been presented and discussed many times. For an up-to-date and extensive summary of the archaeological finds see Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and*
Jewish rejection of statues carried through to the period after the destruction of the Second Temple. Although the Jewish stance towards figurative art did change—and the mosaic ornamentation in synagogues is clearly proof of this—there is no evidence that this change included statues. Unlike Gentile and mixed cities in the Land of Israel, such as Scythopolis, Panias, Caesarea, and others, where excavations have unearthed numerous statues (both fragments and intact), there is not one shred of archaeological or epigraphic evidence, as far as I know, that any Jew brought a three-dimensional sculpture into his own sphere. While decorating ancient synagogue floors with mythological images was a common and habitual practice, and so, although to a less degree, was the engraving of animal images in relief, not even one fragment of a three-dimensional statue has been discovered in any of these buildings. If Abraham or David were pictured in mosaic form, why were their images not chiseled as statues and placed on display? It seems that mosaic art and three-dimensional statues were two separate issues, for ancient Jews.

It should also be noted that the rabbinic texts I have cited allude to statues in bath-houses located in totally pagan regions—Acre and Bostra—or in mixed cities such as Tiberias (even if the Jewish community in Tiberias was a majority, large numbers of pagans are known to have resided there). The mishnah prohibiting the construction of a niche for statues (see p. 432) talked about a bath built “with them.” Hence, it is referring to a mixed city. Along the same line, the previously-mentioned halakha in the Tosefta, which conveys the rules for selling a bath-house and gives an account of its content, did not include statues among its artifacts. This is in spite of the documentation in Roman sources that the cost for statues was by far the most expensive element in building a bath-house. It seems logical that three-dimensional statues, if they had indeed existed, would have been taken into account when selling the bath. Finally, in a dialogue that supposedly took place between Hillel the Elder and his disciples concerning

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A substantial part of Hachlili’s book is devoted to this topic. See Hachlili, Ancient Jewish Art, 141-395. For an in-depth discussion of the rabbinic sources regarding this issue and the various scholarly interpretations see Sacha Stern, “Figurative Art and Halakha in the Mishnaic-Talmudic Period,” ZDMG 61 (1996) 397-419 (Heb.).

Weiss, “Greco-Roman Influences,” 244-5.

bathing at a bath-house, Hillel compares washing the body to cleaning the statues. However, while the first element of this equation—washing the body—occurs in the bath-house, the second element—cleaning statues—takes place at theaters and circuses. 46 These considerations offer sufficient support for the argument that Jewish bath-houses unadorned by statues did in fact exist.

An analogous example of a bath-house lacking statues because of religious principles can be found in the Byzantine world. The relationship between emerging Christianity and the traditional pagan lifestyle was complex and varied. Scholars point to alterations to the buildings as well as shifts in the behavioral norms of bathers made in the process of adapting the bath-house experience to new religious standards. Of course, these changes were executed gradually, and varied from place to place. An example of a conspicuous innovation in this period is the elimination of the palaestra, the exercise court. One interpretation of this structural modification is that it reflects the transformation of the bath from an establishment geared to physical pleasure to one whose goal was hygiene and health.

As for statues and other ornamentation, the situation throughout the Christian empire was not uniform. In many locations, the statues surely continued to stand. 47 Nonetheless, certain sources attest to the removal of ornamentation from individual bath-houses. One decisive piece of evidence for this is the fifth century description of a bath-house in Gaul. Sidonius Apollinaris, a Latin poet and man of the world who at that time served as the bishop of Clermont-Ferrand (located between Lyons [Lugdunum] and Limoges [Limonum]), wrote to his friend Domitius and gave a detailed description of his village bath-house in nearby Avitacum. According to his report, the bath’s walls, which were overlaid with plaster, were devoid of any nude figurative images, and the interior did not contain statues. The rationale Sidonius offers for this exclusion is intriguing: “... nihil illis paginis impressum reperietur quod non vidisse sit sanctius.” 48 This explanation is based on religious consideration;

46 Lev. Rab. 34.3 (Margulies 776-7). On the numerous textual variants of this text, its parallels, and various scholarly interpretations see Eliav, “Did the Jews,” 30-1. The extensive debate among scholars as to the historical authenticity of such stories is not relevant to the matter being considered here. For the present discussion, the author’s impression of the baths (whoever the author might be) is significant.

47 See Berger, Das Bad, 108-14.

and what is true for a bishop from Gaul can be also true for the Jews of the Land of Israel.

(2) *Mixed Nude Bathing*

Communal bathing of men and women in the Roman bath-house has often been a subject of research, and its existence is well established. Questions about this custom’s exclusivity (did everyone bath in the nude?), chronological scope (did people always bath in the nude? and if not, when did this phenomenon begin or end?), and geography (was nude bathing practiced everywhere?), are a more complicated matter which have not always received sufficient attention. In general, scholars reckon that from the first century CE until the rise of Christianity in the fourth century, and even later, mixed bathing was a widespread and almost universal phenomenon (in the Roman empire). Contemporaries who held an unfavorable view of mixed bathing (even emperors who instituted their prohibitions in formal legislation) were unable to prevent it.

Jews who lived in Palestine during that time (and of course, Jews in the Diaspora) undoubtedly knew that men and women bathed together in the nude in public bath-houses. And many of them may well have participated in this activity. Mixed bathing was probably widespread in the large coastal cities of Palestine, as well as in the cities of Decapolis,

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49 Cf. Michael Satlow unpublished paper “Mixed Bathing in Roman Palestine.” Several sources discussed in this chapter are also referred to there; however, our general approach, methodology and conclusions are entirely different.

50 The relevant bibliography and sources on this topic were collected in: Heinrich Meusel, “Die Verwaltung und Finanzierung der öffentlichen Bäder zur römischen Kaiserzeit” (Inaugural-Dissertation, Universität zu Köln, 1960) 158-68. Recently, this issue was again discussed by: Nielsen, *Thermae*, 146-8; Ward, “Women,” 125-47. Ward presents a comprehensive look at the extent of mixed bathing, and rejects, somewhat justifiably, the conclusions of some scholars that women who bathed with men were from the lower classes, mainly prostitutes (135-7). Less convincing is his argument [following Elke W. Merten, *Bäder und Badegeflüstern in der Darstellung der Historia Augusta* (Antiquitas 4.16; Bonn: Habelt, 1983) 79-100] that the sources reporting the prohibition of mixed bathing by imperial decrees reflect only the Later Byzantine attitude (139-40). Even he admits that during the Roman period there were those who had an unfavorable view of mixed bathing, so it is plausible that some emperors shared this opinion.

where Jews mingled in close proximity with Gentiles, and bath-houses were abundant. Reference to nude people in the baths is made in several rabbinic passages. For example, the previously cited halakha (p. 427) specifically mentions “a place where people stand naked” in the bath, although it does not speak of the presence of women at the same place. A later source (perhaps from the Geonic period) which cites this halakha, labels the bath “House (room?) of the nude.” People engaging in nude bathing were also featured in the story (p. 432) about R. Gamaliel visiting the bath-house of Aphrodite in Acre. That was the reason behind R. Gamaliel’s refusal to respond to the halakhic question inside the bath (rabbinic law prohibits any sort of “holy” activity such as prayer or discussing halakha in the present of nudity). Mixed bathing was also at the background of the halakha from the Tosefta, which described (negatively) the case wherein a woman “. . . washes and bathes in the public bath with just any one.” The well-known story about Joseph the Comes in Epiphanius’ Panarion. tells of the Jewish patriarch’s son’s misconduct with a beautiful woman he met at the hot room of thermal baths in Hammat-Gader.

What was the Jewish attitude toward this activity? Recently, Michael Satlow has published a comprehensive study about the ways in which ancient Jews in ancient times perceived nudity. The many sources he collects indicate that there was a pervasive apprehensiveness associated with situations in which a man gazed at a nude woman. The

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52 Presently, there is no comprehensive summary of archaeological and literary information regarding these baths. For now see what I have collected in Eliav, “Did the Jews,” 4-8.

53 Minor Tractates: Tefillin 17 (Higger 47-8). For a suggestion to date this halakha as early as the tannaitic period see Myron B. Lerner, “The External Tractates,” in Shmuel Safrai, ed., The Literature of the Sages I (Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum 2.3; Assen: Van Gorcum and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 400-1.

54 t. Ketab. 7.6. Here, I am using Neusner’s somewhat free translation (Neusner, The Tosefta: Nashim), 81. It is clear that the meaning of the Hebrew כה משנה is to other men. For the parallels to this halakha in the mishnah and talmud, and in regard to its textual variants see Lieberman, Tosefta Kifshutah, 6.291. Although the halakhic standpoint of this passage patently disapproves of a woman attending a mixed bath, and views such an action as justification for denying her monetary compensation after a divorce (Ketubah; if her husband would wish to divorce her as a result), it would be too far-reaching a conclusion to infer that the halakha obligates or even recommends divorcing such a woman. Contrary to, e.g.: Preuss, Biblisch-talmudische, 636; Krauss, Talmudische, 1. 226; Epstein, Sex Laws, 30.

55 This source was referred to above (n. 17). Even though this story takes place at the thermal baths and not at the bath-house, it appears that in regard to mixed bathing, there was no difference between the two.

disapproval of such an act is expressed in miscellaneous Second Temple sources, and even more so, in rabbinic literature, which praises a woman’s physical modesty and condemns undressing before men. Due to the paucity of sources, it is difficult to establish opinions held by groups of Jews outside of the sages’ circles regarding this issue. However, Satlow correctly notes that Jewish artistic representations from the Land of Israel, which are known to express views that are not in accord with the sages, totally refrain from portraying naked women.\textsuperscript{57} It appears that in this matter the Jewish public was more or less united.

Thus, the accepted norms in the Roman bath-house in terms of mixed nude bathing inevitably clash with Jewish norms of behavior. How was this conflict solved, if at all? Four theoretical models can be suggested:

(1) Avoidance: Because of the problem of mixed nudity, Jews avoided going to the baths.

(2) Nullification: Jews bathed in mixed and nude baths, since such action was not defined as problematic.

(3) Compromise: mixed and nude bathing persisted, although nudity presented a problem.

(4) Neutralization: Jews bathed but found solutions to avoid nudity.

The first two possibilities are difficult to accept. A previous study of mine (see n. 10) totally refutes the first possibility. It demonstrates that there is no indication that the Jews avoided going to the baths, and on the contrary, that they frequently visited the bath-house and enjoyed its pleasures. In this respect, the Jews were like the rest of the populace of the Roman Empire. The second alternative must also be rejected. The many and varied sources (collected by Satlow) reflect the Jews’ extremely severe attitude toward the situation in which women’s nudity

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid. 435-6. The only exception to this rule—female nudity in the wall painting of the Dura-Europos synagogue—although pointed out by Satlow (136) was not adequately discussed in his research. For two opposing interpretations of this material see: Elias J. Bickerman, “Symbolism in the Dura Synagogue: A Review Article,” \textit{HTR} 58 (1965) 131-2, 141-2; Warren G. Moon, “Nudity and Narrative: Observations on the Frescoes from the Dura Synagogue,” \textit{JAAR} 60 (1992) 587-658. Moon’s argument, based on comparative art research, that the female nudity in Dura represents a non-Jewish image and holds a didactic significance, seems to me very convincing. Even if his view is not accepted, it cannot undermine Satlow’s claim that findings in the Land of Israel reflect extensive disapproval of such nudity. The few examples of male nudity in artistic material (in Dura Europos, Hammat Tiberias, and Beth-Shearim) and their significance to male nudity in the sacred, discussed by Satlow at length, is not relevant to the present subject.
is exposed to men. They even warn against partial nudity which is only fleetingly visible. This disproves the second possibility that nudity in the baths would not be defined as problematic.

The third alternative deserves more careful consideration. It is evident that there will always be a gap between the values that society defines as appropriate and the ability to implement them. This is an immanent and permanent characteristic of human history. Often people outline for themselves a certain hierarchy of values, but due to constraints, difficulties or plain reluctance, many deviate from this set of norms and do not execute the requisite conduct. Hence, the question is, did this also happen in regard to nudity at the baths? In other words, although seeing a nude woman was forbidden, did Jews ignore this objection and continued to attend the baths?

There are two reasons to reject this alternative. First of all, even if some people did compromise their ideals, this does not explain how the group that adhered to its values handled the bath situation. Secondly, and even more important, sources indicate that such a concession in relation to the baths was not common. We can look at the current argument in terms of the two comparisons that were discussed earlier (pp. 423-26)—contrasting the Jewish attitude to the baths with their approach toward other entertainment establishments, and with the Christian attitude toward the baths. If going to the baths compromised an important value (that of women's modesty), you would expect to find indications of friction or even animosity between those who abided by this ideal and those who did not. Sources relating to the theater and stadium reflect this tension—some people were of the opinion that attending them contradicted the Jewish way of life while others, whether because they saw nothing wrong in it or because they “straddled the fence,” did not avoid visiting them. Rabbinic literature broadly expresses the criticism hurled at those who attended these institutions. The rhetoric of these texts is aimed at castigating these establishments and the activities that took place there, and at tackling any justifications given by the attendants. This reflects a passionate dispute and struggle, wherein positive and negative viewpoints were aired. Such a struggle characterizes the situation where values are being compromised.

As previously mentioned, this type of discord is also found in Christian sources dealing with the baths. Some Church Fathers viewed a visit to the baths as a defect in one's morals and values, although the general public continued to frequent them. This is precisely the tone lacking in the Jewish sources—both those dealing with the baths and those
concerned with the general question of nudity. Consequently, it seems that the Jews found a way to neutralize the problem of nudity at the baths.

This leaves the fourth possibility. Jews of Antiquity could have devised two solutions to the problem of nudity at the baths—segregation and concealment. A variety of sources attest to the existence of segregation between men and women at the baths throughout the Roman Empire. Scholars agree that separation of the sexes was common in the early stages of the Roman baths' operation—in the second half of the second century BCE and most of the century thereafter. Bath structures preserved from this period which contain two sets of installations, clearly demonstrate this (e.g., the Forum baths at Pompey and Herculaneum). In addition, there are literary sources that explicitly describe the division.\(^{58}\) As time passed, sexual segregation at the baths decreased. From the first century CE and onwards, the previous era's double baths are scarcely to be found. Likewise literary sources allude more and more to mixed bathing.\(^{59}\)

However, this did not mean that the custom of separating the sexes at the baths ceased to exist. A famous Latin inscription from Portugal dating to the first half of the second century CE (which Jérôme Carcopino first quoted and many others have since cited) clearly mentions separate bathing hours for the sexes. Women bathed from dawn till the seventh hour, and men from the eighth hour until the end of the second hour of the night.\(^{60}\) Other inscriptions, though admittedly sporadic

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\(^{60}\) CIL 2 (supp.), 5181 (p. 789 1.19-24). For a reconstructed version of the inscription, including supplements and corrections, see Jérôme Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* (trans. E.O. Lorimer; London: Penguin Books, 1956) 258 and n. 63. For a survey of the research on this issue, both before and after Carcopino (especially the enormous influence his remarks had upon the ongoing research on this question) see Ward, "Women," 140-1. Ward's criticism of the disproportional weight assigned to this single source by Carcopino and his followers is justified. Indeed, a conclusion regarding a widespread custom (of any kind) cannot be drawn from one source, and it should be balanced by opposing sources. In this case there are sources that provide extensive evidence for mixed bathing. However, in my opinion, Ward is captivated by his desire to prove the opposite, i.e. that mixed bathing existed, and he misses the main point. The issue is not only whether mixed bathing existed, since it is clear that it did, but rather, did segregated bathing also exist? The significance of the inscription from Portugal even if it is unique (and below I shall show that by all means it was not) is to upset belief in the totality of mixed bathing. Apparently, even in the second century CE, when mixed bathing was widespread, there were those who bathed separately. Other reservations I have in regard to Ward's thesis will be presented in the following notes.
and at times not totally clear, also confirm the existence of a certain degree of segregation.\footnote{These are collected and discussed by Nielsen, \textit{Thermae}, 147. In this matter as well, Ward's discussion lacks the balance I pointed to in the above note. See his remarks on p. 131.}

Other sources further bolster this conclusion. The \textit{Didascalia apostolorum}, a Syriac Christian source from the middle of the third century, shows that mixed bathing was not a common practice in all localities. In the course of warning against mixed bathing the \textit{Didascalia} pronounced that "When there is a bath of Women (בנה כָלָה) in the town or in the village a believing woman shall not bathe in a bath with a man."\footnote{\textit{Didascalia apostolorum} 3; trans. Arthur Vööbus, \textit{The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac} (2 vols.; CSCO 402; Louvain, 1979) 1/2. 26. For a later version of this ruling see: \textit{Constitutiones apsotorum} 1.9 (Metzger [SC 320] 130-132). Ward (144-5) accurately examined the differences between these two sources. However, in evaluating the information in the \textit{Didascalia apostolorum} itself, he lacks the balance as I discussed previously (n. 60). For example, he summarizes the information from this source as follows: "The Didascalia had envisioned the situation where there were no women's baths and the women would be constrained to bathe in mixed baths..." (144). Although this is evidently true, Ward completely disregards the other side, that the \textit{Didascalia} also proves the existence of a "bath of Women."} Hence, the author of this passage was familiar with a segregated bathing, even if it was not available everywhere. A few hundred years later, when Christianity was much more established, segregated baths are often heard of (although mixed bathing did not disappear). For example, the story about Symeon "the fool" relates that when he was invited to a bath-house in the Syrian city of Emesa (modern Homs), he thoughtlessly rushed into the women's baths. The bathing complex is described in this tale as: δῶρο λοντρά ἰσαν ἐγγίζοντα ἀλλῆλοις, ἐν ἀνδρίον καὶ ἐν γυναικείον (. . . two baths next to each other one for men and one for women).\footnote{Leontius Neapolitanus \textit{Vita Symeonis Sali} 35 (PG 93.1713); trans. Derek Krueger, \textit{Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 154. See also: Zellinger, \textit{Bad}, 34-46; Berger, \textit{Das Bad}, 43-4.}

A \textit{halakha} dealing with the disclosure of a woman's physical defects before marriage also indirectly proves the existence of sexual segregation at the baths among Jews of Antiquity. Among the various possibilities, the mishnah states: "And if there was a bath-house in that town he may not make complaints even of secret defects, since he can inquire about her from his women kinsfolk."\footnote{\textit{m. Ketub. 7.8; trans. based on Herbert Danby, \textit{The Mishnah} (London: Oxford University Press, 1933) 255, with minute differences due to textual variants derived from the manuscripts. On these variants see Moshe Hershler (ed.), \textit{The Babylonian Talmud}}} The explanation which is
mentioned en passant at the end of the halakha ("inquire about her from his women kinsfolk"), indirectly reveals a situation wherein only women saw other nude women in the bath-house. The source does not clarify how this separation was achieved. The vague mention of "a bath" apparently means that there was only one bath-house, so the segregation could have been based on different hours, as in the inscription from Portugal cited above.

Another halakha, dealing with the laws of niddah (impurity of menstruating women), mentions "Bathhouses of women," a designation also appearing in the previously alluded to Didascalia apostolorum. In the halakha, it probably indicates a separate installation. Such a bath could either be a separate bathing facility located in the same building as the men’s bath-house (similar to the Roman bath-houses during their early stages of operation), or it could be a totally distinct structure. It seems that there was no established method of segregation; different places used different techniques.

Another possible way to solve the problem of nudity was through covering the body. At the outset, it must be said that unlike the previous argument, discussion of this topic is entirely speculative and

with Variant Readings: Tractate Ketuboth II (Jerusalem: Institute for the Complete Israeli Talmud, 1977) 199. My conclusion that some level of segregated bathing existed among the Jews is also subscribed to by other scholars. See, e.g.: Krauss, Talmudische, 1.218, who speaks of "Eine getrennte Abteilung für Frauen"; ibid., 225-6; Jacobs, "Römische," 253-5.

65 t. Nid. 6.15 (Zuckerman 648). In a parallel version to this halakha, the mishnah (m. Nid. 7.4) reads "House of impure women" or in another version "House of impurity" instead of the tosefta's "Bathhouses of women". However, this does not negate the "realia truth" of the tosefta's passage. Even if we accept the premise that the version in the mishnah is more original (for a discussion of the various versions see Tirsch Z. Meacham, "Mishnah Tractate Niddah with Introduction: A Critical Edition with Notes on Variants, Commentary, Redaction and Chapters in Legal History and Realia," [Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 1989] 85 [Heb.]), nonetheless, the editor of the tosefta did not find the reading "Bathhouses of women" fallacious. Evidently, he did not invent a theoretical term here but rather borrowed it from contemporary speech. For further discussion on the term "realia truth" of the text, and its relation to the "textual truth" see Eliav, "Realia."

It might also be possible in this case to reconstruct the process which motivated the "editor" of the tosefta to alter the reading. For the logical consistency of the halakha, the menstrual stains had to be discovered in a place where both pure and impure women congregated together, since if only impure women sojourned there, no problem would arise (an impure woman cannot double her impurity). One who did not know the real meaning of the phrase "House of impure women," might conclude that this was a place only for impure women, and thus find the mishnah illogical. This could explain why the editor of the tosefta sought a phrase which would encompass pure and impure women convening together, and he came up with "women's bath-house."
theoretical. There is no clear-cut proof that a garment existed which today would be known as a "swimsuit," i.e. special attire worn when bathing. On the contrary, numerous literary and representational sources document nude bathing, although depictions of the way that people dressed when they were not in the water are far from consistent.66

Two young women performing exercises and wearing what seem to be present-day swimsuits, appear on one of the mosaics in the Piazza Armerina villa in Sicily which dates back to the beginning of the fourth century CE. Scholars call them "the bikini girls." Another young woman who appears with them seems to wear a type of sheet wrapped over her body, partially hiding it while revealing one of her breasts.67 When Martial, the celebrated first century CE Roman poet, wishes to insult the matron Chione, he remarks that she covers only her intimate parts in the baths, but, if decency is really important to her, then she should cover her face.68 Emperor Alexander Severus wore a garment, called *vestis balnearis*, in the baths (see discussion below concerning attire with a similar name mentioned in rabbinic literature).69 Clearly, some Christians concealed their bodies, as can be concluded from the above-mentioned criticism in the *Didascalia apostolorum* concerning women who did not do so.70 Finally, in the Byzantine period various sources observed that bathers used a λέβντος, a type of sheet (see below).71 Hence, even though nudity was widespread it was not all-embracing.

Several halakhot imply that coming to the bath-house did not entail complete nudity throughout the visit. For example, in regard to a king, the Sifré to Deuteronomy instructs:

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66 Here too, sources have been collected and discussed more than once. See: Nielsen, *Thermae*, 140-2; Yegul, *Baths*, 34-5.

67 See: Biagio Pace, *I mosaici di Piazza Armerina* (Roma: G. Casini, 1955) 77-81. The Girl with the revealed breast—id., 74. On the term "Bikinimädchen" see, e.g. Werner Heinz, *Römische Thermen: Badewesen und Badeluxus in römischen Reich* (München: Hirmer, 1983) 129. As to the question whether this mosaic depicts apparel that was actually worn in the baths see Nielsen, *Thermae*, 141.

68 Martial *Epigrammata* 3.87; trans. D.R. Shackleton Bailey; *LCL*; 3 vols. (Cambridge Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1993) 1. 265. The fact that on other occasions Martial refers to mixed and nude bathing (collected by Ward, "Women," 136-7) does not affect this argument, since my goal is to emphasize the lack of unanimity about this matter.

69 *Scriptores Hist. Aug.* Severus Alexander 42.1 (Magic *LCL* 2, 262). From this description, it is difficult to deduce exactly how the *vestis balnearis* was used. See Nielsen, *Thermae*, 141 n. 9.

70 *Didascalia apostolorum* 3; trans. Vööbus, 26.

71 Berger, *Das Bad*, 115.
... Sages have ruled: As to a King, People may not ride on his horse, sit on his throne, make use of his scepter, see him naked or getting a haircut or when he is in the bath house. 72

Because "see him naked" and "when he is in the bath-house" are expressed as two separate forbidden activities, the halakha seems to intimate that when a king is at the baths, sometimes he is not naked. This conclusion brings to mind the source cited regarding Emperor Alexander Severus wearing a sort of a garment in the bath, but it is difficult to arrive at definite conclusions on the basis of such allusions.

Rabbinic literature refers to various types of undergarments and coverings for the body, such as towels, that could be used (although there is no proof that they were indeed used), even if only partially, to solve the problem of nudity. One example of such a garment was the apikarsin (אפיקארסין). This term, which also occurs in Greek (ἐπιχλόρσιον) and Syriac (ܡܟܐܢܐ), denoted a long undergarment similar to the Greek Chiton, made from relatively delicate cloth that was wrapped around the body and tied above the shoulder. 73 Sources also mention the 'aluntit (אלוונית), whose name is derived from the Latin linteum and Greek λέντιον. This was a length of cloth whose many uses included drying and oiling the body. 74

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72 Sifré Deut. 157 (Finkelstein 209); trans. partially based on Jacob Neusner, Sifre to Deuteronomy: An Analytical Translation (Brown Judaic Studies 98, 101; 2 vols.; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) 2, 25. Neusner misses the main point when he translates אֲפִיקָרְסִין "as "and not taking a bath." On the textual variants of this halakha and its parallels, and regarding a similar ruling concerning the high priest see Elia, "Did the Jews," 28-9.

73 Sources about this garment were gathered and discussed by Yehoshua Brand, Kaley zehukhah beshifrut ha-Talmud (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 1978) 176-7. For the Greek see: LSJ, 636 s.v. "ἐπιχλόρσιον." III. For the Syriac: Robert Payne-Smith, Thesaurus Syriacus (2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1879-98) 1.349-50 s.v. "ܣܦܝܦܪܡܝ." See also: Samuel Krauss, Griechische und lateinische Lehmschmier im Talmud, Midrasch und Targum (2 vols.; 1899; reprinted Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1964) 2,115 s.v. "Ὑπολειπομενον"; Marcus Jastrow, A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi and the Midrașim Literature (2 vols.; 1903; reprinted New York: Pardes, 1950), 1.107; Jacob Levy, Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midrašim (4 vols.; Berlin & Wien: Benjamin Harz, 1924) 1.148. It should be noted that the only source linking the afkarsin to the baths indicates that it was removed before bathing. See Tractates Derekh Erets: Pareg ha-nikkhmas 1 (Higger 296-8). On the lack of certainty concerning the dating of this source see Einedi 5.1551-2.

74 Presently, there is no inclusive discussion on the sources regarding this object. On its use for drying and rubbing oil (although not exclusively at the baths) see, e.g.: m. Shabbat 22.5; t. Shabbat 5.15-7 (Lieberman 78-9); t. Erubin 5.24 (Lieberman 116-7). Regarding the Latin derivation see Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, A Latin Dictionary (1879; reprinted Oxford: Clarendon, 1962) 1069, s.v. "lineae." For the Greek: LSJ 1038 s.v. "λέντιον." See also: Krauss, Griechische und lateinische, 2.51-52; Jastrow, Dictionary, 1.68 s.v. " dispersion;" Levy, Wörterbuch, 1.82 s.v. " dispersion;"
The most significant example in rabbinic literature of attire used in the baths is a garment, whose name appears in a few variants—balarei (בָּלָרֵי), balnarei (בַּלנָרֵי), balniete (בַּלנִיֵּטֵא). Without delving into how this term evolved, it is clear that its root comes from the Greek name for the bath—βαλανειόν. Samuel Krauss, author of the "classic" Talmudic dictionary of words derived from Greek and Latin, has pointed out that in Latin, balnearia means a type of clothing or a sheet of cloth used at the baths (what he terms Badewäsche or Badezeug).  

What remains uncertain in the rabbinic material is the manner in which this balnarei was used, and whether it was indeed a garment. A halakha from the Land of Israel, preserved in the Babylonian Talmud, reads: "The bath attendants may bring women's bathing clothes (?) רבי הָלָכָה) to the baths, providing that they cover their heads and the greater part of their bodies in them." The sort of article depicted by this excerpt is a lengthy piece of cloth with which the entire body can be covered. Another factor supporting this idea that the balnarei was utilized as a kind of garment, is its classification as women's attire, a designation mentioned by two other sources as well. In these two sources—the first dealing with the rules of kilaim ("different things"); the Biblical prohibition against commingling certain fibers, also known as Sha'atnez) and the second with washing the balnarei on a holiday—a talmudic editor incorporates a comment that indicates a distinction was made between "Women's balnarei" and "men's balnarei". If the balnarei was merely a piece of fabric used for drying oneself, a type of towel, then the strict separation between a woman's and a man's towel would have been unnecessary. The item portrayed by these sources,

75 Krauss, Griechische und lateinische, 2.158-159 s.v. "בָּלנָרֵי"; idem, Talmudische, 1.231. In agreement with Krauss see all other lexicographers: Jastrow, Dictionary 1.174, 177; Levy, Wörterbuch, 1.243 s.v. "בָּלנָרֵי"; Michael Sokoloff, A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1990) 104 s.v. "בָּלנָרֵי." For the argument that the various forms of spelling actually denote the same object see Lieberman, Tosefta Kifihitah, 2.657-8 and n. 47. Two other talmudic sources (cited below in n. 76) identify the balnarei as מַשַּׁלְנָרֵי or in another version מָשַׁלנָרֵי. However, this classification does not contribute to a better understanding of its precise identity or function, since the meaning of these terms are also unclear. See the various explanations suggested by the above dictionaries.

76 b. Shabbat 147b; trans. Epstein (ed.), The Babylonian Talmud: Shabbath, 2.749. The background to this halakha concerns the rules for carrying objects on the Sabbath and is not relevant to the current study. However, this passage does show that the baths were open on the Sabbath. For more on this subject see below and the reference on n. 79.

77 y. Kil. 9.32a; y. Mo'ed Qat. 3.82a.
involving a large segment of cloth which covered the entire body and was used exclusively by women in the baths, corresponds to a type of bathrobe. Perhaps (although I could find no direct proof to support this presumption) the purpose of this robe was to protect women’s modesty, at least when they strolled around the baths.

Nevertheless, the nature of this balnarei is not always clear. On one hand, in regard to kilaim, the Palestinian talmud states that “balnarei of women (which contain prohibited mingled material) are prohibited.” This statement confirms the conclusion that the balnarei was indeed an item of clothing, otherwise the rules of kilaim would not apply to it. On the other hand, the tosefta includes this same statement, but in the reverse status: “balarei of women (that contain mingled materials) are permitted.” Thus, according to this version, the balnarei is not considered clothing. This lack of consistency possibly reflects reality, in which a type of towel, exempt from the laws of kilaim, gradually evolved into a type of women’s clothing. Such dynamics are compatible with the general line of thought standing at the core of the present study, i.e. that the Jews developed ways of dealing with the problems that arose in connection with visiting the baths.

To summarize this topic: the previous discussion does not intend to claim that all bath-houses among the Jews in the Land of Israel were segregated, and certainly not to conclude that all Jewish men and women bathed separately. As the sources have indicated, the widespread Roman phenomenon of mixed baths was also prevalent in the Land of Israel, and Jews participated in this activity. What I have argued is that an alternative existed as well. In other words, there were ways to avoid mixed bathing, either by arranging separate set hours for men and women or by establishing separate bathing facilities (in the same bath) or separate bath buildings altogether. Such options are not theoretical possibilities invented by scholars; they are based on and echoed by the sources.

The pending challenge is to determine the extent of these phenomena; were the majority of bath-houses in Jewish settlements mixed and segregated bathing only marginal, or was the opposite true—was segregated bathing the norm in Jewish communities, with some Jews attending Gentile-owned mixed bath-houses only in cities where both

Jews and Gentiles resided. Based on the above discussion, I tend to agree with the latter possibility. However, in truth, because of the scarcity of sources, it is difficult to decide one way or the other, and for the present study, it makes no difference.

(3) Jewish Motifs in Bath-Houses

In the course of time, the bath-house was absorbed into the Jewish society in Palestine, and gradually became an integral part of the country’s landscape. At the same time, the bath-house was undergoing a slow process of cultural integration. It is natural for a reciprocal relationship to develop between physical objects and the group of people within whose framework they function. Jewish sources provide evidence of this process through a variety of issues, wherein the bath-house and affairs related to it intersect with other matters of Jewish life.

One example is the tradition of washing at a bath-house on the Sabbath. As I have shown at length elsewhere, it is possible to follow the rabbinic ruling on this matter over a period of about a hundred and fifty years, from the time prior to the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE) to the era following the redaction of the mishnah (ca. 200 CE), and perhaps even thereafter. It was necessary for the sages to formulate regulations on this subject, since many people desired to attend the baths, and the weekly day of rest provided an ideal opportunity to partake in this activity. Unfortunately, the operation of the bath-house and in certain circumstances even bathing itself were likely to involve desecration of the Sabbath. The ruling concerning these matters underwent dramatic changes beneath the hammer of the halakha, as befits issues that are closely related to the daily life of ordinary people. Technical solutions to the halakhic problems involved in keeping the baths open on the Sabbath were devised (especially restricting the operation of the furnace), and in light of the flaws revealed in enforcing them, strict rulings were reinstated. Decrees mutated from the strict end to a more lenient phase, and again stricter. At the end of this long process, bathing during the Sabbath was prohibited. Over the course of time, customs and habits became established. For example, the residents of outlying neighborhoods (i.e. outside the city’s walls) in

79 Eliav, “Pylé.” The details mentioned here are extensively discussed there. This paper was overlooked by Jacobs in his discussion of the subject (Jacobs, “Römische,” 272-83).
the large cities would take a Sabbath afternoon walk that culminated with a visit to the municipal bath in the evening after the Sabbath ended.

Bath-houses on the Sabbath in Jewish communities were particularly adapted to Jewish customs and religious beliefs. Observations in sources indicate that in certain Jewish villages furnaces of the baths were extinguished or their function limited on the Sabbath; in others the baths did not operate altogether; and in the mixed cities some Jews did not attend the baths on that day. A ruling in the Tosefta also attests to this adaptation: "In no place may one rent out his bath-house to a Gentile, since it would be called by the Israelite's name and people will bathe in it on the Sabbath." The process in which a Roman institution such as the bath-house becomes "called by the Israelite's name" reflects the essence of this paper's argumentation.

Additional issues emanating from rabbinic tradition and common Jewish standards of behavior can be added to the above Sabbath example. What would the average Jew do if he were in the bath and it was time for one of the daily prayers? What should a Jew who comes to the bath wearing phylacteries do? Sources allude to the distinction between places in the bath which are permissible for prayer, and those that are forbidden. This suggests that even if it was not formally sanctioned, Jews did conduct their daily prayers in the baths. There are those who will discredit such questions as theoretical and not worthwhile for historical study; I do not agree. In a situation where halakha and the baths functioned side by side, their confluence is more than reasonable. There is no documentation on a prayer hall at the baths, although the above-mentioned Christian parallel in connection with John Chrysostom (see n. 13) refers to performance of Christian ceremonies in the baths.

In addition, there are indications that a special room in the bath-house was provided for menstruating women in their period of impurity. As previously noted, the mishnah mentions a "house (יִנָּה) of impure

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80 t. 'Aboda Zarah 2.9 (Zuckerman 463); trans. based partially on Neusner, The Tosefta: Nedarim, 317-8. Cf.: m. 'Aboda Zarah 1.9.
81 t. Ber. 2.20 (Lieberman 10). Lieberman presents other parallels to this halakha. See also above n. 23.
82 This is analogous to a scholar who, hundreds of years from now, examines today's rabbinic responsa dealing with whether a soldier is permitted to wear phylacteries in a tank during a battle, and assumes that this was only a theoretical question, whereas it is a real question for soldiers who observe Orthodox halakha.
women” in relation to the laws that apply to menstruating women. In another source regulating the sale of a bath-house (see n. 23), the word “house (יִירָה)” signifies a “room” in the bath-house complex. If this is so, “house (יִירָה) of impure women” was possibly a special room in the “Jewish” baths allocated for the use of menstruating women.\(^{83}\)

Another particularly Jewish character of the bath-house involved the “baths’ benediction.” In the Roman world people greeted one another when entering and leaving a bath-house with a variety of salutations and blessings. For example, at the entrance they would say Bene lave, or if they wanted to speak in a more refined manner they would use the subjunctive form and say Salve laves. When leaving, common parting words were Salve lotus. Catherine Dunbabin has shown that voicing these blessings was not only the proper etiquette, but also (as evidenced by their epigraphic context) that uttering them helped to ward off the fears and superstitions of people visiting the baths.\(^{84}\)

Accordingly, these greetings should be regarded as benedictions rather than mere salutations. For Jews in antiquity, blessings accompanied a person throughout the day, and therefore, it was natural that they also spoke them when entering the bath-house. Indeed a halakha preserved in the tosefta prescribes:

He who enters a bath-house recites two benedictions, one upon entering and one upon leaving. Upon entering what does he say? “May it be thy will, Lord my God, to bring me in safely and bring me out safely, and let no accident happen to me. And if, God forbid, an accident should happen to me, may my death be atonement for all my sins. And save me from similar things in the future”. Once he has left safely he says: “I thank thee that thou hast brought me out safely. So may it be thy will to bring me home safely.”\(^{85}\)

**Geographical Realm and Archaeological Remains**

Jewish bath-houses may have been widespread throughout the geographical domain of homogeneous Jewish settlements. Until the Bar Kochba revolt, this territory included most of Judaea, stretching from

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\(^{83}\) For other explanations regarding the term “house” in this connection see for example Albeck, *Shisha*, 6.588-589; Meacham, “Mishnah Tractate Niddah,” 85.


\(^{85}\) *t. Ber.* 6(7).17 (Lieberman 38). The parallels to this tradition are listed by Lieberman; trans. Neusner, *The Tosefta: Zeraim*, 40. For more on this benediction and its *sitz im leben* see: Eliav, “Realia.”
Beth-El north of Jerusalem to Hebron in the region of Idumaea, and Galilee—excluding the large mixed cities, Scythopolis, Caesarea, etc. From the end of the first century CE and onwards, this territory gradually decreased to encompass Galilee and to some degree the southern part of Judaea and the Golan as well.

Archaeological excavations and written documentation from the Second Temple period record the existence of bath-houses in Herod’s fortified palaces in Jerusalem, Jericho, Cyprus on the hilltop west of Jericho, Herodium, Masada, and Machaerus.\(^6\) Although these were not public baths in the full sense of the word, it should be noted that extensive archaeological excavations carried out in many of these sites have not retrieved even a shred of evidence indicating the existence of statues.

On a large estate in south Judaea, called “the palace of Hilkiyah” by archaeologists, a Roman style bath-house, dating to the last century of the Second Temple period, was discovered. An additional bath-house was excavated in the nineteenth century in the village of Artas, not far from “Solomon’s pools”, south of Jerusalem.\(^7\) Josephus mentions a bath of the same sort at Ἰσρά, a Jewish village some twenty kilometers north of Jerusalem. His description of the external and internal rooms suggests the previously cited account in the mishnah (n. 23) concerning inner and outer rooms.\(^8\) Recently, excavations at Ein Zur at Ramat ha-Nadiv, northeast of Caesarea, have uncovered a bath-house dating to the time before the destruction of the Second Temple. Various details, especially its devastation during the first revolt (66-70 CE), point to its Jewish origins.\(^9\) The bath-house discovered at Engedi, which should be identified as Jewish (for I see no reason to classify it as a military bath), belong to the era subsequent to the destruction of the Second Temple. The bath-house at Rama in upper Galilee, which


\(^{7}\) On the “Palace of Hilkiyah” see: Emmanuel Damati, “Khirbet el-Muraq,” IEJ 22 (1972) 173; idem, “Armon Hilkiyah,” in M. Broshi et al. eds., Between Hermon and Sinai (Memorial to Amnon) (Jerusalem, 1977) 93-113 (Heb.). For a summary and bibliography of the bath-house at Artas see: David Amit, “What was the source of Herodion’s Water?” Cathedra 71 (1994) 12-15 and n. 38 (I would like to thank David Amit for referring me to this information).

\(^{8}\) Josephus Ant. 14.462-3. For an extensive discussion of this source and its parallels see Eliav, “Did the Jews,” 22-5.

\(^{9}\) For information about this bath-house which has not yet been published see Eliav, “Did the Jews,” 8 n. 27.
dates from a slightly later period, should also be classified as Jewish. All these bath-houses are located in regions where the populace was almost exclusively Jewish. Hence, they are appropriate candidates for implementing the above-mentioned Jewish model.

Conclusion

It is possible to delineate some fundamental features of what I call "the Jewish bath-house." Its structure and function corresponded to the "classic" Roman bath prevalent throughout the empire: it had similar types of rooms; the rooms were arranged in patterns which constituted the sequential course of the bather; it utilized the hypocaust for heating. The majority of routine activities that occurred in the Roman baths also took place in the Jewish baths: people rubbed their bodies with oil, exercised, immersed themselves in the water, and took advantage of the wide range of indulgences that the baths offered.

Nevertheless, the "Jewish bath-house" contained distinct elements that had no analogues in the Roman world. The buildings' physical contents express this, and even more significantly, the unique customs, activities and traditions that became associated with it. First of all, its space was devoid of stone images on pedestals; it was a building lacking any three-dimensional sculptures. Secondly, some of the activities that took place there differed from the common behavior in the Roman bath-house. Segregation between the sexes, accomplished either by designating different hours of use for men and women or by separate chambers, was an essential standard in "Jewish bath-houses", as was the tendency not to walk around completely naked. Such customs did not subsist only among the Jews, and others, although a minority in the Roman world, practiced them as well (such as the people referred to by the inscription from Portugal or the Didascalia apostolorum).

90 Benjamin Mazar and Immanuel Dunayevsky, "En-Gedi: Third Season of Excavations," IEJ 14 (1964) 128-130. Gichon ("Roman Bath," 45-7) suggested that the bathhouse at Engedi was a military bath, but he did not provide support for this suggestion. Numismatic findings show that the bath-house functioned when the Jewish community was flourishing during the years preceding the Bar Kokhba rebellion. Rama—Vassilios Tzaferis, "A Roman Bath at Rama," Atiqot 14 (1980) 66-75. Although three niches with stone pedestals were discovered in the back of a pool at the northern wall of the entrance room, no statues (or raptures of such) were found. Tzaferis and Gichon disagree in their interpretation of this finding—the former believes statues existed but were not recovered, while the latter is of the opinion that the niches held vases, which were also a common ornament. In light of all that has been discussed in this paper, I incline
There were also unparalleled peculiarities. The benedictions uttered when people entered and left the bath-house were different from those usually spoken in Roman bath-houses. Occasionally, a person, or a group of people, retired to a corner and prayed. A room was assigned for women bathing to use while they were menstruating, and all others avoided entering there. Finally, once a week, from Friday late in the afternoon until after the stars appeared the next day, the furnaces were extinguished, and in many places the baths were shut down and activities ceased entirely.

Studies of Roman bath-houses identify one type of structure as a "small city bath." Unlike the large public bath or the gigantic imperial baths, these were more modest in size and were at times geared to serve a specific group. Archaeological evidence of such establishments has been detected in many places, from Britain in the West through Asia Minor, Syria, and as far as Dura Europos in the East. The model of a "Jewish bath-house" proposed here conforms to this type of small bath. Like the small city bath the Jewish bath-house was established to serve a specific group; however, the common denominator among the group’s members was their religious belief and ensuing lifestyle rather than their profession or societal status. It is quite plausible that the above-mentioned archaeological remains in the Land of Israel represent such "small bath-houses."

Finally, I do not wish to argue that all of the above-mentioned characteristics of a "Jewish bath-house" existed simultaneously in every bathhouse in Jewish towns and communities. The goal of my study, which uses the method known as "Ideal Type Analysis," is to incorporate all characteristics into one model in order to demonstrate its uniqueness and to clarify its form. In reality, this model was implemented in a variety of ways and levels according to many factors—religious, social, and economic—which differed from one village to another. Nevertheless, viewing this process of cultural integration as a whole highlights a less studied facet of the complex relationship between Jews and the cultures that surrounded them. Voices of conflict are not heard here. In their stead is the quiet process of the absorption of outside cultural elements into ancient Jewish society through revision and adaptation.

towards the latter. This indeed fits my thesis: the framework of the structure was adopted and only the inadmissible elements were neutralized.