

Diversity and Rabbinization

Jewish Texts and Societies
Between 400 and 1,000 CE

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Cover image: Zodiac motif and figure of Helios on the mosaic floor of the fourth-century Hammat Tiberias synagogue. Moshe Dothan, *Hammath Tiberias* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1983), plates 10/11. Courtesy of the Israel Exploration Society.
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INTRODUCTION

For several decades, it has been the *communis opinio* that, during the Roman Era, Judaism was diverse even beyond the tripartite division found in Flavius Josephus. Beyond the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and even Jewish Christians, the existence of several other Jewish groups is generally accepted.¹ At the turn of the second millennium, however, rabbinic Judaism seems to be ubiquitous in the West, challenged in the East only by Karaism. When and how did this transformation happen? Most scholars have accepted a gradual ascent of rabbinic Judaism in late Roman and early Byzantine Palestine. Even though the standard academic model of a homogenous and dominant rabbinic Judaism following the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE) has been questioned in recent years, a new paradigm has yet to emerge.²

Rethinking the homogeneity of rabbinic Judaism and emphasizing diversity results, in part, from new archaeological and epigraphic discoveries, such as the synagogue mosaics of Palestine, Babylonian magic bowls, and inscriptions from both Europe and the Near East. The influx of new information raises a flurry of questions. Why do Late Antique synagogues, with their

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- 1 Gary G. Porton, 'Diversity in Postbiblical Judaism', in *Early Judaism and its Modern Interpreters*, ed. by Robert A. Kraft and George W. E. Nickelsburg (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 57–80.
 - 2 See, for example, Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 13 vols. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953–1968); Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1977); *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. by Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); Simon C. Mimouni, *Le judaïsme ancien du VI^e siècle avant notre ère au III^e siècle de notre ère: des prêtres aux rabbins* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012); José Costa, 'Entre judaïsme rabbinique et judaïsme synagogal: la figure du patriarche', *Judaïsme ancien/Ancient Judaism* 1 (2013): 63–128.

elaborate mosaics, contradict rabbinic aniconism? Would most synagogue worshipers have even recognized rabbinic authority, or would they have considered themselves members of distinct groups? What relationship exists between the Babylonian Talmud and the Babylonian magic bowls, which invoke the rabbis but also refer to Christianity and Zoroastrianism? What does the sudden appearance of the Karaites in the eighth and ninth centuries tell us about rabbinic hegemony (and what is their relationship to Second Temple sects)? How does the depiction of Jews in the Qur'an (which mentions rabbis and might allude to the Mishnah: see Q 5.32 and cf. m. Sanh. 4.5) tally with the epigraphic evidence from South Arabia? What was the nature of European Jewry prior to the development of Ashkenazic and Sephardic cultures?

This line of questioning inevitably alters our understanding of classical rabbinic texts. Close study of the literary corpora generally attributed to the rabbis (and received as such in the Middle Ages) reveals underlying tensions between rabbis and other Jewish groups. Classical rabbinic literature consists, above all, of Talmud and Midrash. Rabbis composed liturgical poetry (piyyut) and recited Targum, but both literary categories originate in the synagogue, not the rabbinic academy. The exact origin and purpose of the Hekhalot literature, routinely attributed to certain rabbis (e.g., R. Ishmael) but seemingly incongruous with rabbinic warnings against mystical speculation (e.g., m. Hag. 2.1), remain hotly contested. Works that modern scholars reflexively designate 'Midrash', including Toledot Yeshu, Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, and Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, differ as much from each other as they do from their classical predecessors. What can these works, with one foot in the rabbinic camp and one foot outside, tell us about the gradual emergence of rabbinic Judaism as normative?

In June of 2015, we invited a group of scholars to Paris to discuss these questions. The current volume assembles the papers first presented at that meeting. The papers covered a broad range of dates and geographical regions, from fifth-century Rome to tenth-century Babylonia, resulting in the unusual chronological range of 400–1000 CE. We allowed such a wide range in order

to include specialists from a number of diverse fields whose work might not easily conform to the common periodizations of 'Late Antiquity' or the 'Early Middle Ages'. It was also critically important for us to have voices representing both the situation in Europe as well as in Palestine, Babylonia, and beyond. Despite this variety, the papers fell naturally into one of four categories. The first section of the volume examines the world of the synagogue, the meeting place of several Jewish groups beyond the rabbis. The second and third sections look at direct evidence for non-rabbinic Jewish groups, first in the Near East and then in Europe. The fourth section focuses on the rabbinic texts which appear to be directed at non-rabbinic Jews. A concluding essay draws all these threads together.

The most tangible challenge to the traditional paradigm of ancient Jewish history, in which the rabbinic movement is viewed as the dominant force in Jewish societies in Palestine and beyond, came from the discovery of Late Antique synagogues with structures and decorations that differ from or are even opposed to what one would expect from a 'rabbinic' synagogue. In the period covered by this volume—as in modern times—the synagogue manifests great diversity in Jewish society in matters of cult and in relation to the surrounding societies and their cultures. In fact, even before we compare the ancient synagogue with data from Talmudic literature, we are confronted with an impressive variety of synagogue art and architecture that seriously challenges any attempt at generalization. The synagogue is therefore a good vantage point to begin our inquiry about diversity and rabbinization in the Late Antique and Early Medieval Jewish world.

The variety of Late Antique synagogues is the subject of Lee I. Levine's article 'Diversity in the Ancient Synagogue of Roman-Byzantine Palestine: Historical Implications'. Levine criticizes the hypothesis of a linear development of synagogue types and shows that there was a great deal of diversity in synagogue art, architecture, and even liturgy throughout Late Antiquity. Furthermore, the number and size of synagogues suggest a thriving Jewish community even after the Christianization of the

Roman Empire, a time that has normally been viewed as one of steady decline for the Jews.

Michael Swartz, in ‘Society and the Self in Early Piyyut’, takes us on a textual journey in the company of some early liturgical authors from the Byzantine period whose work was probably recited in the synagogues of Palestine and other places before audiences that were not exclusively rabbinic. Through the analysis of selected piyyutim, Swartz shows that these liturgical poems help us better understand ideological frameworks and social structures of Late Antique Jewish Palestinian society. These piyyutim, whose authors are generally known (unlike most other Jewish literary products from the period), complicate our vision of Jewish society and the structures that held it together.

In ‘Some Remarks about Non-Rabbinic Judaism, Rabbinization, and Synagogal Judaism’, José Costa offers a survey of historiographical debates about Judaism in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. He claims that scholars should principally focus on what he calls “the ambiguous corpora” (Targumim, piyyutim, Hekhalot literature) and cannot neglect two concepts which remain to be clarified: ‘non-rabbinic Judaism’ and ‘rabbinization’. Costa particularly engages with and criticizes Ra’anan Boustan’s 2011 article ‘Rabbinization and the Making of Early Jewish Mysticism’.³ Building on Simon Claude Mimouni’s hypothesis of ‘synagogal Judaism’,⁴ he suggests that the rabbinization process involved mainly the rabbinization of synagogues and the religious activity therein. This conclusion can also be shared by those who do not adhere to the model of ‘synagogal Judaism’.

If Jewish diversity in the Roman Empire is broadly acknowledged, it has taken more time for scholars to acknowledge diversity among Babylonian Jews. One reason for this is a dearth of archeological evidence in context. For example, vestiges of Late Antique synagogues in the regions around Babylonia are

3 Simon C. Mimouni, *Le judaïsme ancien*.

4 Ra’anan Boustan, ‘Rabbinization and the Making of Early Jewish Mysticism’, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 101 (2011): 482–501.

wanting. Geoffrey Herman assesses the problem in his article ‘In Search of Non-Rabbinic Judaism in Sasanian Babylonia’. Herman provides a survey of scholars who dealt with the question, from Jacob Neusner’s *Aphrahat and Judaism*⁵ to the more recent works of Richard Kalmin,⁶ Catherine Hezser,⁷ Moulie Vidas,⁸ and the Jewish Babylonian Aramaic magic bowls published by Shaul Shaked and others.⁹

In ‘Varieties of Non-Rabbinic Judaism in Geonic and Contemporaneous Sources’, Robert Brody shows that, based on his analysis of several *responsa* attributed to Natronai Gaon and the letter of Pirqoy ben Baboy, rabbinic authorities were aware of the existence of several non-rabbinic Jewish groups in the eighth century. However, over the course of little more than a century, rabbinic discourse shifted from knowledge of several such groups to the assumption that all non-rabbinic teachings derived from Anan ben David and his followers. Finally, Brody pinpoints several differences between the earlier non-rabbinic groups, on the one hand, and the Ananites and Karaites, on the other, who seem to have posed a greater threat to the rabbis.

Yoram Erder, writing on the ‘Karaites and Sadducees’, addresses the polemical identification of the two groups by Rabbanite Jews (such as Moses Maimonides). Not all Rabbanites equated the Karaites with the Sadducees, and the Karaites recognized the Sadducees as a group distinct from their own movement. In fact, the Karaites refer to two groups called Sadducees: the Second Temple sect and the ‘Zadokites’ of the Qumran movement. He

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- 5 Jacob Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth-Century Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 1971).
 - 6 Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
 - 7 Catherine Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997).
 - 8 Moulie Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).
 - 9 Shaul Shaked, James Nathan Ford, and Siam Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells: Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Bowls, Volume One* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

suggests that the Damascus Document, found at both Qumran and in the Cairo Genizah, was known to the Karaites. While the Karaites have much in common with these ‘Zadokites’, there are also important differences between them, such as the Karaite belief in the resurrection.

Christian Robin’s ‘The Judaism of the Ancient Kingdom of Ḥimyar in Arabia: A Discreet Conversion’ surveys the prominent Yemenite kingdom, which plays an important role in both Christian and Muslim historiography but is utterly neglected in Jewish sources. This is surprising, since Judaism was the official religion of the kingdom from the fourth to the sixth centuries (c. 380–530 CE). Robin carefully analyses the primary evidence, i.e., epigraphy, to assess our knowledge of Ḥimyarite Judaism. He arrives at the conclusion that it was grounded in priestly, rather than rabbinic, currents. The Ḥimyarite inscriptions mention neither the rabbis nor belief in the resurrection, yet there is an important inscription mentioning the twenty-four priestly courses in the Temple. The scant evidence, however, obscures the exact nature of Ḥimyarite Judaism. Robin characterizes this as calculated religious minimalism in a pluralistic society.

While Near Eastern sources clearly attest to the existence of many different Jewish groups, the situation in Europe before the end of the first millennium is ambiguous. Capucine Nemo-Pekelman, in ‘The *Didascalus* Annas: A Jewish Political and Intellectual Figure from the West’, explores the identity of a little-known fifth-century figure who managed to secure two legal victories for the Jewish community of Ravenna, both involving controversies over conversion. Annas’s title, *didascalus*, was one of several Latin and Greek titles used for Jewish legal experts, but it was also used by Christians. It was therefore not a synonym for *rabbi*. Nemo-Pekelman associates Annas with the same Jewish milieu that produced the *Collatio Legum Mosaicarum et Romanarum*. She also suggests, with some hesitation, that this Annas is also the author of the *Epistola Anne ad Senecam*.

Giancarlo Lacerenza, in ‘Rabbis in Southern Italian Jewish Inscriptions from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages’,

examines the evolution of the title *rabbi* based on epigraphic evidence. Even though rabbinic literature mentions the presence of rabbis in Rome, the word *rabbi* rarely appears in the early inscriptions. Lacerenza studies three Greek and Latin funerary inscriptions from the fourth to sixth centuries that mention some variation of the title. The scarcity of evidence for this period contrasts with the situation after the ninth century, where rabbinic allusions abound in predominantly Hebrew inscriptions. Lacerenza postulates that a progressive rabbinization of southern Italy occurred during the two centuries where the evidence is silent.

Michael Toch's contribution, 'Jewish Demographics and Economics at the Onset of the European Middle Ages', deals with the knotty question of the origin of European Jewry. Toch contests the controversial claim that both Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities were descendants of converts (notably the Khazars). He emphasizes the continuity of Jewish presence within the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire, which eventually resulted in immigration northward into the European continent. Toch concludes that these later European Jewish communities, who emerged with a fully-formed culture in a short period of time, had been rabbinic from the outset.

The final section turns from diversity within Judaism to the process of rabbinization as reflected in unusual rabbinic texts. Ron Naiweld opens with some programmatic remarks in 'The Rabbinization Tractates and the Propagation of Rabbinic Ideology in the Late Talmudic Period'. He identifies two interrelated aspects of rabbinization: first, the rabbinization of the past, including the biblical past, and, second, the acceptance of rabbinic institutions as normative. The four studies in this section focus on texts that teach Jews how to think like rabbis. Naiweld begins with two examples, the extracanonical Talmudic tractate Kallah and the Sar ha-Torah section of Hekhalot Rabbati. Naiweld sees both texts as ideological tools intended to promote rabbinic thinking outside the academy.

Next, Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra wonders 'Who is the Target of Toledot Yeshu?' The ideological opponents of this polymorphic

work are not merely Christians but (in the words of John Gager) “the dangerous ones in between”, Christianizing Jews and Judaizing Christians.¹⁰ The rabbinic authors of *Toledot Yeshu*, which Stökl Ben Ezra dates to the fifth century, were particularly concerned about Christianizing Jews. Drawing from selected cases in the legal composition *Sefer ha-Ma‘asim*, he argues that unforced conversion to Christianity was a social reality in Late Antiquity.

Another unusual text, *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*, is a clear example of the rabbinization of the biblical past. Many of the stories in this rewriting of biblical history have roots outside of rabbinic and even Jewish literature. Gavin McDowell, in ‘Rabbinization of Non-Rabbinic Material in *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*’, shows how Christian, ‘Gnostic’, and Muslim legends about biblical characters have been altered to make them compatible with existing rabbinic traditions from the Talmud and classical Midrash. Through this process, biblical history, the common cultural patrimony of all these groups, becomes specifically rabbinic history.

Finally, Günter Stemberger explains how Seder Eliyahu Rabbah presented ‘Rabbinic Tradition for a Non-Rabbinic Society’. Although Seder Eliyahu cites the Mishnah and other classical rabbinic texts, it does not demand a level of learning greater than knowledge of the Hebrew Bible. A couple of the interlocutors with the narrator are not even Jewish. According to Stemberger, the text advocates a ‘minimal Judaism’ bordering on universalism, where respect for the Law is equal to or greater than academic achievement.

Ra‘anan Boustán, in ‘Rabbinization and the Persistence of Diversity in Jewish Culture in Late Antiquity’, offers some closing thoughts on the overall theme of the volume. He begins with a brief history of the concept of ‘rabbinization’, a twentieth-century neologism that only recently came to designate the process by which rabbinic institutions became normative. He

10 John Gager, ‘Jews, Christians and the Dangerous Ones in Between’, in *Interpretation in Religion*, ed. by Shlomo Biderman and Ben Ami Scharfstein (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 249–57.

also catalogues the written and archaeological sources that are used in order to study this process, most of which are covered in the present volume. In addition to rabbinic literature itself, he mentions synagogues, piyyutim, inscriptions, the writings of the Church Fathers, legal corpora, Geonic writings, and Jewish magic. At the same time, Boustán sounds a note of caution that the varieties of non-rabbinic Judaism should not be lumped together as a homogenous entity in opposition to the emerging power of the rabbinic Sages.

At the very end of his essay, Boustán declares that a proper history of rabbinization remains to be written. In fact, the history of rabbinization is nothing less than the history of Judaism itself. The rabbinic movement cannot be discretely separated from other types of Judaism and from different types of texts apart from the classical rabbinic canon of Talmud and Midrash. A comprehensive history would have to integrate the threads that are often stratified in contemporary research. As it stands, the present volume serves as a modest contribution to a field of enquiry that has only begun to emerge.

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