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## From the Temple to the Synagogue: Exploring Changes in Judaism After the Fall of the Second Temple

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FROM THE TEMPLE TO THE SYNAGOGUE:  
EXPLORING CHANGES IN JUDAISM AFTER THE FALL OF THE SECOND TEMPLE

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2008

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
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## **ABSTRACT**

“From the Temple to the Synagogue” is an analysis on the influence of external cultures, predominantly the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism on the early rabbis following their failed revolt against Rome and the destruction of the Second Temple in the first century CE. How did the Jewish people react to the upheaval of their center of worship? What can we attribute to the major changes in their religious literature and centers of worship following the demise of their rebellion? Is it possible that what has traditionally been seen as an isolated and uniform group of people did in fact borrow major theological ideas from neighboring religions? This analysis demonstrates the transmission of ideas into this new center of power in the Jewish community, that of the rabbis, through their changed notions of the afterlife, the incorporation of artistic design within the synagogue, and the apocalyptic literature of the Dead Sea Scrolls community of Qumran. While the conversation has become more open in recent years to the idea that Judaism did not simply grow in a bubble, the extent to which Persian ideas made their way into Jewish theology has been largely ignored. This work seeks to demonstrate how open early rabbinic Judaism was to the exchange of ideas and how much of their ideas can be attributed to their non-Jewish neighbors.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this work is to examine an often neglected although critically important period of Judaic history, the Talmudic Period that ranged approximately from the fall of the Second Temple in 70 CE to the rise of the Muslim conquests in the seventh century. It is my intent to discuss the influence of other dominant religions and cultures at the time, predominantly Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and to a lesser extent Hellenic Polytheism, on a people traditionally argued to be very insular and rejecting of anything foreign. I propose that contrary to earlier popular, Zionist influenced thought, and in line with some more modern and at times revisionist works, that the central expression of Judaism after the first century CE, following the fall of the Second Temple, had partially, if not completely been redefined in some areas. That is to say that as the religious authorities lost most of said authority following the failed revolts against Rome, there was a reshaping between both them and the lay people in both their beliefs and their hierarchal relationship. We can find evidence of this breakdown and remolding of standard practices in the texts found in the Dead Sea Scrolls of Qumran, as well as the religious texts and the religious settings of the synagogue where we can see foreign influence in the form of changed notions of the afterlife and the art adorning their architecture and their spiritual artifacts.

### **History**

The First Jewish Temple, according to the Old Testament and the Talmud, was built by King Solomon circa 1000 BCE and was the center of prayer and sacrifice until the Babylonians destroyed it in 586 BCE. According to the Book of Ezra, the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem approximately seventy years later to rebuild the temple, but this happened over the course of many generations and was not finished until King Herod's reign in 20 BCE. The

Second Temple met the same fate as the first in 70 CE after a four year long revolt against the Roman Empire in protestation over taxation as well as Greek-Jewish religious tensions that had been building up for quite some time. The fall of the Second Temple is considered a monumental act to modern Orthodox Jews that forever changed the religion, and millions of people continue to visit its remains in Jerusalem to this day. The Temple was not just a place of worship but the center of the most powerful and influential sect of Judaism at this time. It was where their God resided and where their sacrifices were offered up to him. Pilgrimages were made, the priests were held in deference, and gifts were often given. Perhaps most importantly, it held the support of the Roman imperial authorities. Talk persists to this day among some sects over when the Temple will be rebuilt. As the Zionist scholar Gedaliah Alon put it:

“The destruction of the temple wiped out a symbol of national pride for the Jews at home and abroad and tarnished their image in the eyes of the nation; it shook the very foundations of the Jews belief in his religion and in the future of his people; it rendered impossible the practice of whole areas of his religion, especially in the field of communal ritual. With the altars gone, the nation was confronted by a gaping vacuum, one which the generation of survivors had to fill, and fill quickly.”<sup>1</sup>

It is debated by scholars how deep of an effect the destruction had on the Jews who lived outside of the land of Judaea during this period. Without a center of worship, Judaism was in a predicament not known since the Babylonian conquest of the First Temple and subsequent exile that led to the Diaspora of the Jews. While the details are still unclear, the Bavli tells a story of how during the siege of Jerusalem, when Emperor Vespasian’s victory seemed all but assured, the religious teacher known as Yochanan ben Zakai asked and was given permission to open a school in Yavneh, which would become the home of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish court) and the

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<sup>1</sup> Gedaliah Alon, *The Jews in Their Land in the Talmudic Age (70-540)*, trans. and ed. Gershon Levi, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1980), 50.

Jewish religious center.<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Gamaliel II would succeed him soon after as the first person to lead the Sanhedrin with the title of Nasi (prince). Sometime around the early third century CE, the rabbinic sage Judah haNasi and his followers, worrying about the continued dissemination of Jewish knowledge in a world where their numbers had dwindled and scattered and their center of worship destroyed, redacted their hundreds of orally preserved laws since the time of Moses (which helped expand on those of the Torah) in c. 220 CE into one of Judaism's most important texts. The sages of this time took the opportunity offered by the permanent destruction of the Temple elite to redefine Judaism and appoint themselves its codifiers and judges to such an extent that they fundamentally redefined what "Torah" was.<sup>3</sup> This would be known as Mishna, which means repetition.

During the third century CE, Jewish religious centers had propped up in various Mesopotmian cities such as Nehardea and Nisibis, as well as in Sura, Pumbedita, and Mahoza, predominantly along the Euphrates River. Under Parthian rule (c. 250 BCE – 224 CE), the Jews in this area were in a relatively secure position of power. While their numbers were fewer than their neighbors, they settled over far greater geographical areas. Furthermore, the Parthians were a military aristocracy more concerned with building their empire than imposing strong religious changes on their subjects. Thus the Jews and the Parthians held an amenable arrangement that allowed both to thrive without conflict. They were among the most powerful and loyal supporters of the Parthian cause against the invasion of the Roman emperor Trajan in 114-117 CE. In Palestine, under the Jewish civil authority that existed there during this time, circles of Jewish messianic nationalists were prepared to cooperate with the Parthians against Rome in

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<sup>2</sup> B. T., Seder Nashim: Gittin, 56 a&b.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Schama, *The Story of the Jews: Finding the Words 1000 BC – 1492 AD*, (Harper Collins Publishers, 2013), 183.



order to see that the former unrest in Jewish Babylonia was not repeated.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, later, under Sasanian rule (224 – 651 CE), we find no evidence of a persecution of Jewry or of Judaism from the time of Ardashir (r. 224-242 CE.) to the advent of Yazdagird II (r. 438-457.) more than two hundred years later. Sasanian policy was to treat with even-handed justice the Jews, among other generally docile and sometimes useful, inoffensive minorities. The Iranian empire was generally a law abiding state and followed stable policies. The rabbis in turn gave them little reason to treat their communities with any offense as we see in a phrase mentioned multiple times in the Talmud by the Jewish leader and scholar at the time, Samuel, who wrote *dina de-malkhuta dina*, or “the law of the land is the law.” The rabbis’ sayings pertaining to this period showed the persistence of an old political theory, that of rabbinical Judaism. The pagan state—any pagan state—has been imposed upon Israel on account of her sin, and the Messiah must someday come to remove the yoke of the nations and re-impose that of the kingdom of God.<sup>5</sup> Jews living within the confines of the Iranian empire were often willing to find ways of reinterpreting religious texts to cooperate with outsiders. They did this via their own belief that either they *were* following their scripture by being compliant to those in power, or that they deserved subservience to a hostile foreign power, but only until they were either back in God’s good graces or until the messiah came.

Following the publication of the Jewish oral laws known as the Mishnah in c. 200 CE, rabbinical authorities poured over the texts for generations and for over three centuries commented and wrote on the laws in the Mishna in what would be known as the Gemara, which means to study or learn by tradition. The Mishna and the Gemara together make up the Talmud,

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<sup>4</sup> Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia I: The Parthian Period*, (Leiden: E. J. BRILL, 1969), p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia V: Later Sasanian Times*, (Leiden: BRILL, 1970), pp. 30-1.

of which we have two, the Jerusalem/Palestinian Talmud (also known as the Yerushalmi for short), completed around c. 425 CE, and the Babylonian Talmud (also known as the Bavli for short), which was completed around c. 500 CE. These two works, along with a very select few other rabbinic writings passed down to us (such as the Tosefta, meaning supplement, which is a compilation of Jewish oral law from the late second century), comprise the bulk of what we know about Judaism in Late Antiquity, and the two Talmuds, which contain both juridicial subjects and rabbinic stories, are our window into the world of the Jewish religious advisers, more commonly known as the rabbis, and occasionally, the Jewish people they wished to lead.

### Historiography

One of the early influential works on the study of post-Second Temple Jewish history comes from Gedaliah Alon. The modern study of Jewish history began in the 1780s with the German Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn and his followers in the intellectual movement known as the Jewish Enlightenment or the Haskalah. These scholars of Jewish history had a tendency to either focus on the Bible for its treasure trove of positive and negative exemplars or on leading Jewish figures over the years who could widen their past.<sup>6</sup> The Jewish Enlightenment was followed by the rise of Jewish Nationalism in the 1880s and with it a broader study of Jewish history. Before Alon there were mid nineteenth century Jewish historians such as Heinrich Graetz and Simon Dubnow, who were met with initial praise for their histories of the Jewish people, but under later review were argued to either be ill equipped to handle the material

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<sup>6</sup> Michael A. Meyer, "The Emergence of Jewish Historiography: Motives and Motifs," in *History and Theory*, Vol. 27, No. 4, (Wiley for Wesleyan University: Dec. 1988), 162.

or seen as sloppy in their work.<sup>7</sup> Alon's most notable work is *The Jews in Their Land in the Talmudic Age (70-640 CE)* originally published in two volumes in 1980 and 1984 (by his disciples after his death in 1950.) Alon was a Zionist living in Israel before it was declared a state in 1948, so it comes as no surprise that this is a subject written very passionately and with dramatic flair. At the time he was seen as a maverick scholar, unafraid to turn a critical eye on historical truisms.<sup>8</sup> He discusses in depth the state of Judaism after the fall of the temple, the organizations and forms of leadership that came to dominate afterwards such as the Sanhedrin and the patriarch, and lesser examined areas of life such as agriculture, finances, crafts, and other economic interests of the time. As mentioned earlier, Alon believed that the destruction of the Temple was nothing short of a cataclysmic event for the Jewish people.<sup>9</sup> His study focuses predominantly on Palestinian Judaism; He points out early in his book however that the Babylonian Jews admitted to having limited authority and deferred to the Patriarchate and the Sanhedrin at all times, although future scholars argue against this.<sup>10</sup> While Alon's work is still heavily cited and garners a larger following, many of his arguments have been disputed and expanded upon by historians in the past two decades.

The most influential Jewish scholar of the twentieth century following Gedaliah Alon's death was Jacob Neusner. Neusner wished to tell the entire history of the Jews, as Alon had attempted to do, but with an American audience in mind and without any extra weight given to the exceptionality of Judaism or the Jewish texts. While there were a number of yeshivas and

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<sup>7</sup> A detailed critique of Graetz's work was published in Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's journal *Jeschurun*, Vols. II-IV (1855-8).

<sup>8</sup> Gedaliah Alon, *The Jews in Their Land in the Talmudic Age (70-540)*, trans. and ed. Gershon Levi, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1980), 801.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

universities to study Judaism's postbiblical history in the 1920s, there was an expectation to write of the holiness and uniqueness of the Jewish texts that Neusner railed against. Instead of the expected requirement that Jewish texts only be studied using well-established disciplinary methods, Neusner spent his entire life fighting to open up the study of Judaism, specifically rabbinic texts, to a larger intellectual audience.<sup>11</sup> At one time he bemoaned the current state of Jewish academic studies stating:

So although we spend our lives studying Jewish holy books and there is no more particularly Jewish activity than what we do, yet it is accurate to describe us as standing outside of the community of Judaism. Among the available categories, rabbi or "professional" or lay leader, there is no place for us. True, there *is* room for learned Jews. But they are perceived as eccentrics or turned into Hebrew teachers. There is no room in Jewry for a learned Jew who makes a living by teaching what he or she knows, on the one side, but who is paid for doing so by secular, neutral institutions, on the other.<sup>12</sup>

There was an important argument Jacob Neusner wished to get across to his audience that he brought up in many of his works. The rabbinic literature available to us is not a single religious work, but a composition of multiple Judaisms that must be critically analyzed, as opposed to the almost sole method of thought he had previously encountered, that there was but one form of Judaism, and that it represented a unique ethnicity.<sup>13</sup> The rigid methodology that had persisted in the study of this period Neusner felt was in need of overhaul. Scholars and religious authorities looked to the biblical history of the rabbis who in turn linked themselves back to Moses on Mt. Sinai. This has often been taken for granted as modern scholars oftentimes failed to connect rabbinic documents with biblical ones. As a result, the vast

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<sup>11</sup> Aaron W. Hughes, *Jacob Neusner: An American Jewish Iconoclast*, (NY: New York University Press, 2016), 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era*, ed. W. S. Green and E. Frerichs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. xiii, as well as Jacob Neusner, *The Systemic Analysis of Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), pp. 9-15.

development, in the period from the fourth century BCE to the second century CE, the diverse sorts and types of Judaism, and the immense literature of that period such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Apocrypha, and the Pseudepigrapha, were rarely consulted for their connections with and contributions to the rabbinic Judaism of the later period.<sup>14</sup> With regards to Judaism's external influences, he argued in 1968 that Iranian "influences" on the culture and religion of Babylonian Jewry, and all the more so of Palestinian Jewry, have been for the most part exaggerated and overrated. Examining just what the Talmudic rabbis actually knew about Iranian culture, we can hardly be impressed by the depth of their knowledge;<sup>15</sup> by 1993 however Neusner had begun to argue otherwise, as he saw a number of similarities between the structure of the Bavli and the Persian literature known as the Pahlavi Rivayat, and even went so far as to say that no two religions have more in common than the Zoroastrianism of the Avesta and the Pahlavi books and the Judaism of the Pentateuch and the Talmud.<sup>16</sup> Neusner's view of the history of Judaism was similar to Alon's who saw history as a continuum, a process rather than a sequence of events in which time periods were artificial constructs, but they differed in their views on Judaism as a united versus a fragmented organization.

In keeping with the theme of how to view Judaism during this period, Stroumsa, examined the scriptural movement from the formation of the New Testament and the Talmud to that of the Qur'an. For thirty years now Stroumsa has been studying the dynamics between religions (particularly those associated with the Abrahamic faith) in Late Antiquity, and how

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<sup>14</sup> Jacob Neusner, "The History of Earlier Rabbinic Judaism: Some New Approaches," in *History of Religions*, Vol. 16, No. 3, (The University of Chicago Press, February, 1977), 218; 219.

<sup>15</sup> Jacob Neusner, "Jews and Judaism Under Iranian Rule: Bibliographical Reflections, in *History of Religions*, Vol. 8, No. 2, (The University of Chicago Press, November, 1968), p. 162.

<sup>16</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Judaism and Zoroastrianism at the Dusk of Late Antiquity: How Two Ancient Faiths Wrote Down Their Great Traditions*, (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1993), p. 5.

studying the Abrahamic religions together can help us understand their conflicting identities.<sup>17</sup> Stroumsa claims that the rise of Judaism as a religion of the book seems to have stopped quite suddenly, more or less with the birth of Christianity. For the rabbis, orality seems to have provided a protection against the dangers of dissemination. Moreover, the very holiness of the Torah which stood in a category of its own as a religious book without equals might have inhibited them from producing other books.<sup>18</sup> Stroumsa also noted that the oral tradition of literature was not unique to Judaism. The Gathas of the Avesta, the oldest texts of the Zoroastrian tradition, were transmitted orally for a whole millennium as well.<sup>19</sup> The pause in any sort of scriptural progression at this time was seen as the outcome of the competition between Judaism and Christianity as they each strived to establish a fixed set of hermeneutical rules for the proper interpretation of the Bible.<sup>20</sup> If Stroumsa is correct, it may help us understand why there is so little Jewish literature during this period compared to Christian literature, as well as the detailed, but simultaneously obscure nature of the Talmud, and how we may interpret said writing based on the reasoning behind its creation. The rabbis were oftentimes reactionary to their Christian counterparts. Whether it was to orally dictate their laws to protect dissemination or to write in response to Christian doctrine, the rabbinic authorities of the time let the Christian authorities take the lead in the scriptural movement more often than is given credit.

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<sup>17</sup> Guy G. Stroumsa, "From Abraham's Religion to the Abrahamic Religions," in *Historia Religionum, an International Journal* 3 (2011), p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Guy G. Stroumsa, "The Scriptural Movement of Late Antiquity and Christian Monasticism," in *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1, (John Hopkins University Press, Spring, 2008), pp. 63; 64.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>20</sup> Guy G. Stroumsa, "From Abraham's Religion to the Abrahamic Religions," in *Historia Religionum, an International Journal* 3 (2011), p. 65.

There are a number of works that have come out over the last decade concerning Judaism's relationship with its ancient middle-eastern counterparts. Elman, for example, is a founder of the field known as Talmudo-Iranica, which seeks to understand the Babylonian Talmud in a Middle-Persian context. The interest in this subject dates back as far as 1982 when Rosenthal appealed to fellow Talmudists to invest intellectual capital in mastering Iranian studies, but aside from Elman, few other scholars heeded Rosenthal's call.<sup>21</sup> In his two-part article, "The Other in the Mirror: Iranians and Jews View One Another Questions of Identity, Conversion, and Exogamy in the Fifth Century Iranian Empire.," Elman compares the Pahlavi Vendidad literature to the rabbinic literature, finding a number of striking similarities in what each culture deems important to discuss during the period at hand. Other scholars have examined specific stories, finding examples of cultural exchange. Russel's "God Is Good: On Tobit and Iran," Herman's "Ahasuerus, the Former Stable-Master of Belshazar, and the Wicked Alexander of Macedon," and Secunda's "Reading the Bavli in Iran" examine the rabbinic literature and find surprising amounts of Persian influence, both from their culture and their religion.

While Rosenthal wished to see a rise in Jewish-Iranian studies, the rise of Christianity has often taken precedent. Its influence on the rise and establishment of rabbinic Judaism in the Talmudic era has resulted in a multitude of various opinions. C. G. Montefiore was a late nineteenth century scholar of Jewish history who was one of the first to examine Jewish history through a Christian lens. His work was often seen as novel but controversial. In a series of books, including *Liberal Judaism and Hellenism* (1918) and *The Old Testament and After*

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<sup>21</sup> Shai Secunda, *The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Bavli in its Sasanian Context*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, Oct 9, 2013), p. 14.

(1923), Montefiore discussed his belief in the evolutionary nature of divine revelation. The job of the modern Jew, he argued, was to choose the best and most enduring aspects of all past religious experiences and ignore the rest. Nor would it be going too far to incorporate the teachings of Jesus and Paul into the regular services of the Liberal synagogue.<sup>22</sup> Paul was in fact a point of interest in much of his work and argued the difficulty of studying the jumbled Midrash while praising St. Paul's systematic writings.<sup>23</sup> He argues the Midrash can, however, be interpreted by comparing rabbinic literature to Pauline literature and that the two were at odds with one another. While Paul promises eternal bliss for the believer and destruction for the non-believer for example, the Jews were motivated by obedience to the law as the will of God, and the belief that they alone would be privy to God's blessings.<sup>24</sup> Throughout Montefiore's work we see references that seem to at times raise up Paul, while bringing down the rabbis. He felt that Judaism in its desire to distance itself from Christianity had unjustly neglected the positive features of the daughter religion, and that only by confronting the New Testament theologically and critically could we ever attain the 'complete truth'.<sup>25</sup>

By the 1960s, many more scholars had begun studying the two groups, although often in the case of Judaism as an opponent to Christianity as opposed to a group that shared many mystical aspects as Montefiore hoped it would be seen. Wilken for example, addressed the problem of perceiving Jewish history through Christian eyes that had been persisting for some

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<sup>22</sup> Joshua B. Stein, "The Contribution of C. G. Montefiore to the Establishment of Liberal Judaism in England," in *Shofar*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Purdue University Press, Summer, 1985), pp. 31-32.

<sup>23</sup> C. G. Montefiore, "Rabbinic Judaism and the Epistles of St. Paul," in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2, (University of Pennsylvania Press, January, 1901), p. 170.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 176; 216.

<sup>25</sup> Steven Bayme, "Claude Montefiore, Lily Montagu and the Origins of the Jewish Religious Union," in *Transactions & Miscellanies*, Vol. 27, (Jewish Historical Society of England, 1978-1980), p. 65.



time in his 1967 article, "Judaism in Roman and Christian Society." He focused on the separatism of Judaism during this period, calling them outsiders and intruders who were only attacked by the Roman Empire when they became a nuisance through major unrest. Jewish separatism was seen as destructive of social and political life. The superiority of Jewish mores suggested a judgment on Roman mores, institutions, and traditions. The Roman anti-Semitism rested more on social than religious factors.<sup>26</sup> Under the Christian empire, religion played a strong role in fueling the animosity between the two groups who before had been lumped in with one another.

A recent trend in scholarship has been the argument that Christianity was the foundation of religion itself as we recognize it today, and that Judaism was a separate entity that shaped itself in response to, and often in rejection of. Boyarin stated in 2004 that we find in Eusebius a clear articulation of Judaism, Hellenism, and Christianity as "religions." This represents a significant conceptual shift from the earlier uses of the term religion in ancient sources. "Religio" was now seen as a single act of worship.<sup>27</sup> Boyarin is not alone in what seems like at first like an outlandish claim. A few years later, Dohrmann published an article wherein she argues that the idea of calling Judaism a "religion" in Late Antiquity is as anachronistic as it would be to call the ancient Greeks or Romans homosexual.<sup>28</sup> While one could certainly make their share of arguments for what constitutes Judaism and religion, Boyarin argues that it is only during this period that Judaism actually begins to fuse these two ideas together. Jerome,

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Wilken, "Judaism in Roman and Christian Society," in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 47, No. 4, (The University of Chicago Press, October, 1967), pp. 316; 317.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel Boyarin, "The Christian Invention of Judaism: The Theodosian Empire and the Rabbinic Refusal of Religion," in *Representations*, No. 85, (University of California Press, Winter, 2004), 24.

<sup>28</sup> Natalie Dohrmann, "Name Calling: Thinking About (the Study of) Judaism in Late Antiquity," in *Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 99, No. 1, (University of Pennsylvania Press, Winter, 2009), 3.

speaking with Augustine in *Galatians* 2 makes a new claim by condemning the Jewish-Christians for not being Jews, marking the existence and legitimacy of a true Jewish religion alongside Christianity. Judaism functioned for Christian orthodoxy as a guarantee of the Christian's own bounded and coherent identity and thus furthered the project of imperial control.<sup>29</sup> Arguably, it is here that Judaism not only defines itself in one of its most explicit ways, according to Boyarin, but also makes one of its grandest arguments against Christianity. The rabbis, in the end, reject and refuse the Christian definition of a religion. They instead find the principle that has been ever since the touchstone of Jewish ecclesiology: "an Israelite, even though he sin, remains an Israelite (Sanhedrin 44a.)" This phrase becomes nearly ubiquitous and foundational for later forms of rabbinic Judaism. There is now virtually no way that a Jew can stop being a Jew, since the very notion of heresy was finally rejected and Judaism (even the word is anachronistic) refused to be, in the end, a religion. For the Church, Judaism is a religion, but for the Jews, only occasionally, ambivalently, and strategically is it so.<sup>30</sup> It should be noted however that Boyarin was not arguing for merely a reversal of the traditional narrative, where Judaism was born out of Christianity instead of vice versa, but rather that both groups co-emerged during the same time period, which is an argument that hearkens back to Claudie Montefiore's school of thought.

With regards to their physical interaction though, Koltun said that there was much interaction between the Jews and Christians in the fourth century – including rabbinic counter-attacks against Christianity. While church fathers such as Aphrahat discouraged observance of

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<sup>29</sup> Daniel Boyarin, "The Christian Invention of Judaism: The Theodosian Empire and the Rabbinic Refusal of Religion," in *Representations*, No. 85, (University of California Press, Winter, 2004), 27.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

Jewish ritual, The Syriac Christian community suffered from a severe religious persecution that may have pushed many Christians, a number of whom had Jewish backgrounds, into the arms of the Jewish community.<sup>31</sup> Rouwhorst supports this argument stating that a considerable number of the first Christian communities in the Syriac area consisted for a large part of Christians who came from Judaism. Some of these communities will have continued keeping observances that may be qualified as Jewish Christian.<sup>32</sup> Loch's "Rabbi Abbahu and the Minim" deals with a discussion relating to a mortal taking on divine qualities. A debate ensues between the rabbi and the minim phrased in a way as to suggest that the rabbi has been confronted with and had time to mull over a response to certain arguments. The situation at hand shows that some rabbis, such as Rabbi Abbahu were familiar with Christian dogma, as evidenced from the phrase, "Why are you different that you know how to explain Scripture?"<sup>33</sup> While these scholars have argued that Judaism was a stronger force under Persian than Roman rule, the point to keep in mind here is that they were in dialogue with one another, and thus exist the possibilities of cultural exchange.

The research done on Jewish and Christian relations outweighs that of Jewish relations with other cultures and religions, possibly because of the dominance of Christianity, or possibly because of the continued interest among some scholars to find and declare when the official "breaking off point" between Judaism and Christianity occurred.

Our comparisons between the rabbis and other cultures come about predominantly through our analysis of the rabbinic texts. This is where the dominant scholarship comes from

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<sup>31</sup> Naomi Koltun, "Jewish-Christian Polemics in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversation," in *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, (ProQuest, 1994), pp. VI; 161.

<sup>32</sup> G. Rouwhorst, "Jewish Liturgical Traditions in Early Syriac Christianity," in *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (BRILL, Mar., 1997), p. 88.

<sup>33</sup> Samuel Tobias Lochs, "Rabbi Abbahu and the Minim," in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Series, Vol. 60, No. 3, (University of Pennsylvania Press, January, 1970), p. 208.

and where we get an enormous amount of our knowledge from concerning this period. The following authors mentioned demonstrate that while the literary evidence has not changed much, the discussion is still open to debate. There is still far too much we do not know about this period, and analysis of what little evidence we have on hand continues to produce new and fascinating results. Kalmin has argued that the rabbinic texts have identifiable sources, and that clear distinctions can be found between Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis.<sup>34</sup> He believes we can find an insular and elitist group attempting to enlarge their importance and influence while making up for their failure to stop the destruction of the Temple. He has used the Talmud's markers of geography and chronology to trace the development of institutions and ideas which in turn make possible documentation of what appears to be a significant change in rabbinic literature and society, specifically during the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century C.E. For example, he notes the distinction the Bavli makes between the Parthian and Sassanian rule over the Jews concerning idols, where they could easily be encountered in public during the Parthian period, but would have to be sought out during the Sassanian. Their warnings against idolatry in the Talmud in turn show a disconnect between their anxiety and their historical reality.<sup>35</sup> In *Rabbinic Instruction in Sasanian Babylonia*, Goodblatt examines the structure and nature of the rabbinic institution in Sasanian Babylonia, showing that the rabbis followed a traditional form of institutions and learning, falling slightly behind their Christian neighbors. By the third century the west had created law schools which anticipated the medieval and modern university in many ways, with a fixed staff, curriculum, and of course study, whereas the rabbis continued to train

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<sup>34</sup> See Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia Between Persia and Roman Palestine*, (Oxford University Press, 2006 and Richard Kalmin, *Sages, Stories, Authors, and Editors in Rabbinic Babylonia*, (Scholars Press, 1994).

<sup>35</sup> Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia Between Persia and Roman Palestine*, (Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 103-4.

their lawyers in the older ways of apprenticeship.<sup>36</sup> Much more recently Charney and Mayzlish's *Battle of the Two Talmud's* was published in which the reasons for emigration to Babylonia are explored, and Kalmin's arguments about the insular nature of the rabbis are somewhat expanded, as Charney and Mayzlish explain how Babylonian rabbis were much more independent and inward looking than their Palestinian counterparts.<sup>37</sup>

The way many modern scholars have approached the topic of Jews in the world of Late Antiquity has largely continued to be how they define themselves. Schwartz addresses in his 2004 work, *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.*, some of the problems of the scholarship from the eighties that persists today. Schwartz questions the grouping of Judaism altogether, and argues that an ideologically complex society came into existence by the second century B.C.E., collapsed in the wake of the Temple's destruction and the imposition of direct Roman rule after 70 C.E., and reformed starting in the fourth century, centered now on the synagogue and the local religious community, in part as a response to the Christianization of the Roman Empire.<sup>38</sup> As no set of prescriptions can be assumed to control completely the lives of those to whom they are addressed, and no government has ever been able to maintain complete control, and the Pentateuch is difficult to observe exactly even by those intent on it, there is no reason to think ancient Jewish society differed from any other and that we *cannot* predict the behavior of the Jews from the prescriptions of the Torah.<sup>39</sup> This is not to say that Judaism itself is a myth or a construct according to Schwartz. There is ample evidence for Judaism's success in

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<sup>36</sup> David Goodblatt, *Rabbinic Instruction in Sasanian Babylonia*, (Leiden: BRILL, 1975), p. 285.

<sup>37</sup> Leon H. Charney and Saul Mayzlish, *Battle of the Two Talmuds: Judaism's Struggle with Power, Glory, & Guilt*, (Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 2010), p. 149.

<sup>38</sup> Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E. (Jews, Christians and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World)*, (Princeton University Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

creating a Jewish society, as seen with the emergence of apocalypticism in literature in the third century, which shows that the scribal and priestly elites and sub-elites constantly engaged in the domestication, or Judaization, of ideological systems apparently at odds with the Torah.<sup>40</sup> What we see as a dramatic change of view is that the construction of authority that the rabbis worked on via the creation of rabbinic literature may have in fact been more of a desperate struggle. The Palestinian Talmud itself, interested though it is in playing up rabbinic authority, never describes the rabbis as possessing jurisdiction in the technical sense. Only the Roman governor and his agents had such authority. They did by the fourth century however have a largely informal influence (acquired through the hard work of fund-raising, preaching, and setting themselves up as intermediaries between common folk and the powerful). Thus they constituted a limited and marginal but nevertheless discernible part of the system.<sup>41</sup> This image of a fractured society is highly at odds with those who would say that Judaism, while struggling after the destruction of the temple, was saved thanks to the rabbinic schools set up by the rabbinic authorities, and is instead argued that it was the importance given to the synagogue over time that formed Judaism into a more cohesive group. Nor is this to say that the rabbis had *no* part in the reconsolidation of Judaism, which would be an equally naïve statement. Rather, that with the lack of a central authority backed by the Roman government, many Jews were free to now (or continue to) do as they wished unimpeded, and in many cases that meant embracing the pagan cultures they were surrounded by as part and parcel of their own previously held beliefs, at least until the fourth century or later.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 98-9.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 120; 124.

## Methodology

The focus of this work will be largely literary in nature, examining the known rabbinic literature, as well as some from the Christian and Persian writers of this period. As previously stated, the main rabbinic writings are the Babylonian Talmud (also known as the Bavli), the Jerusalem Talmud (also known as the Yerushalmi), both of which are composed of the Mishnah (the oral law redacted) and the Gemara (the commentary on the law). The Tosefta is a supplement to the Mishnah, and will be used as well. The Hekhalot (palaces) literature dates back to the Talmud period, and while scholars argue over certain texts (regarding whether or not they can be considered Hekhalot or not), the available work will be important to study. Not all of the Hekhalot literature has been translated into English, but many scholars have studied it since the seventies and will be relied on for their analysis. The Christian sources will be those of the bishops or other official sources that may have contributed in some way to the formation of rabbinic Judaism as they constructed their own religion. Men such as Barnabas, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus of Lyons wrote much on how their religion should be defined and how it opposed Judaism. In this, it may be possible to discern a loose dialogue of sorts between the rabbis and the bishops as each constructed their own identities. A number of Persian texts will be examined as they prove useful such as The Book of the Deeds of Ardashir son of Babag, and to a limited extent, the sacred Zoroastrian texts known as the Avesta. I intend to critically analyze the available Christian and Persian works as a reference to the rabbinic works, in order to see how much of what was said in each group's documents matches up, or seems to be in communication

with each other, as scholars such as the Irano-Judaica scholar Yaakov Elman noticed with the topic of pollution in the rabbinic texts and the Pahlavi Videvdad.<sup>42</sup>

Archeology and art history that will be examined will be limited in nature. The magic bowls of Nippur have received much attention as they represent an item believed to be supernatural in power, used by Jews as well as Christians, Mazdeans, and Mandeans.<sup>43</sup> The Dura-Europos synagogue has been studied extensively since its uncovering in 1932 as well, and will be useful in this work as it mixes both biblical with pagan art. Burial practices found in uncovered graves and sarcophagi will reveal epigraphic and onomastic evidence for the intermingling of cultures. Aside from these, other synagogues, artwork, and archeological finds are available for analysis. Exactly what pagan elements are applied in these instances, how they relate to Judaism, and what, if anything, they tell us about the Jewish people, whether rabbinic or not, will be examined.

### Chapter Outline

This work will attempt to fit into and build upon the research done by many of the scholars previously mentioned. As they discussed postbiblical Judaism and its place in the world, so too will this work look into the effects the Greco-Roman world had on shaping Judaism in different parts of the Diaspora. The narrative has changed over time to show that the Jewish people were not as insular or immune to external influences as they once appeared. The following chapters will compile some of the literature and archeological discoveries highlighting

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<sup>42</sup> Yaakov Elman, "The Other in the Mirror: Iranians and Jews View One Another: Questions of Identity, Conversion, and Exogamy in the Fifth Century Iranian Empire. Part One," in *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, Vol. 19, (New York: Yeshiva University, December, 2009), 15.

<sup>43</sup> Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).



this in an attempt to even further broaden the history of the Jewish people during a period of history that has only recently begun receiving significant attention.

The first chapter of this work will focus on the changes in apocalyptic, mystical, and texts on the afterlife. The Talmudic texts offer a vastly different picture of the world to come than the Old Testament, and we can find parallels between them and the ancient Persian, Zoroastrian literature of works such as the Avesta and the Arda Viraf, sacred texts that in their modern usage derive largely from the Sassanian period. These works contain rules about purity and the duality between good and evil, as well as the uniqueness of their faith and the consequences for being an outsider. Many of the rabbis living in a world theologically thrown into upheaval and under the rule of a government that often treated them oftentimes without persecution might have been influenced by their neighbors who they could have been in dialogue with. Of course we shouldn't presume to make any clear cut decisions as to what they were specifically thinking, but we may be able to infer some things by examining the change in literature and comparing it to that of their neighbors who were close by proximity as well as theologically in some ways.

The second chapter will focus on some of the architecture and art discovered from this period. One of the most extensively documented synagogues discovered so far is that of the previously mentioned one from Dura-Europos. Dura-Europos was a small border city located west of Babylon along the Euphrates River. The synagogue itself was discovered in 1932 and dates back to the third century CE. What makes it unique are the paintings that adorn the wall that originally had the dwelling mistaken for that of a Greek temple. And what makes this synagogue unique to *Judaism* is that Judaism is an aniconic religion that can be traced as far back as the second commandment which prohibits any graven images or depictions of heaven

above or the earth below. Yet we see such images as Orpheus playing to animals, Eros and Aphrodite, and Moses carrying not a staff, but the club of Heracles, a popular figure in the East. While most scholars are willing to accept that this is in fact pagan imagery incorporated into the temple, the disagreement stems from the interpretation and implication. I will be arguing along the lines of Goodenough, a historian who specialized on Greek culture's impact on Judaism and who influenced Neusner's work, who believed this to be an adoption of Greek and Iranian conventions only to show that Judaism, when properly understood, presents all religious values, even the pagan values, better than the pagans themselves.<sup>44</sup> Other synagogues were found with large floor mosaics or living figures such as the Naraan synagogue in the West Bank, which dates back to the fifth or sixth century. The magic Nippur incantation bowls are also of interest as magic was prohibited in the Hebrew Bible. However we have evidence that between the late Second Temple Period and beyond up to the fifth century CE, it was widely practiced.<sup>45</sup> The implications of the art found in these synagogues along with the prohibited magical acts performed during this period have only recently begun to develop and are in need of further examination.

The third chapter will take a step back and focus on a sect of Judaism that broke off near the end of the Second Temple Period, the Essenes who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls found in the Qumran caves. It is my aim to show that even when Judaism attempted to break off into its own reclusive sect, it still could not help but appropriate ideas from its neighbors. In this instance

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<sup>44</sup> Jacon Neusner, *Early Rabbinic Judaism: Historical Studies in Religion, Literature, and Art*, (Brill, 1975), 195.

<sup>45</sup> Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 143.

however, it was not, strictly speaking, the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism, but a branch of its own known as Zurvanism that I will focus on.

The post-Temple period left many gaps in our knowledge of the Jewish people. The destruction of the Temple was a major blow in Jerusalem and a number of other places that regularly held pilgrimages there, but within the widespread Diaspora there were many communities that barely felt any impact at all.

There is still much to build on as we examine the pagan influences in future archeological discoveries. This past year alone a new elaborate mosaic has been unearthed at a synagogue excavation in Huqoq.

The religious folklore opens itself to new interpretations as well as scholars continue to look at Judaism through a fresh lens. The Talmud is rife with parables, and examining these stories through a wider lens may yield even more influences from neighboring cultures.

The idea of cultures being influenced by their surroundings is certainly not a new one, nor is even the study of the traditionally insular Jewish religion being affected by those they would speak only vaguely about and pretend to have little to no contact with. But what has only emerged in the last decade or two is the effects beyond the Christian-Jewish split. The Greek and Roman influences, and the less discussed Persian influences are still somewhat in their infancy. It is my hope that in this work, we can at least continue that discussion if not expand on it for future research.

## **CHAPTER TWO: EXPLORING CONVERGANT VIEWS OF THE AFTERLIFE**

The concept of a realm largely outside of our understanding that we traverse to after death is a common one among religions. Judaism serves somewhat of a unique role in its downplaying of such a realm. The afterlife was originally almost non-existent in form, if not in purpose. Only much later did it expand to involve similar notions of Heaven and Hell found in neighboring religious sects. The massive change in discussion that occurred from the time the Old Testament was written to the time of the Talmud is dramatic and still under-discussed to this day. Furthermore as it pertains to this study, we can see, if not the direct influence, at least a sharing of ideas between the rabbis, the Christian priests, and the Zoroastrian magi. It will be argued in this chapter that this influence manifested itself more clearly following the fall of the Second Temple where it became more relevant to more Jewish lives among the Diaspora. Their close proximity and ideas, which were at times agreeable to the rabbinic authorities, created an atmosphere ripe for comingling and exchange.

The Book of Revelations, written sometime in the first century CE gives us a fairly clear picture of what was to be expected from the afterlife in Christianity.

“They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars--their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Revelation 21:4-8 (NJPS).

The concept of the afterlife in ancient Judaism, however, is vague and at times can even appear to be nonexistent. Ecclesiastes, for example, believed to have been written sometime between the fifth and second century BCE presents a somber and plain view. Within it was written “For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even their name is forgotten. Their love, their hate, and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun.”<sup>47</sup> The Sadducces, however, who maintained the Second Temple, did not believe in any afterlife at all, and that all ended with death.<sup>48</sup> These early vague and stagnant views would expand over time and take on a more vibrant picture similar to that of Christianity, while still retaining some aspects unique to the Jews of this period.

As mentioned previously, the concept of life after death for ancient Judaism is difficult to discuss. The Hebrew Bible reveals no systematic personal eschatology and there is no clear indication of what remains of the individual at death. The previous mention in Ecclesiastes is perhaps the most descriptive version there is. Some entity is left and goes down to a dark and gloomy place called Sheol. It is the eternal abode of all the dead, righteous and unrighteous alike. It is the land of forgetfulness, of silence, of destruction, and of dust. There is no praise of god, the dead are devoid of their material possessions, and they have no knowledge of the events that take place on earth. Existence in Sheol is marked by inactivity and stagnation. The inhabitants of Sheol are in a state of permanent sleep, and once there, there is no return to the land of the living.<sup>49</sup> It was a place where one would live on forever without decay. In the Book

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<sup>47</sup> Ecclesiastes 9:5 (NJPS).

<sup>48</sup> Raphael Patai, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 17.

<sup>49</sup> Farnaz Masumian, *Life After Death: A Study of the Afterlife in World Religions*, (Kalimat Press: One World, 1995), p. 30.

of Job, it is described as the land of gloom and deep shadow, disorder, and night, where even the light is like darkness.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the afterlife for Judaism was not a very appealing or grand notion at the time. While there was a common theme in the Old Testament that death meant joining one's ancestors<sup>51</sup>, the emphasis was, as it often is today, on the present. A glaring example of this in the Old Testament can be seen in Deuteronomy 30:19: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse.

There is a heaven in the Old Testament, but it is the dwelling place of God, not of all people.<sup>52</sup> There is occasional mention of righteous men serving at God's right hand (Psalm 16:11), living in his house (Psalm 23:6), or being received by him in honor (Psalm 73:24), but these passages are both vague and brief. A paradise-like place called *Gan Eden* (the Garden of Eden) is mentioned in the books of Genesis and Ezekiel, but this should not be equated with heaven as the only inhabitants of *Gan Eden* were the first man and woman - Adam and Eve – before their fall.<sup>53</sup> Heaven as such is almost non-existent in the Old Testament with regards to an eternal dwelling-like afterlife for the Jewish people as a whole.

What would eventually become synonymous with the realm of Hell is referred to as *Geh ben Hinnom* (or the "Valley of Hinnom's Son"), and denotes a place outside of Jerusalem where Canaanite's and apostate Israelites sacrificed children by fire to Ba'al and Canaanite gods such as Moloch.<sup>54</sup> There is no archaeological evidence for Canaanite child sacrifice in ancient Israel, but something like it may have been occasionally practiced by groups of Canaanites elsewhere.

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<sup>50</sup> Job 10:21-22 (NJPS).

<sup>51</sup> See Genesis 25:8, 25:17, 35:29, 49:33, Deuteronomy 42:50, 2 Kings 22:20 (NJPS).

<sup>52</sup> Kings 8:30 (NJPS).

<sup>53</sup> Raphael Patai, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 32.

<sup>54</sup> 2 Kings 10-11 (NJPS).

Whatever the practice amounted to in reality, the Israelites were horrified by the concept of child sacrifice and used it as anti-Canaanite propaganda.<sup>55</sup> The Hinnom Valley also served as symbolism because of its geographical location. At its lowest point, the Hinnom Valley is also the lowest point in the city of Jerusalem. If the Temple Mount on Mount Moriah is the highest point in the city and represents the presence of the Lord, then the lowest point of the city would also have illustrative value. Add to this the geographical fact that the wilderness began where the Hinnom Valley ended, and we have a perfect illustration of the realm of demons (Leviticus 16:10) and the chaos that was conquered (Genesis 1:2,3).<sup>56</sup> This idea that the land of Hell was real and accessible as well as associated with their neighbors who they were often at war with may suggest that the religious authorities at the time had no need or notion of an afterlife following the present, or at least that they saw no reason to write it down. Once again, their focus was on the present. A righteous man might one day bask in God's glory, whether that was meant to be in a physical or metaphorical sense, but if a man wished to see and experience true wickedness, they need only look for it among their wicked neighbors.

By the rabbinic period the Talmudic literature had expanded the idea of a spiritual world beyond that of the mortal plane to one more familiar to a modern audience. This is not to say that Judaism formed a coherent view of the afterlife during this period. It was much more complicated than that. What we find are thousands of individual rabbinic teachings on various

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<sup>55</sup> Rachel S. Hallote, *Death, Burial, and Afterlife in the Biblical World: How the Israelites and Their Neighbors Treated the Dead*, (Chicago:Ivan R. Dee, 2001), p. 125.

<sup>56</sup> Galyn Wiemers, *Jerusalem: History, Archaeology, and Apologetic Proof of Scripture*, (Wauke, Iowa: Last Hope Books and Publications, 2010), pp. 51-52.

facets of death and the hereafter, randomly interspersed throughout Talmudic and Midrashic literature. Many distinct and disparate notions of the afterlife coexist.<sup>57</sup>

The *Geh ben Hinnom* became more commonly known as Gehenna and took on a more distinctive and familiar role. It now referred to a massive fiery place where the souls of the wicked would be punished for a specific amount of time.<sup>58</sup> Gehenna also took on several other interchangeable names taken from biblical passages, each representing a region where the wicked dead were judiciously dispatched, such as *Abbadon* (Destruction), *Eretz Neshiyah* (Realm of Forgetfulness), and *Dumah* (Silence).<sup>59</sup>

In the rabbinic literature, heaven is referred to as *olam ha-ba* (the World to Come) or for the truly righteous, the Garden of Eden. In the *Hekhalot Rabbati*, Rabbi Ishmael speaks of Heaven in great detail as seven palaces, each full of celestial beings and treasures.<sup>60</sup> According to Mishnah *Avot*, “Better is one hour of bliss in the World to Come than the whole life in this world” (M. *Avot* 4:17). We must also be careful to point out however, that the same rabbi who made that statement also said, “Better is one hour of repentance and good works in this world than the whole life of the World to Come” (M. *Avot* 4:17).<sup>61</sup> Thus, the rabbis were capable of both placing the spiritual world above all other things, while also maintaining their view that the world of the present was what mattered most. As was touched upon earlier, these ideas were new, oftentimes conflicting, and rapidly changing in the world of the rabbis.

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<sup>57</sup> Simcha Paul Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 120.

<sup>58</sup> B. T., ‘Erubin 19a.

<sup>59</sup> Simcha Paul Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 111.

<sup>60</sup> *Hekhalot Rabbati*, Ch. 15, 206-215.

<sup>61</sup> Simcha Paul Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009), p. 121.



What sparked this sudden emphasis on notions of heaven and hell, on eternal lands of reward or punishment? It will be argued in this chapter that the disillusion with the current state of Judaism forced the rabbis to (either purposely, or inadvertently) look to outside sources, those being predominantly Zoroastrianism, and Christian notions, creating an afterlife for the Jews to look forward to that had previously not existed and not been needed. We must then begin by looking at the world the Jews were living in.

A good starting point may be the Jewish uprising that led to many of the events discussed in this work. In 66 CE the Jewish people in Judea rose up in revolt among growing tensions between themselves and the Greeks, as well as their Roman overlords. Some of the specifics cited by the Jewish historian and hagiographer Josephus, who lived during this time, included the murder of two High Priests, the involvement of the governor Albinus with criminal gangs, and the rise of the Jewish group, the Zealots, who believed divine assistance would come to their rebellion. What Josephus cites as one of, if not the final straw, is a specific incident at Caesarea where a Greek set up workshops on his land, refusing to sell, and leaving the Jews only a narrow approach to their place of worship. Gessius Florus, the Roman procurator at the time in Judea, did little to help the Jews and instead inflamed their existing grievances so as to drive them to revolt.<sup>62</sup> Florus had been abusing his authority and eventually felt the need to disturb the peace and stir the Jews to rise up against Rome so that they would not be able to stand as accusers against him when Caesar discovered his greed and the damage he had done.<sup>63</sup> The revolt lasted until late 73 CE, when it ended in defeat for the Jews of the land of Judea, the destruction of the

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<sup>62</sup> *Josephus: The Essential Writings*, translated by Paul L. Maier, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1988), p.281.

<sup>63</sup> *The Complete Works of Josephus*, translated by William. Whiston, (Kregel Publications, 1970), 283.

Second Jewish Temple, the center of Jewish worship, and finally the suicide of 700 Jews at the Masada fortress shortly before Roman troops breached their walls. Josephus states that over a million Jews were killed, almost 100,000 enslaved, many doomed to die fighting in the gladiatorial arena.<sup>64</sup> While these numbers are impossible to substantiate, we can at the very least deduce that the revolt was disastrous for the Jewish people living in and around this area at the time.

What would eventually be known as the Second revolt, or Kitos rebellion, started in 115 CE during the Roman incursions into Armenia. The title comes from a Hebrew disruption of the name Quietus, referring to Lucius Quietus, the Roman general and governor of Judea who put down many of the rebellions. The fragmentation of the Roman Empire also led to the fragmentation of its written history at this time, and as the revolt was fought in multiple places, it is difficult for historians to pinpoint its root cause. As it happened during Emperor Trajan's expansion into and conflict with the Parthian Empire, modern historians have suggested that the Parthians may have stirred up the Jews as a distraction. Whatever the cause or causes, revolts sprung up in Cyrene, Egypt, Cyprus, Mesopotamia, and Judea, but when all was said and done, the Jewish populations of Cyrene and Cyprus were depopulated and the Jewish people were forbidden to live on the island of Cyprus.<sup>65</sup> There would be however one more major revolt before the Jewish people finally accepted their ultimate defeat and cut their losses, so to speak.

In 132 CE, the Jews in the land of Judea rose up against the Roman Empire one final time under the leadership of Simon bar Kokhba, in what would eventually be called the Bar Kokhba

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 367.

<sup>65</sup> Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, Book LXXV, 32.

revolt. Simon bar Kokhba is a significant character in that Bar Kokhba means “son of the star” and was a surname given to him by the Jewish sage, Rabbi Akiva, who declared Simon Bar Kokhba the messiah.<sup>66</sup> In Judaism, the messiah means the anointed one and is meant to be a great political and military leader, well versed in Judaic law that will lead his people through the end of days. It is not a title given lightly, and with it shows some of the hope instilled in Bar Kokhba’s leadership. The reason for this particular revolt was the Emperor Hadrian forbidding circumcision, a defining feature of Judaism.<sup>67</sup> Letters from this time speak of Bar-Kokhba as President of Israel and coins have been found saying ‘Shimeon’ on one side and ‘of the Freedom of Jerusalem’ on the other.<sup>68</sup> Within three years the revolt was crushed, and both Simon Bar-Kokhba and Rabbi Akiva were executed. This defeat was in fact so bad, that not only were almost 600,000 Jews killed, but the Jews were expelled from the land of Judea, Judea was renamed Syria Palaestina, Jerusalem was renamed Aelia Capitolina, and at the former Temple sanctuary, two statues were put in place, one of Jupiter and one of Hadrian. Furthermore, the Jews were forbidden to live in the newly christened Aelia Capitolina and were only permitted to enter on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av to mourn.<sup>69</sup> The rabbis would later write that “the voice is the voice of Jacob and the hands are the hands of Esau: ‘the voice’ here refers to [the cry caused by] the Emperor Hadrian who killed in Alexandria of Egypt sixty myriads on sixty myriads, twice as many as went forth from Egypt. ‘The voice of Jacob’: this is the cry caused by the Emperor Hadrian who killed in the city of Bethar four hundred thousand myriads, or as some say, four

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<sup>66</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, Book 4, Ch. 6 - The Last Siege of the Jews under Adrian, 2.

<sup>67</sup> Aelius Spartianus, *Historia Augusta: Hadrian*, 14.2.

<sup>68</sup> Yigael Yadin, *Bar-Kokhba: The Rediscovery of the Legendary Hero of the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome*, (New York, Random House: 1971), 122; 182; 194.

<sup>69</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, Ch. 6 - The Last Siege of the Jews under Adrian, 4.

thousand myriads.”<sup>70</sup> This was a decisive defeat and where many scholars place the true start of the Jewish Diaspora, and the Jews would continue to face heavy persecution for the remainder of Hadrian’s reign, until 138 CE.

The purpose of recounting these events in Judaic history is to attempt to paint a picture of just what being a Jew at this time period must have felt like in some areas, at least so far as we can without being anachronistic or inferring too much from imagination. During each revolt, particularly the first and third, certain sects of the Jews believed to be in the end of days and that their messiah would or had finally come. They were proved horribly wrong and left defeated, scattered, enslaved, or dead. Their messiah had perhaps not yet come after all, and if these really were the end of days, they were bleak ones indeed. This, then, can give us an idea of how the concepts of the afterlife might have played a greater role in Late Antiquity.

The change that the destruction of the Temple and the failed Jewish revolts brought to Judaism cannot be overstated. Although there might have been little changed under the direct Roman rule that followed, and the casualties are very often exaggerated by ancient sources, the failure of the revolts led to disaffection with and attrition from Judaism. Other Jews greeted the end of the rule of the Temple and Torah as their emancipation and rushed openly into the waiting embrace of the paganism of the Greco-Roman cities of Palestine and elsewhere.<sup>71</sup> The rabbis therefore had quite the task ahead of them if they were to shepherd their flocks.

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<sup>70</sup> B. T., Seder Nashim: Gittin, 57b.

<sup>71</sup> Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E. (Jews, Christians and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World)*, (Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 108; 109.

The Jews of Babylonia had an extensive history with their Iranian neighbors. They had resided in the land since the sixth century BCE under Babylonian, Achaemenid, Seleucid, Parthian, and finally Sasanian rule, and thus were no strangers to strangers. The Parthian empire was established in Mesopotamia c. 140 BCE and lasted until 224 CE when the Sasanian empire took control, but both were followers of Zoroastrianism, much more so the Sasanian empire than the Parthian. While it is believed that some of the dominant scriptures (known as the Avesta), were re-compiled during the reign of the Parthians, the Sasanian empire dominates the current narrative that theirs was the “true” version of Zoroastrianism, and little is known of how the Parthians practiced it.<sup>72</sup> The point being that the Jewish people had lived alongside the followers of the prophet Zoroaster and their god, Ahura Mazda, for a number of centuries, and thus were not likely to see the religion as a curious and unknown threat, or had already developed ways of mingling with these people without compromising their own views.

The Zoroastrian influence on the Jewish afterlife potentially dates back to the sixth century BCE under Cyrus the Great’s rule (559-530 BCE.) The founder of the Achaemenid Empire understood the value in allowing people to continue their traditions, and even went so far as to give the Jewish people the right to return to Jerusalem and to build their Second Temple a few decades after the destruction of the first by the Babylonians. The exact meaning of this decree has been contested. As one historian pointed out, while there does seem to have been a general policy of allowing deportees to return and to re-establish cult sites, the archeology shows no evidence of mass expansion in Judean settlement beyond about 30,000 at its greatest.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Albert De Jong, “Regional Variation in Zoroastrianism: The Case of the Parthians,” in *Bulletin of the Asia Institute, New Series, Vol. 22*, (Bulletin of the Asia Institute, 2008), 24.

<sup>73</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period, Vol. 1 - Yehud: A History of the Persian Province of Judah*, (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 355.

Regardless of the decrees exact accuracy or its magnitude, a certain number of Jews did return to Jerusalem to lay down the groundwork for their holy site. Furthermore, this kindness was not lost on them, as his name can be seen spoken of as a patron and deliverer dozens of times in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>74</sup> Cyrus' own personal beliefs are unknown to us, but we do know that he practiced tolerance of other religions. So while it probably was not under the Achaemenid dynasty that Zoroastrianism made its way directly into Jewish religious ideas, just as he allowed the Jews to pave the building blocks to their religious center, so too did he pave the way to an exchange of ideas that would happen many years later. As Boyce puts it, "Those that wrote of Cyrus entertained warm feelings thereafter for the Persians, making them more receptive to Zoroastrian influences."<sup>75</sup>

The concept of heaven and hell in Zoroastrianism is seen in a number of their texts, but the earliest mentions of it are in the Gathas, the Vendidad, and the Book of Arda Viraf.

The Gathas are the most sacred texts of the Zoroastrian religion and are part of the Avesta, the primary collection of sacred Zoroastrian texts. The first century CE, Pliny the Elder, is quoted as saying that Zoroaster (or Zarathustra), the founder of Zoroastrianism, existed six thousand years before the death of Plato, that he had written over two million verses, and that his doctrines were derived from Agonaces, who lived five thousand years before the time of the Trojan War.<sup>76</sup> The popular notion is that the Gathas were written by Zoroaster sometime around

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<sup>74</sup> See examples at 2 Chron 36:22-33; Ezra 1:1-8, Ezra 3:7; Ezra 4:3,5; Ezra 5:13-17, Ezra 6:3,14, Isaiah 44:28, Isaiah 45:1,13; Daniel 1:21, Daniel 6:28, and Daniel 10:1.

<sup>75</sup> Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 51.

<sup>76</sup> Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*: Book XXX, Ch. 2

1200 BCE (although other scholars place him closer to Cyrus the Great's time in the seventh or sixth century.)

The Gathas are comprised of seventeen hymns meant to glorify their god Ahura Mazda, and are central to the Zoroastrian faith. But they also deal with concerns regarding the process of death and thereafter. In the Gathas, it states that once the Zoroastrian spirit had moved on, it would come to the bridge of the separator where they would be judged. An immortal life full of joy awaited the righteous, while in perpetuity would be the torment of liars.<sup>77</sup> A man who lived a life full of evil actions could expect their soul to be tormented for all time. Misery, darkness, ill-food, crying, and woe awaited those who did not remain in good faith.<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, the righteous souls would be helped over the bridge by Ahura Mazda to Heaven.<sup>79</sup> While it is lost to the Gathas, the idea of resurrection, which is a fundamental part of Zoroastrianism, is mentioned in the Younger Avesta which dates back to the Achaemenid era mentioned earlier. It states that "It is the divine sparks of Ahura Mazda that shall restore the world, which will thenceforth never grow old and never die, never decay and never rot, ever living and ever increasing, and master of its wish, when the dead will rise, when life and immortality will come, and the world will be restored at its wish."<sup>80</sup> From the early Avestan texts then we see some of the oldest images of an afterlife with a heaven, hell, and resurrection, all things that gradually made their way into Judaism.

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<sup>77</sup> *Avesta* – Yazna, Ch. 45.7.

<sup>78</sup> *B. T.*, Seder Nashim: Gittin Ch. 46.11; 31.20

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 19.6

<sup>80</sup> *Avesta*, Yashts: Ch. 19. 19

The Vendidad's age is arguably dated to the eighth century BCE. It consists of creation myths, but also of early traditions and laws for the community, including hygiene, social behaviors, distribution of wealth, and most importantly to the subject at hand, how the deceased were dealt with and what was expected to happen to them in the afterlife.

Zoroastrianism does not believe in life after death in the traditional western sense, but more precisely life and nonlife, as the soul is believed to live on. The Vendidad explains that the soul remains by its body for three days after death, reciting both its good deeds and sins before heading off to its next destination.<sup>81</sup> A similar belief was argued in the early rabbinic (pre-Bavli) Torah commentary of the Midrash. Rabbi Kahana stated that during the mourning period, one was not permitted to return to work for three days, because during that time the soul stays near the body mourning over him before passing on.<sup>82</sup>

With regards to dating the Book of Arda Viraf, the mention of Alexander the Great being Roman in the opening chapter has led scholars to believe that this book is linguistically dated to the Sasanian period when there was heated rivalry between the Roman and Sasanian empires, most likely being in either the third or fourth century CE.<sup>83</sup>

Before going into Arda Viraf, it is pertinent to mention the concept of hell as a punishment as it was defined within the Talmud, as this is a central subject of the Zoroastrian book. The Talmud states specific reasons as to why one might be sentenced to Gehenna. These actions include idolatrous worship, offending God, adultery, being prideful and scoffing at

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<sup>81</sup> *Vendidad* – Fargard 19:5.28-29.

<sup>82</sup> *Midrash* – Tanchuma, Miketz 4.1-2.

<sup>83</sup> *The Book of Arda Viraf*, Ch. 1, 3.



others, losing one's temper, and for making derogatory remarks about the rabbis.<sup>84</sup> While Gehenna is sometimes spoken of symbolically or metaphorically, there are rabbinic texts that speak of it in detail and what was to occur there. Gehenna is seen as the largest of domains. Egypt is said to be one-sixtieth the size of Ethiopia. Ethiopia is one-sixtieth of the world. The world is one sixtieth the size of the Garden of Eden and the Garden is one-sixtieth the size of Eden itself. Eden itself is one sixtieth the size of Gehenna, and thus the whole world compared with Gehenna is but a as a lid to the pot. Some say that Gehenna has no limit in size. Within Gehenna, fire is one-sixtieth part of it.<sup>85</sup> Gehenna is depicted as a place where fire pours down on the heads of the wicked, as well as being deep and full of smoke.<sup>86</sup> This depiction of hell, while still somewhat vague, reflects notions of the Zoroastrian hell discussed in the Arda Viraf.

The Book of Arda Viraf tells the story of a devout Zoroastrian named Viraf who travels through the world of the dead on a dream-journey, guided by two divine beings, Srosh the pious and Adar the angel. Viraf makes his way across the Chinwad Bridge (also known as the bridge of the separator), briefly through heaven, extensively through hell, and finally to the god Ahura Mazda himself who praises Viraf and commands him to preach piety, good thoughts, and good deeds to the world.

While the Book of Arda Viraf gives extreme details as to the events that transpire in hell, the smoke and heat described in the Talmud's version of Gehenna are ever present. There are those thrown into hell where smoke and heat propelled them from below while cold wind hit them from above.<sup>87</sup> What the rabbis deemed punishable in Gehenna can also be found in the

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<sup>84</sup> B. T., *Ta'anith* 5a; *'Erubin* 19a; *Sotah* 4b; *'Abodah Zarah* 18b; *Nedarim* 22a; *Berakoth* 19a.

<sup>85</sup> B. T. *Ta'anith* 10a; *Berakoth* 57b.

<sup>86</sup> B. T. *Chagigah* 13b; *Menachoth* 99b-100a.

<sup>87</sup> *The Book of Arda Viraf*, translated by Martin Haug, Ch. 93.1.

Book of Arda Viraf. Adultery, idolatry, wickedness, and disrespect for the religious law all lead to severe punishments in the Zoroastrian version of hell.<sup>88</sup> It is possible that the rabbis were familiar with this work that was published at the same time that they were codifying the Talmud, and borrowed that which they deemed important and punishable. Also, like the wicked personality ascribed to Satan in the Talmud, the Evil spirit Angra Mainyu mocks the wicked in Hell for not following Ahura Mazda's will.<sup>89</sup> While the Book of Arda Viraf would later serve as a source for Dante's *Divine Comedy*, we can potentially see its influence on Judaism centuries earlier.

In the Book of Arda Viraf, Viraf is taken to the palace of heaven. Within are angels of various ranks, along with good souls living perfect lives, and what he calls the pre-eminent world of the pious.<sup>90</sup> The rabbis, similarly, did not focus only on the negative aspects of the afterlife. There was a heaven to their hell that took on different forms. This world is similar to the one that Rabbi Ishmael visits in the Hekhalot Rabbati text.

The Hekhalot literature deals with esoteric and mystical themes and is arguably believed to originate as far back as 200 CE.<sup>91</sup> Rabbi Ishmael ascends to the palace of God where he is guided by an angelic being known as the Prince of the Presence who shows Ishmael the world to come where Israel will be enslaved until a time of reckoning will convince the warring kings of the world to bow down before him and the children of Israel.<sup>92</sup> While it isn't precise if one is expected to ascend to Heaven the way that Viraf does, we do know that there are magical and

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., Ch. 81.5, 36, 28.4, and 47.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., Ch. 100

<sup>90</sup> *The Book of Arda Viraf*, translated by Martin Haug, Ch. 11.13, Ch. 12, Ch. 15.21.

<sup>91</sup> Don Karr, "Notes on the Study of *Merkabah* Mysticism and *Hekhalot* Literature in English," in *A Guide to Kabbalistic Books in English: 1977-1979*, (Ithaca, 1982), 37.

<sup>92</sup> *Hekhalot Rabbati: The Greater Treatise Concerning the Palaces of Heaven*, translated and edited by Morton Smith, Gershom Scholem, and Don Karr, (2009), Ch. 6.140-145.

ritualistic ways of getting one to return. When Rabbi Ishmael desires to bring Rabbi Nehunya ben Hakkanah back from the palace of God, a cloth is placed upon Rabbi Nehunya's knees (implying that this is a trance-like state one enters, like Viraf's dream-journey).<sup>93</sup> What is important is the method in which this is done. Rabbi Ishmael took a piece of cloth appropriate for a woman's internal examination and gave it to a servant. He had him give the cloth to a woman whose purity could not be questioned. She is to use this cloth for the internal examination of her menstrual cycle. The servant is told to instruct this woman to touch the cloth lightly and not to press too hard. Apparently, the cloth was to be wrapped around the middle finger and inserted with the least pressure possible. Rabbi Ishmael takes the cloth and inserts into it a bough of myrtle full of oil of foliatum soaked sharuy in pure balsam. The cloth, wrapped around the bough, is placed on the lap of Rabbi Nehuniah, characteristically sitting for the mystical vision. It is this ritualistic series of magical acts which results in Rabbi Nehuniah's dismissal from before the throne of glory.<sup>94</sup> The rabbis seem to have taken the notion of heaven from the Arda Viraf and expanded upon it as the palace of God had multiple rooms with different kinds of celestial beings. The similarities between the two stories from the ability of a holy man to visit heaven, to the method with which they ascend, to some of the aspects within are striking.

In the Talmud, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai speaks of the judgment that leads to Heaven or Hell in a similar manner to the Zoroastrians at the Bridge of the Separator.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., Ch. 18.226.

<sup>94</sup> Lawrence H. Schiffman, "The Recall of Rabbi Nehuniah Ben Ha-Qanah From Ecstasy in the "Hekhalot Rabbati," in *AJS Review*, Vol. 1, (Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 274-5.

“Now that I am being taken before the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, who lives and endures for ever and ever, whose anger, if He is angry with me, is an everlasting anger, who if He imprisons me imprisons me forever, who if He puts me to death puts me to death for ever, and whom I cannot persuade with words or bribe with money — nay more, when there are two ways before me, one leading to Paradise and the other to Gehinnom, and I do not know by which I shall be taken, shall I not weep? They said to him: Master, bless us. He said to them,: May it be [God's] will that the fear of heaven shall be upon you like the fear of flesh and blood. His disciples said to him: Is that all? He said to them: If only [you can attain this]! You can see [how important this is], for when a man wants to commit a transgression, he says, I hope no man will see me.”<sup>95</sup>

This passage is important not only for its similarities to the Zoroastrian literature, but because it highlights how the rabbis may have felt during this period. The rabbis appear to have an emphasis on the afterlife and a fear of what is to come. The belief that one may have to feel the wrath of God’s judgment for all eternity was now a part of a community that originally had little to no concept as to what happened once one died. Zoroastrianism was capable of influencing Judaism because in a world where the people were scattered and their resistance crushed multiple times, the original stagnant Sheol was simply no longer appealing. Instead came the idea that the wicked would be punished, the righteous would be rewarded, and at the end of time all would be made right with the world and its inhabitants.

I stated earlier how Judaism became aware of and tolerant of the Persians and their religion dating all the way back to the sixth century BCE under the Achamemenid Empire and Cyrus the Great. Now that some of the main Zoroastrian texts have been introduced, I will go back to the Old Testament in order to show just how early Persian ideas may have begun permeating into Jewish religious thought, using examples from the books of Ezekiel and Daniel.

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<sup>95</sup> B. T. *Beracoth* 28b.

The book of Ezekiel is filled with visions from said prophet during his exile in Babylon in the early sixth century BCE. One such vision involves Ezekiel recognizing a vast plain covered with dry human bones bleached by the sun. Ezekiel was commanded to prophesy to the bones and announce their resurrection, which happened as the skeletons reassembled and bodies were formed. Ezekiel is then commanded to order the winds to breathe on the bodies. The bodies then came back to life, and the resurrected people returned from Babylonian exile to their homeland.<sup>96</sup>

The book of Daniel dates to the second century BCE and tells of apocalyptic visions. The notion of resurrection is found there as well. Speaking of an extreme time of trouble, it is written that “Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence.”<sup>97</sup>

In Zoroastrianism’s earliest form, only high ranking who sacrificed enough would see a rewarding afterlife.<sup>98</sup> The prophet Zoroaster expanded this concept to all people. In the Young Avesta is found one of the earliest descriptions of resurrection.

“Ahura Mazda made the creatures, many and good, many and fair, many and wonderful, many and prosperous, many and bright; So that they may restore the world, which will (thenceforth) never grow old and never die, never decaying and never rotting, ever living and ever increasing, and master of its wish, when the dead will rise, when life and immortality will come, and the world will be restored at its wish; We sacrifice unto the awful kingly Glory, made by Mazda .... That will cleave unto the victorious Saoshyant and his helpers, when he shall restore the world, which will (thenceforth) never grow old and never die, never decaying and never rotting, ever living and ever increasing, and master of its wish, when the dead will rise, when life and immortality will come, and the world will be restored at its wish.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ezekiel 37.1-14 (NJPS).

<sup>97</sup> Daniel 12:2 (NJPS).

<sup>98</sup> Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2001), 14.

<sup>99</sup> *Avesta* – Yast, 19: 10-11, 88-89.

The Jewish prophets may have redefined and adapted the Zoroastrian concept of resurrection to fit their religious and political outlook. While the original Iranian doctrine implied the end of human history, as well as the end of death, the prophet took it to refer to a miracle that inaugurated a new era in Israel's national life, linking the idea of resurrection to national concerns, rather than universal, cosmological expectations. Ezekiel expected not a new universe, but a renewed Jewish commonwealth free from foreign oppression.<sup>100</sup> What is curious, and why I aim to tie it in with Zoroastrianism is that Judaism adopted a theology they previously seemed to have no use for. Perhaps the early hopelessness and disillusionment had to do with their repeated enslavement.<sup>101</sup> It was the influence and increased freedoms under Persian rule that allowed Jewish ideas of the afterlife to expand to something greater, involving reward and punishment, and a messiah that would bring about the resurrection and end of days. These ideas were probably also enhanced by their recent defeat, exile, and deportation at the hands of the Babylonians in the early sixth century BCE.

After the fall of the Temple and the failed Jewish revolts, Judaism found itself at a point of uncertainty. One of the major Jewish sects mentioned earlier, the Sadducees, disappeared shortly after the Temple's destruction because they considered themselves the guardians of the Temple and thus their role in communal life ceased to exist without it.<sup>102</sup> For many, or even most, Palestinian Jews however, especially those outside Judaea proper, the revolts had caused less drastic disruptions. Here the main changes, aside from an influx of Palestinian Jews, were

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<sup>100</sup> Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 13.

<sup>101</sup> Raphael Patai, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 39.

<sup>102</sup> Rachel S. Hallote, *Death, Burial, and Afterlife in the Biblical World: How the Israelites and Their Neighbors Treated the Dead*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 130.

produced by the collapse of the central institutions – no more pilgrimages, no enforced deference to representatives of the Temple and Torah, no obligatory gifts to the priests. Whatever formal constitutional authority the Torah and its interpreters had had was now abrogated; authority resided almost exclusively in the Roman or Persian government and its representatives.<sup>103</sup> It was the Pharisees that would carry on Judaism's legacy as well as be the most receptive to outside influence.

The farthest we can date the Pharisees back is to the second century BCE during the Hasmonean Dynasty's rule, according to Josephus.<sup>104</sup> The Pharisees were concerned with observance of their doctrine and commandments. More importantly to this work, however, they also believed that souls have an immortal rigor in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have power to revive and live again.<sup>105</sup> The Pharisees were the most adaptable group to change, and placed emphasis not just on the temple, but on the oral traditions as well. Josephus explains that the Pharisees had passed on to the people a great many observances handed down by their fathers, which are not written down in the Law of Moses.<sup>106</sup> It is the writing down of this oral tradition that gives us our clearest look into who the rabbis were and what they believed, or at least idealized.

In Judaism, it is believed that Moses was given at Mount Sinai both the oral law and the written law (the Torah). The oral Torah was understood to provide the interpretations and

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<sup>103</sup> Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E. (Jews, Christians and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World)*, (Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 110.

<sup>104</sup> Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, XIII, Ch. 5.9.

<sup>105</sup> *The Complete Works of Josephus*, translated by William. Whiston, (Kregel Publications, 1970), 586.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 13.297.

explanations that made possible the application of the written Torah as a way of life. Therefore, the two Torahs are of equal status and authority. Further, the accuracy of the transmission of the teaching of either of these two kinds of Torah is seen to depend not only on the correctness of the contents, but also upon the mode of transmission. The Tannaim (Rabbinic sages who lived between the first and third centuries CE) make clear that to be considered authentic, a tradition needs to be transmitted in the way it was believed to have been given at Sinai. Therefore, it was required that the written Torah be taught from a scroll while the oral law had to be recited orally by the Tannaim.<sup>107</sup> The Mishnah is the first major written recording of the oral Torah. The Gemara is the rabbinical analysis and commentary on said oral laws found alongside it. Together, these make up the Talmud and are the largest rabbinic work in Late Antiquity and our greatest source for Judaism during this time period. An early form of the Mishnah was first composed sometime around 200 CE by Rabbi Judah the Prince, part of the fourth generation of Tannaim. The Gemara more specifically is the rabbinical analysis that follows each Mishnaic statement. Oftentimes the Mishna is a few sentences to a few paragraphs long, outlining a rule and the Gemara contains an extensive response by multiple rabbis as they analyze every part of the statement. The Gemara for this particular Mishnah was completed sometime between 350-400 CE, creating the Jerusalem Talmud as opposed to its expanded version, the Babylonian Talmud which would come later.

The Babylonian Talmud was produced by circles of Babylonian Amoraim (Jewish scholars who taught the Oral Torah between the third and fourth centuries CE) who were led in each generation by masters whose schools constituted the center of Amoraic activity. Although

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<sup>107</sup> Lawrence H. Schiffman, "The Making of the Mishnah and the Talmud," in *Printing the Talmud: From Bomberg to Schottenstein*, eds. S.L. Mintz and G.M. Goldstein, (New York: Yeshiva University Museum, 2005), 4.



Tannaitic activity previously took place in Babylonia, the rise of Babylonia as a center of Talmudic study is first known from the time of Rav and Samuel, in the first half of the third century CE.<sup>108</sup> The Gemara for this Mishnah was published sometime around 500 CE. As the Babylonian Talmud contains a much longer and more in depth Gemara than the Jerusalem Talmud (although neither covers every Mishnah tractate), it has been the main source of study for scholars of this period, and will give us our primary look into how the rabbis came to view the afterlife in Late Antiquity.

The early rabbinic period was a dark time for certain parts of Judaism, largely due to the failed revolts and resulting dispersion of the remaining Jewish people in those areas. Not only were many Jews likely disillusioned with their messianic beliefs following the destruction of the Temple, but there was now no symbol of authority for them to rally behind. The rabbis would take up this mantle, but it would not be a smooth process. In Palestine, the rabbis did not control anything—not synagogues, not charity collection or distribution, nor anything else. But as acknowledged experts in Jewish law, protégés of the patriarch, and so on, they might be approached with some regularity for some purposes. By the fourth century, however, they were not without a certain compartmentalized and largely informal influence (acquired through the hard work of fund-raising, preaching, and setting themselves up as intermediaries between common folk and the powerful). Thus they constituted a limited and marginal but nevertheless discernible part of the societies they functioned within.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>109</sup> Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E. (Jews, Christians and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World)*, (Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 124.

There is a marked difference when looking at Babylonian Judaism. Babylonian sources depict a rabbinic movement more secure in its social position, less economically dependent on outsiders, and more powerful than its Palestinian counterpart. The Talmudic picture of self-imposed Babylonian rabbinic separation from most non-rabbis conforms to that of the dominant Persian culture. Thus the structure of Jewish society in Babylonia, with its division between rabbis and other groups, resembles the structure of Persian society.<sup>110</sup> In Babylonia then, the rabbis would be receptive to Persian influence, not just from their Pharisaic backgrounds, but from the privileges afforded to them in Persian society as well.

The concept of the afterlife that had developed in the second century CE is one of the most significant changes to be found amongst post-Temple Judaic culture. In the Talmud, there is a story of a Rabbi Joseph the son of Rabbi Joshua b. Levi, who became ill and fell into a trance. When he recovered, his father asked him, 'What did you see?' 'I saw a topsy-turvy world', he replied, 'the upper class underneath and the lower on top'' he replied: 'My son', he observed, 'you saw a clear world. And how are we situated there?' 'Just as we are here, so are we there. And I heard them saying, "Happy is he who comes hither with his learning in his hand". And I also heard them saying, "Those martyred by the State, no man can stand within their barrier."<sup>111</sup> This idea of the persecuted man who stayed dedicated to his faith and is rewarded for it contains elements from the Zoroastrian idea of individual judgment at the bridge of the separator, mentioned earlier, as well as the persecution and martyrdom of Christians going on at this time.

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<sup>110</sup> Richard Kalmin, *The Sage in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 7; 10.

<sup>111</sup> *B. T.*, Pesachim, 50a.

In both the rabbinic and Zoroastrian literature, the period of punishment is limited. In Seder Nezikin's tractate on testimonies, the Mishnah states that the judgment of the ungodly in Gehenna continues twelve months, for it is said, and it will be from one month until its same month.<sup>112</sup> This statement can also be found in Seder Mo'ed's tractate on the Sabbath where a story teaching the value of practical work states: "Seeing a man ploughing and sowing, they exclaimed, 'They forsake life eternal and engage in life temporal!' Whatever they cast their eyes upon was immediately burnt up. Thereupon a Heavenly Echo came forth and cried out, 'Have ye emerged to destroy My world: Return to your cave!' So they returned and dwelt there twelve months, saying, 'The punishment of the wicked in Gehenna is limited to twelve months.'<sup>113</sup> Similarly, the period of punishment in Zoroastrianism is limited as well. For Zoroastrians, hell is a temporary place of punishment and in the final victory over evil the just souls will go to heaven and be united with Ahura Mazda.<sup>114</sup>

The duality of good and evil is central to Zoroastrianism, and found its place in Judaism over time as well. Even to the one almighty Judaic God there is an adversary. As previously mentioned, in Zoroastrianism, the god of all things good is Ahura Mazda (or Ohrmazd.) Ahura Mazda's rival is the hostile spirit Angra Mainyu (or Ahriman.) These two primal Beings each made a deliberate choice between good and evil, an act which prefigures the identical choice which every man must make for himself in this life. Angra Mainyu was to Zoroaster a false god not to be worshipped because he stood for conflict among men, luring them through their greed for offerings to bloodshed and destructive strife.<sup>115</sup> This description should bring to mind the

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<sup>112</sup> B. T., Eduyyot, Ch. 2.10.

<sup>113</sup> B.T. Seder Mo'ed: Sabbath, 33b.

<sup>114</sup> Gillian Towler Mehta, *European Zoroastrian Attitudes to Their Purity Laws*, (Boca Raton, FL: 2011), 11.

<sup>115</sup> Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 20; 22.

idea of the Judeo-Christian Satan, the adversary of the Judean God. The primary talk of Satan in the Old Testament comes from the Book of Job. Satan is mentioned in several other places in the Old Testament (typically as either the Adversary or the Accuser), but plays little role outside of Job. The Book of Job's composition date varies from the patriarchal period to the time of the Persians. Many scholars believe it was written in the late biblical period, between the sixth and the fourth century BCE.<sup>116</sup> This was the period of Israel's history after the exile in which a people had been taken from their homeland. Similarly, other scholars date Job to the Second Temple Period. The idea that all suffering was punishment for wrongdoing began to be questioned, certainly on an individual level. Job is just one of a whole range of material dealing with many different issues that were of concern to the post-exilic community.<sup>117</sup> Job is one of the instances in which Satan is referred to as The Adversary, and is independent of God and his host. Each time god talks to Satan in Job he begins by asking him where he came from, and each time Satan replies that he has been wandering the earth. This gives us the idea that Satan lives with people when he is not doing God's bidding, which in turn leads to the later Judeo-Christian idea of Satan being able to tempt men to do evil. These biblical references to Satan were interpreted in the light of the later dualist belief in good vs. evil, and Satan neatly became the Judeo-Christian devil.<sup>118</sup> In the Talmud, Satan is given a wicked and deceiving personality. When discussing the Book of Job, it is written that a Tanna taught that Satan descends to Earth

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<sup>116</sup> Shmuel Vargon, "The Date of Composition of the Book of Job in the Context of S. D. Luzzatto's Attitude to Biblical Criticism, in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 91, No. ¾ (2001), 377.

<sup>117</sup> Katharine J. Dell, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, edited by James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), p. 337.

<sup>118</sup> Rachel S. Hallote, *Death, Burial, and Afterlife in the Biblical World: How the Israelites and Their Neighbors Treated the Dead*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 132.

and seduces, then ascends to heaven and awakens wrath. He is called the evil prompter and is the same as the Angel of Death.<sup>119</sup>

There are three stories side by side in the tractate on Consecrations in Seder Nashim:

“R. Meir used to scoff at transgressors. One day Satan appeared to him in the guise of a woman on the opposite bank of the river. As there was no ferry, he seized the rope and proceeded across. When he had reached half way along the rope, he [Satan] let him go saying: ‘Had they not proclaimed in Heaven, "Take heed of R. Meir and his learning," I would have valued your life at two ma'ahs.’

R. Akiba used to scoff at transgressors. One day Satan appeared to him as a woman on the top of a palm tree. Grasping the tree, he went climbing up: but when he reached half-way up the tree he [Satan] let him go, saying: ‘Had they not proclaimed in Heaven, "Take heed of R. Akiba and his learning," I would have valued your life at two ma'ahs.’

Pelimo used to say every day, ‘An arrow in Satan's eyes!’ One day — it was the eve of the Day of Atonement — he disguised himself as a poor man and went and called out at his door; so bread was taken out to him. ‘On such a day,’ he pleaded, ‘when everyone is within, shall I be without?’ Thereupon he was taken in and bread was offered him. ‘On a day like this,’ he urged, ‘when everyone sits at table, shall I sit alone!’ He was led and sat down at the table. As he sat, his body was covered with suppurating sores, and he was behaving repulsively. ‘Sit properly,’ he rebuked him. Said he, ‘Give me a glass [of liquor],’ and one was given him. He coughed and spat his phlegm into it. They scolded him, [whereupon] he swooned and died. Then they [the household] heard people crying out, ‘Pelimo has killed a man, Pelimo has killed a man!’ Fleeing, he hid in a privy; he [Satan] followed him, and he [Pelimo] fell before him. Seeing how he was suffering, he disclosed his identity and said to him, why have you [always] spoken thus? Then how am I to speak? You should say: ‘The Merciful rebuke Satan.’”<sup>120</sup>

In all three of these stories, Satan is teaching great men important lessons, but these lessons are taught through trickery and with the threat that it is only because of Heaven's protection and his mercy that they were not killed.

When referring to the end of days and the world to come, the Talmud states that in the time to come, God will bring the Evil Inclination and slay it in the presence of the righteous and

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<sup>119</sup> B. T., *Baba Bathra* 16a.

<sup>120</sup> B. T. *Kiddushin* 81a-b.

the wicked.<sup>121</sup> This mirrors the Zoroastrian end of days where Ahura Mazda slays Angra Mainyu bringing about the end of evil.<sup>122</sup>

The Jewish religion had for centuries revolved itself around the Temple in Jerusalem, as it was the center of sacrifice and worship and where the various sects of priests predominantly presided. With its destruction and the devastation felled upon the Jewish community from 66 CE to 135 CE came the need to reshape Jewish thought and worship, and the afterlife seemed to become a greater focus in Jewish literature. While the Jewish people were traditionally seen as introverted and unique people compared to their pagan neighbors and rulers, we can see that there were often times when they were willing to listen to and adapt ideas that may have fit their need to make sense of all the chaos in their world. As they lived (at times) peacefully under Persian rule for centuries, and the Persians held somewhat monotheistic views as well, it should come as no surprise that the rabbis would find inspiration here.

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<sup>121</sup> *B. T. Sukkah* 52a.

<sup>122</sup> *Avesta*, Yashts: Ch. 19. 96.

### **CHAPTER THREE: ARCHEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE INTERACTION AND INFLUENCE OF PAGAN CULTURE AND RELIGION ON POST SECOND TEMPLE JUDAISM**

The focus of this chapter will be on some of the archeological finds made regarding this period of Late Antiquity as they pertain to the changes in Jewish culture. Specifically the focus will be on the synagogue which, while a common institution in modern Judaism, was a more controversial center after the fall of the Temple where rabbinic authorities and the lay folk would sometimes clash in ideas, beliefs, and control, as I will attempt to infer based on the imagery and architecture. Ideas pertaining to magic will also be discussed with regards to the items such as magic bowls. It is my hope to show that external religious influences often made their way into the Jewish communities following the fall of the temple, and that these objects, places, and images can tell us quite a bit (while raising even more questions along the way) about the confusion and reorganization of Judaism at this important juncture.

The first thing to take into consideration is the level of interaction between the Jews and their Christian and pagan neighbors. The story of the Jews has traditionally been one of isolation, a people whose practices survived into the modern era by turning inward and rejecting outsiders. While it is difficult to say to what extent Judaism was receptive to external ideas, when we look at their use of art, we can at least infer that they practiced what was in vogue at the time.

Burial practices in the late third and early fourth century CE exemplify these interactions. Multiple sarcophagi have been found in Beth She'arim in Lower Galilee, the home of the Jewish Patriarchate near the end of the second century, that show a change in religious practice. The

Second Commandment, which prohibits graven images, had previously led many Jews to use simply rosettes and floral motifs in their ossuaries during the Second Temple period. In contrast, these sarcophagi were found to be embellished with formerly taboo carvings such as heraldic eagles, lions face to face, and in one exceptional case, a bearded human face in relief. There were also depictions of men and beasts in mythological scenes. Only two of the known sarcophagi which originated from those catacombs were decorated with a conservative design of Jewish symbols; they may well have been sculpted by Jewish stone-masons. The rest, when decorated, were of gentile manufacture, as their decoration, which included mythological figures and scenes, persuasively demonstrates.<sup>123</sup> It was not unusual to see pagan imagery common to that seen on sarcophagi throughout the Roman Empire. On one sarcophagus, seen below as *Figure 1*, we see an image of two Victories holding a *clipeus* with a menorah on it, along with several cupids playing near the bottom. The use of non-Jewish artisans to create works that combined Greek and Roman mythology is in contrast with the rabbinic writings on the prohibition of idolatry and graven images.

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<sup>123</sup> Adia Konikoff, *Sarcophagi From the Jewish Catacombs of Ancient Rome: A Catalogue Raisonne*, (Franz Steiner Verlag Stuttgart, 1990), pp. 9-10.





Figure 1 Slab of sarcophagus with inscribed menorah, seven-branched candelabrum symbol of Judaism, Late 3<sup>rd</sup> century, Museo Nazionale Romano, [www.gettyimages.com/detail/photo/slab-of-sarcophagus-with-inscribed-menorah-high-res-stock-photography/102520281](http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/photo/slab-of-sarcophagus-with-inscribed-menorah-high-res-stock-photography/102520281).

There is epigraphic and onomastic evidence that coincides with that of the sarcophagi as well. A handful of distinctly Jewish funerary inscriptions dating back to Late Antiquity have been discovered. What is unique about these inscriptions are the names, written in Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and in one case beginning in Hebrew and then continued in Latin.<sup>124</sup> One of the main features of Jewish epigraphic practices in the ancient world is the constant process of negotiation between what is specifically Jewish and what is commonly practiced by the non-Jewish world of antiquity. This is evident in the use of epithets in the Jewish inscriptions from Rome, as well as in the citation of biblical verses evidenced in Jewish inscriptions found throughout the Roman Empire. When non-Jewish epigraphic practices are adapted for Jewish usage, local non-Jewish practices are often the single most important factor in determining the content of Jewish inscriptions.<sup>125</sup> For example, on one of the plaques dating back to the fourth or fifth century CE, we see the inscription “Here lies Leontia, aged 3. Here lies Calliope, aged 18.”

<sup>124</sup> Leonard Victor Rutgers, “Interaction and its Limits: Some Notes on the Jews of Sicily in Late Antiquity,” in *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, Bd. 115, (Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH, Bonn (Germany), 1997), 247.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

The words are written in Greek and a menorah is inscribed on the plaque. The name Leontia might be regarded as the Greek equivalent of Judith, and the name Calliope derives from Greek mythology.<sup>126</sup> In contrast, apart from Samuel, in the Diaspora biblical names were not exceedingly popular compared to Greek names found in inscriptions. The names most frequently used by Sicilian Jews were Greek. Local factors were the most determining elements in the choice of the language of the name. It can be observed that names that were popular among Jews in other parts of the Roman world occur in six out of ten inscriptions. That some of these Greek names used by Sicilian Jews may have had specifically Jewish connotations, at least for their users, follows from the fact that in a Jewish inscription from nearby Malta, the name εἰρήνη (Eirini) is used as agnomen for a woman whose primary name had a distinctively more pagan ring, namely Διονυσία (Dionysia). While it is important to note that, for non-Jews, there was nothing specifically Jewish about the name Irene leading it to be used not infrequently, among Jewish women it is one of the most frequently found names used throughout the Diaspora.<sup>127</sup> In antiquity, names could and did at times serve as cultural indicators. That this is so follows from what ancient Jewish literary sources have to say about onomastic change, and also from the use of agnomina we encounter in Jewish inscriptions from Rome, Edfu in Egypt, and Beth Shesarim in Galilee. The fact that Sicilian Jews preferred Greek names that were generally popular over other types of names can be taken to mean, therefore, that in this specific respect Jews interacted with their non-Jewish contemporaries.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> David Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe Vol. 1 Italy (Excluding Rome), Spain and Gaul*, (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 192-93.

<sup>127</sup> <sup>127</sup> Leonard Victor Rutgers, "Interaction and its Limits: Some Notes on the Jews of Sicily in Late Antiquity," in *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, Bd. 115, (Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH, Bonn (Germany), 1997), 249.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

The relatively small amount of evidence found makes conclusions difficult. It has been posited that the sarcophagi may have been made for gentile customers but later sold to Jews without changes being made.<sup>129</sup> This, however, discounts the importance of the rabbinic prohibition on idolatry found in the Talmud's tractate, *Avodah Zarah*. Thus, the opposing argument is that some Jews were not responsive to some aspects of Jewish laws and that there must have been several understandings of what is a permissible symbol in Judaism.<sup>130</sup> A similar argument exists for the inscriptions found on the funerary items. It has been argued on one hand that the Greek names are direct translations of typically Jewish names, while on the other that they may have just been popular Greek names that Jews took on. The results in the end leave a definitive argument inconclusive, although we can say for sure that there was a significant amount of interaction among neighbors, and whether there were differing levels of integration or cultural appropriation, the Jewish people at this rapidly changing point in their history were not immune to the influence of their pagan neighbors.

Burial practices in general, as a rule of thumb, were important to Jews and their neighbors equally. Although it is impossible to determine if pagans, Jews, and Christians were buried in the same hypogeum or catacomb, it is beyond doubt that all these groups could make use of one and the same cemetery.<sup>131</sup> Communal cemeteries have been discovered all across the Roman world. S. Antioco on Sardinia, Rabat-Mdina on Malta, where Jewish hypogea lay dispersed among Christian tombs, Doclea where Jews were laid to rest in an otherwise pagan necropolis, Thessaloniki, several sites in Asia Minor, possibly Tyre, Alexandria, Teucheira,

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<sup>129</sup> E. E. Urbach, "The Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry in the Second and Third Centuries in Light of Archeological and Historical Facts," in *Israel Exploration Journal* IX, Vol. 3, (1959), 165.

<sup>130</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Early Rabbinic Judaism – Historical Studies in Religion, Literature, and Art*, (E. J. Brill, 1975), 158.

<sup>131</sup> Leonard Victor Rutgers, *The Hidden Heritage of Diaspora Judaism*, (Peeters Publishers, 1998), 83.

maybe Carthage, Edessa, and northern Arabia one encounters Jewish tombs among those of the local non-Jewish population.<sup>132</sup> In this instance, we find the rabbis in agreement with their neighbors. Cleanliness is an important subject throughout the Jewish Talmud and the Persian Avesta. Zoroastrianism teaches that when alive, non-Zoroastrians are wicked, but when dead, they are worthy of death. In either case, their bodies or corpses do not cause pollution to Persians.<sup>133</sup> Similarly, the rabbis argued that the graves of idolaters do not impart Levitical uncleanness by an Ohel (tent), although they do by ordinary means of contact.<sup>134</sup> Exclusive burial rites were preferred, but respect to the dead was of prime importance. Furthermore, the *Tosefta* and the *Palestinian Talmud* state that just as in the case of the dead of Israel, so should non-Jewish dead be buried properly, a behavior prompted by the wish to preserve peace that was put into actual practice by Jews in Edessa.<sup>135</sup> Therefore, we see that despite traditional Jewish restrictions against burying Jews and non-Jews together which continues to this day, there were in fact many exceptions. Funerary devices and locations were shared, and these items tell us a great deal about how much the Jewish people intermingled with their non-Jewish neighbors. To a degree, death was the great equalizer that united these religions.

Many artifacts have come out of these funerary sites, but classifying them can be a complicated practice. In both Judaism and Christianity, the archeological record with respect to decorated artifacts is small (and in the case of Christianity non-existent) before about 200 CE,

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 88-89.

<sup>133</sup> Yaakov Elman, "The Other in the Mirror: Iranians and Jews View One Another - Questions of Identity, Conversion, and Exogamy in the Fifth Century Iranian Empire - Part One (Yeshiva University, New York – Bulletin of the Asia Institute, Vol. 19, December, 2009), 16.

<sup>134</sup> *B. T. Yebamoth* 61a.

<sup>135</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era*, ed. W. S. Green and E. Frerichs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. xiii, as well as Jacob Neusner, *The Systemic Analysis of Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), p. 89.

but rich across the Roman Empire in the third century CE and thereafter.<sup>136</sup> However, even with artifacts in hand, deciding what is distinctly Jewish or Christian is difficult even when the most obvious of evidence is at hand. For instance, a piece of gold glass from Rome with a lit menorah, palm trees, and an inscription that reads “House of Peace. Accept a blessing ... with all yours” on it, which taxonomically fits with a group of thirteen known gold glasses from Rome that have Jewish iconography. But the piece was found in the usually classed Christian catacomb of St. Marcellinus and St. Peter.<sup>137</sup> Some archeologist apologists in this instance would argue that the piece merely made its way there from a nearby Jewish catacomb, and this is not impossible to imagine. But Elsner argues that it is important to maintain awareness of the possibility that Jewish symbols like the menorah or Torah shrine were not necessarily and exclusively used only by Jews, although in their use by Jews they may have developed some specific meanings which came to be seen by some Jewish communities as definitional of their faith. They may have been used also by some Christian constituencies and even by syncretistically-minded pagans.<sup>138</sup> The acceptance of this possibility opens more doors to the understanding of the diverse cultures that existed during this period, but also makes the job more difficult for the historian or archeologist looking to neatly place each piece of evidence into its own category. It begs the question that this paper often brings up of what exactly was Judaism during this time, and what did it mean to those that identified as one, if the symbols that typically apply to one group or another can easily be appropriated by another group that sees no complication in adopting multiple icons?

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<sup>136</sup> Jas Elsner, “Archaeologies and Agendas: Reflections on Late Ancient Jewish Art and Early Christian Art,” in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 93, (Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 2003), 114.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-16.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

Artifacts used for mystical purposes are not uncommon in pagan religions, but they are a difficult study with regards to Judaism, and thus when an item can be identified as uniquely Jewish, it can tell us much about the influence of surrounding religions. Following Leviticus 18:3, the rabbis condemned magic, as they saw it as one of the ways of the Amorites (often spoken of as the most loathsome and heretical of nations), practice of which is punishable by death.<sup>139</sup> Witchcraft it seems was a common occurrence during this period. Women were often seen as falling into its trap as they grew older, and one story from the Talmud in particular tells of eighty women accused of witchcraft hanged.<sup>140</sup> However, the Talmud is ripe with stories of the rabbis performing miraculous acts. Jacob Neusner went so far as to say that “Were an anthropologist of our times to spend a few years in ancient Pumbedita, Sura, or Nahardea in order to learn the social role of the sage, his research work would certainly have a title like ‘The Legislating Sorcerer of Babylon’.”<sup>141</sup> One popular story involves Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanos, who performed miracles to settle a legal dispute.<sup>142</sup> There was a fine line as to where magic was acceptable for the rabbis. When it could be traced back to the power of God and the Torah, it was deemed controversial and debatable, but acceptable. When it was associated with witchcraft and idolatry however, it was an unforgiveable crime.

Incantation bowls, also known as demon bowls, were a form of protective magic believed to work by burying the bowl, which would then trap the demon. Almost eighty of these bowls have been found with distinctly Jewish characteristics, dating back to Late Antiquity, specifically Sassanid Babylon (3<sup>rd</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> c.) primarily around the settlement of Nippur. They contain Aramaic

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<sup>139</sup> *B. T. M. Shabbat 6:10; M. Sanhedrin 7:7.*

<sup>140</sup> *B.T. Sanhedrin 100b; 45b.*

<sup>141</sup> Yuval Harari, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, Ph.D. (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem), 65.

<sup>142</sup> *B.T. Baba Mezi’a 59b.*

writing that spirals towards the center of the bowl, occasionally with a human or animal-like drawing in the center. One bowl contains seven lines of Hebrew with two figures in the middle, one possibly a sorcerer and the other a demon, shown below as *Figure 2*. The text on the bowl translates as such:

Again I come, I Pabak bar Kufithai, in my own might, on my person polished armor of iron, my head of iron, my figure of pure fire. I am clad with 'the garment of Armasa (Hermes), Dabya and the Word, and my strength is in him who created heaven and earth. I have come and I have smitten the evil Fiends and the malignant Adversaries. I have said to them that if at all you sin against Abuna bar Geribta and against Ibba bar Zawithai, I will lay a spell upon you, the spell of the Sea and the spell of the monster Leviathan. (I say) that if at all you sin against Abuna b. G., and against his wife and his sons, I will bend the bow against you and stretch the bow-string at you. Again, whereinsoever you sin against the house of Pabak and against his property and all the people of his house, in my own right I Abuna bar Geribta — or against Ibba bar Zawithai — will bring down upon you the curse and the proscription and the ban which fell upon Mount Hermon and upon the monster Leviathan and upon Sodom and upon Gomorrha. In order to subdue Devils do I come, I Abuna b. G., and all evil Sacraments and the tongue of impious Charm-spirits; I have come and smitten the Demons and Devils and evil Tormentors, the Gods (Idol-spirits) and female Goddesses — standing in serried rows and encamped in camps.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> James Alan Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts From Nippur*, (The University Museum, 1913), 121-22.



Figure 2 Hebrew Bowl, Nippur, c. 3<sup>rd</sup> BCE – 6<sup>th</sup> CE, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, <http://www.penn.museum/collections/object/82460>

While some of the biblical scenes are familiar, there are a few things that stand out. Fire is the potent element against witches and demons, as the ancient means for destroying their arts. In Babylonia the fire-god Gibil was the chief god of exorcism in such magic. The garment of Hermes refers to the garment of a potent being carrying with it his powers, a common property of folklore.<sup>144</sup> Many of the incantation bowls share writing similar to this, in which a sorcerer commands protection of himself or others against a demon while invoking magical and holy powers.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 122.



It is interesting to note that while stories of demons and their hierarchy are prominent in the Babylonian Talmud, they are almost completely absent in the Palestinian Talmud. The argument for this is that the Persian backdrop for the Bavli was written under a Zoroastrian influence. Zoroastrianism had a well-developed demonology, which might have proven useful for magical purposes, and it had its own magic tradition, preserved in the religious books in Pahlavi to some extent, and also in amulets and magic bowls. Judging by the names used, both in regards to the people being protected and the demons the wards were meant for, many of the customers for whom incantations in Judaeo-Aramaic were inscribed in these bowls may have been Persian.<sup>145</sup> Demons and other beings of a more mystical nature do exist within biblical literature, but they take much more prominent forms during the Talmudic period, and suggest a great deal of cultural interaction between the rabbis, the magic practitioners, and their Persian neighbors.

We then turn to perhaps the most affected area of Judaism following the fall of the Second Temple, that being the place of worship. Although the terms temple and synagogue are used interchangeably today, the Second Temple in Jerusalem was *the* international center of worship for Judaism for over four hundred years, up to its fall at the hands of the Roman Empire in 70 CE. It was a place of pilgrimage, festivals, and sacrifice, and during the holidays of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles the population could swell up exponentially, hosting anywhere from sixty thousand to three million people, depending on the source.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Shaul Shaked, "Bagdana, King of Demons, and Other Iranian Terms in Babylonian Aramaic Magic," in *Acta Iranica, Vol. IX - Papers in Honour of Professor Mary Boyce*, (E.J. Brill, 1985), 511.

<sup>146</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Judean War 2*, Translated and Edited by Steve Mason, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008), 187.

The synagogue was a similar but distinctly different institution. Their origins are problematic, but what we can deduce is that buildings called *synagogé*, *sabbateion*, *hieron*, *naos*, or the oldest and most common, *proseuchai* (prayer), were erected by Jewish ethnic corporations in some Egyptian villages as early as the third century BCE. There are alternative dates to define the beginning of the synagogue such as the Josianic reforms of the late seventh century BCE, the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE, the rise of the Jewish Diaspora in the centuries that followed, or as a Palestinian expression of hostility to the temple and priesthood. Each term and time period has been proposed by modern scholars. The Jews refrained from using the word “temple” as they had at least partly internalized the Deuteronomic insistence on the uniqueness of the Temple of Jerusalem.<sup>147</sup> We cannot conclusively say whether or not sacrifices were held in these synagogues. Josephus tells us when talking about a monumental synagogue in the city of Tiberius that deliberations, services, and prayers were held there. It was a site of various assemblies and served as the main public building.<sup>148</sup> The Christian Bible states that Moses had people preaching him in every synagogue in every city and the first century Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo questioned the safety of the Jews and the synagogues during the reign of Caligula.<sup>149</sup> This evidence is circumstantial, but it is a sign that regardless of how widespread and influential the synagogue was exactly by the first century CE, it had at least become a known and recognized institution with a significant amount of influence over some portion of the Jewish population.

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<sup>147</sup> Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E. (Jews, Christians and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World)*, (Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 217-18.

<sup>148</sup> Samuel Rocca, “The Purpose and Functions of the Synagogue in Late Second Temple Judaea: Evidence From Josephus and Archaeological Investigation,” in *Flavius Josephus: Interpretation and History*, edited by Jack Pastor, Pnina Stern, and Menahem Mor, (Brill, 2011), 295.

<sup>149</sup> Acts 15:21; *On the Embassy to Gaius XLVI*, 370-71.

In the latter half of the Second Temple Period, while the Temple itself was run by the conservative priestly aristocracy of the Sadducees, the rabbis were primarily composed of the somewhat more liberal Pharisees, and unlike the Sadducees, were not paid for their profession. Both groups served on the ruling body of the Jews, the Sanhedrin. When the Sadducees faded away with the destruction of the Temple, the rabbis were left to maintain order in this new and chaotic world of theirs. Their influence over the congregation of the synagogue was different from that of the priests and the Second Temple. By the fourth century CE, in rural areas the rabbis did not control anything -- not synagogues, not charity collection or distribution, nor anything else. But as acknowledged experts in Jewish law, protégés of the patriarch, and so on, they might be approached with some regularity for some purposes. They lacked a formal authority but were not without an informal influence acquired through the hard work of fundraising, preaching, and setting themselves up as intermediaries between common folk and the powerful.<sup>150</sup> Their authority was not much greater in urban areas. The Jewish population was situated along an ideological continuum. At one extreme are people who, though of Jewish origin and ethnicity, were for all intents and purposes standard Greco-Roman pagans. At the other are hardcore representatives of Judaism, mainly the rabbis. Most Jews were caught in between, though the evidence clearly indicates that the two poles were unequal in their attraction and most Jews seem to have lived mainly as pagans at least until the rise of Constantine and the Christianization of the empire.<sup>151</sup> This brief history of the rabbis and their tenuous role up to around the fourth century CE has been with the purpose of showing the complexity in Jewish society. There had always been mixed views among the Jewish people of the diaspora, but with

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<sup>150</sup> Daniel Boyarin, "The Christian Invention of Judaism: The Theodosian Empire and the Rabbinic Refusal of Religion," in *Representations*, No. 85, (University of California Press, Winter, 2004), p.124.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

the failed revolts, their center of worship gone, and the persecution that followed, peace and accommodation may have seemed like the more appealing option for many of the lay folk. This is important to take into consideration when we examine the synagogue at Dura-Europos.

Dura-Europos was a border city on the bank of the Euphrates in what is today, Syria that existed from around 300 BCE to around 256 CE. It was a military and commercial outpost that began under the rule of the Seleucid kingdom, later fell under the control of the Parthian empire, and eventually controlled by the Romans, until finally falling to the Sassanians, who deported the city. These various rulers left it open to a wide array of cultural influences. The vast assortment of materials found there detailing daily life have led the location to being nicknamed “the Pompeii of the desert.” Under the Persian and Roman imperialists, Dura held a relaxed atmosphere where any and every cult flourished, so that alongside their own temples, shrines to local Syrian gods sprang up alongside the Hellenistic ones.<sup>152</sup> Roman control led to the influx of three foreign cults, seen by the eventual construction of a synagogue, a mithraeum, and a Christian chapel (alongside the many already existing temples). These three, however, appear in native Durene guise, closely resemble each other, and are hardly Roman. It is essential to understand that Roman dominance at Dura-Europos was one of historical importance only and that it cannot claim any profound effect on any of the city’s artistic and architectural features. The local tradition of Dura-Europos was all pervasive and remained oblivious to outward forms imposed by Hellenistic Greeks, oriental Parthians, or Imperial Rome.<sup>153</sup> Dura was a cosmopolitan city, and much of its architecture followed similar patterns. Even when they were

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<sup>152</sup> Simon Schama, *The Story of the Jews: Finding the Words 1000 BC – 1492 AD*, (Harper Collins Publishers, 2013), 174.

<sup>153</sup> Marie-Henriette Gates, “Dura-Europos: A Fortress of Syro-Mesopotamian Art,” in *The Biblical Archeologist*, Vol. 47, No. 3, (American Schools of Oriental Research, Sep. 1984), 168.

reconstructed, the Dura temples remained faithful to their Mesopotamian prototypes, for mudbrick construction allowed little variety in exterior decoration. Moreover, the temples all exhibited few departures from the basic plan. They were usually located in residential quarters and resembled private houses in layout. Another typical practice was that the Dura temples were all embellished with programs of painted decoration.<sup>154</sup> The synagogue that we will discuss was a continuation of these traditions.

The synagogue was an elaborate and highly decorated sanctuary. Like the other religious buildings, it was a private house converted into a religious dwelling, and was expanded over time to cover an entire block. There was a suite, a guest house, and a place for assembly. A niche was built for the Torah facing towards Jerusalem, as was tradition and the assembly house was filled with rows of benches, all of which followed the design of other Dura temples.

Within the synagogue, what is most important to us are the wall paintings. The three registers with figural compositions are divided into panels illustrating biblical scenes. As far as they are understood today, they cannot be made to fit satisfactorily into any unified cycle or theme. But they can be summarized best as narrative illustrations of the history of the Jewish faith from Moses and the Exodus, the Ark of the Covenant, and the Temple of Solomon to scenes of deliverance and prophecy – all serving to reaffirm most vividly for the local Jewish community the close covenant binding them, as people of Israel, to God.<sup>155</sup> The images served as a narrative framework that integrated the congregation into a sacred history that would seem to have come to a disastrous end. In doing so, the decoration became the central aspect of the

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 173.

synagogue, defining it as a holy place where the congregation could still offer "service" and, quite likely, pointed beyond this site toward an age to come when the sanctuary could be restored to Jerusalem itself.<sup>156</sup> The style used to illustrate these scenes once again followed the tradition of other illustrations done in temples throughout Dura. Figures differed in scale to signify their importance, furniture and cult objects such as thrones and altars were anachronistically painted in the style of the iconography of the period, and the Parthian artistic' technique of frontality was prevalent in the Dura paintings.<sup>157</sup> All four walls along with the ceiling tiles were decorated with these frescoes.

Decoration in a synagogue during this period was unusual, but not unheard of. The synagogue at Gerasa in Jordan was excavated in 1929 and may date back for the Jews as far as the second century CE if the testimonial of the birthplace of Rabbi Joshua Ha-Garsi is authentic.<sup>158</sup> The Gerasa synagogue had its two side aisles covered in mosaics. One that was discovered under a church apse built over the synagogue in the sixth century CE depicts many animals in rows, as well as a dove in a tree carrying a branch in its' beak, depicting the story of Noah and the Flood, labeled below as *Figure 3*. At Sepphoris in Galilee there have been found calendar girls personifying the seasons on the mosaic floors of synagogues. Schama describes these seasonal women in great detail:

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<sup>156</sup> Kara L. Schenk, "Temple, Community, and Sacred Narrative in the Dura-Europos Synagogue," in *AJS Review*, Vol. 34, No. 2, (Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Association for Jewish Studies, Nov. 2010), 229.

<sup>157</sup> Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archeology in the Diaspora*, (Brill, 1998), 191.

<sup>158</sup> Estee Dvorjetski, "The Synagogue-Church at Gerasa in Jordan. A Contribution to the Study of Ancient Synagogues," in *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palastina-Vereins (1953-)* Bd. 121, H. 2, (Deutscher verein zur Erforschung Palastinas, 2005), 143.

“Tevet, the winter girl with the teardrop face, looks out wistfully from beneath the folds of a gown (uncannily like a modern Islamic hijab) concealing her hair, more from seasonal chill than any obligation of modesty. Nissan, the springtime girl, on the other hand, has thick tresses of golden hair piled up and held with exactly the kind of showy headband the Mishnah frowned upon for Shabbat wear. Worse, or better yet, from her left ear dangles an unmistakably bling-heavy pendular earring. Tammuz, the summertime month, sometimes associated with the moment the fickle Israelites took to worshipping the golden calf, sports a spiffy flat-top beret and an enticingly bare shoulder. In cities like Sepphoris, mosaics of female beauties, as well as the full repertoire of what we think of as profane pagan imagery – animals in particular rabbits, ducks, and deer – could be found on the floors of the opulent houses lining its streets and avenues.”<sup>159</sup>

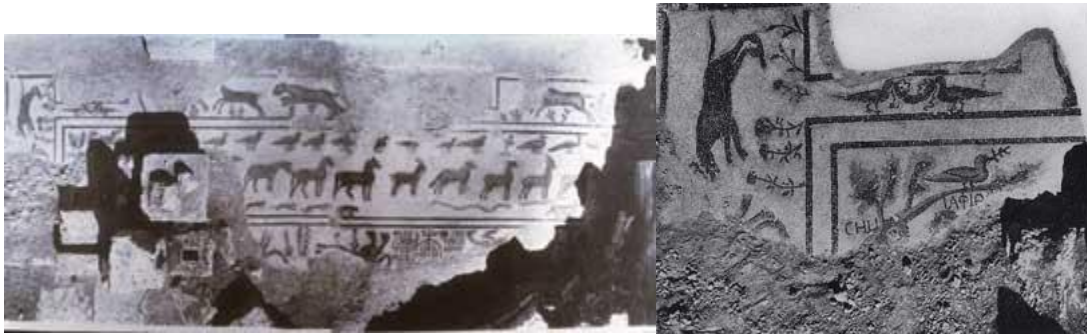


Figure 3 Gerasa Synagogue, The Flood mosaic panel, 5th cen. - 530 CE, insitu, [cja.huji.ac.il/Ancient/Gerasa/Gerasa-object.html](http://cja.huji.ac.il/Ancient/Gerasa/Gerasa-object.html).

There was no continuous development or even really original creative art; rather, there were for the most part external influences and borrowing from foreign sources, while altering the form and ends in accordance with the needs of the Jewish community.<sup>160</sup> They were not hidden away or in small corners of the room either. While modern Jews grow up with an assumption that images in houses of prayer and Torah were confined to the modest stained- glass window here and there, where synagogues took their original shape and form, images dominate

<sup>159</sup> Simon Schama, *The Story of the Jews: Finding the Words 1000 BC – 1492 AD*, (Harper Collins Publishers, 2013), 192.

<sup>160</sup> Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E. (Jews, Christians and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World)*, (Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 154.

everything else, and would have been seen from any position.<sup>161</sup> They were implemented with great deliberation so as to be ingrained into the congregation's mind for all time.

The mosaics at Gerasa and Sepphoris are controversial for their breaking of the Second Commandment, but the illustrations at Dura are perhaps the most detailed and expansive that we currently have at our disposal. They show the overthrown traditional view of the Jewish community as insular and highly orthodox, due to the prohibition against graven images and the rabbis' against idolatry in the Talmud, as well as their incorporation of pagan characters. While the wall frescoes contained biblical scenes that incorporated both Jewish and pagan characters to tell their stories, the painted ceiling, the only one from a synagogue to survive since antiquity, induced a disorienting effect on the synagogue visitor, for its tiles created an otherworldly artificial sky in which overhanging paintings of luscious fruits, bounding animals, strange bird-snakes, and sea-goats joined images of centaurs grasping fish, women's smiling faces, Evil Eyes with snakes and smoking lamps, coupled with vaguely discernable texts in unusual scripts.<sup>162</sup> The prohibition against graven images cannot be stressed enough with regards to Judaism. Ancient Jews understood that looking at certain visual objects could have very real effects on the beholder.<sup>163</sup> There have been arguments made throughout the Talmud on how exactly to deal with coming into contact with such images, which range from complete aversion to desecrating the image itself. About painted images specifically, the rabbis have nothing at all to say and

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<sup>161</sup> Simon Schama, *The Story of the Jews: Finding the Words 1000 BC – 1492 AD*, (Harper Collins Publishers, 2013), 194.

<sup>162</sup> Karen B. Stern, "Mapping Devotion in Roman Dura Europos: A Reconsideration of the Synagogue Ceiling," in *American Journal of Archeology*, Vol. 114, No. 3, (Archeological Institute of America, July 2010), p. 501.

<sup>163</sup> Rachel Neis, "Eyeing Idols: Rabbinic Viewing Practices in Late Antiquity," in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 102, No. 4, (University of Pennsylvania Press, Fall 2012), 541.



silence was taken as assent.<sup>164</sup> As Judaism grew into a more intermingling of cultures, at least in places such as Dura then, the message becomes clear that there was at least some modicum of tolerance for that which previously would have been seen as purely heretical by the Jewish religious authorities.

The pagan elements incorporated into the frescoes are nothing short of astonishing. For example, on the west wall one of the panels depicts the story of Moses. In *Figure 4* below, we see him being lifted out of the basket, handed to a servant, presented to the pharaoh, and a set of open doors, perhaps to show his acceptance into the royal family, the possibilities ahead of him, or his eventual flight into Midian. Goodenough, however, saw much more to the image. He argues:

The princess lifting Moses up out of the water is in fact a divine figure, specifically Anahita, one of the most popular deities of the period in Iran who was associated by the Greeks with the Great Mother and Aphrodite. In a house adjacent to the synagogue was a figure of Aphrodite-Anahita who in general outline, hair, and the position of her hands resembles the figure taking the baby Moses from the ark. In this instance as in numerous others, that what we have before us is an example of the adoption of Greek and Iranian conventions "only to show that Judaism, when properly understood, presents all religious values, even the pagan values, better than the pagans themselves."<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Simon Schama, *The Story of the Jews: Finding the Words 1000 BC – 1492 AD*, (Harper Collins Publishers, 2013), 190.

<sup>165</sup> Jacob Neusner, "Judaism at Dura-Europos," in *History of Religions, Vol. 4, No. 1*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 86-87.

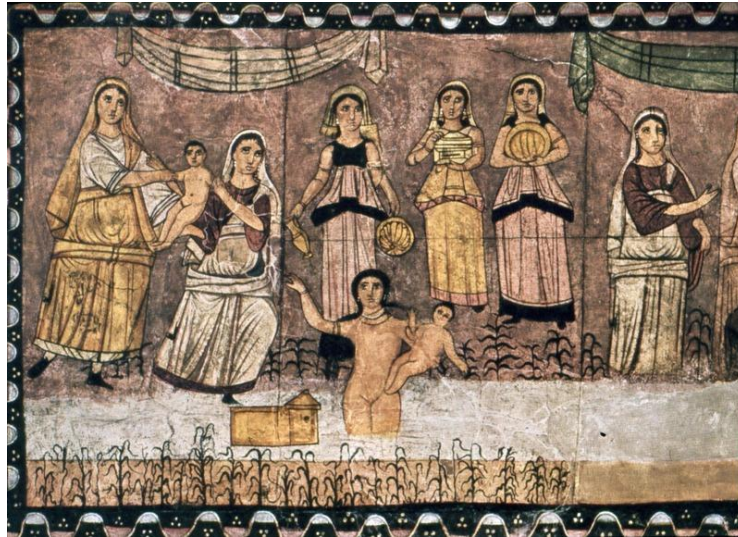


Figure 4 Pharaoh and Infancy of Moses, fresco detail of the Synagogue of Dura Europos, 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE, Dura Europos, Syria, Damascus National Museum, UB Digital Collections, Contributing Department, State University of New York at Buffalo, 03/15/19, <http://digital.lib.buffalo.edu/items/show/33896>.

A different panel on the west wall, labeled below as *Figure 5*, shows from right to left the story of Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egypt. We see him lifting a rod to part the sea, followed by the Egyptians drowning, and the twelve Jewish tribes being organized, while God's hand is above twice, towards the sea and the tribes. Goodenough once again makes the claim for the incorporation of pagan elements, this time affiliating Moses with the popular Eastern god-hero Heracles. He argues that the staff in Moses' hand as he opens and closes the Red Sea is in fact a club, and that the club is a distinctive characteristic of only Theseus and Heracles. The symbols are polygamous, as Moses was the Ares-Heracles of Judaism and his function and nature were properly characterized by showing him with the club in this setting.<sup>166</sup>

<sup>166</sup> Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E. (Jews, Christians and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World)*, (Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 90.



Figure 5 Moses Leads the Exodus From Egypt, 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE, Dura Europos, Syria, Damascus National Museum, UB Digital Collections, Contributing Department, State University of New York at Buffalo, 03/15/19, <http://digital.lib.buffalo.edu/items/show/35917>.

While the motifs are borrowed from other cultures, they present an anti-pagan, or at least Jewish dominant stance. On one end of the room is a depiction of Moses miraculously producing a well in the wilderness for the twelve tribes, while on the other is a depiction of the story of the Philistines carrying away the Ark of the Covenant, which ends with the toppling of the Philistine god Dagon and the Ark being carried back to the Jewish people. In terms of the visual scheme on the west wall, the positive miracle of the well (positive, that is, for the Israelites) is counterpoised against the negative miracle of the fall of Dagon (negative, that is, for the enemies of Israel). In the well image, the ritual objects of the Jews preside beneath a central *aedicula* representing the Tabernacle; in the Dagon scene, the cult implements of the Philistines are scattered along with their god, while the Ark walks away on its cart. Whatever the precise identity of all these images and their relation to specific scriptural texts and the broader narrative meanings of the Dura Synagogue frescoes as a whole, they appear to present a visual meditation on temples (pagan and Jewish) and to make the case for one over the other in no uncertain

terms.<sup>167</sup> Other depictions such as that of the story of Abraham and Isaac are uniquely Jewish and appear to be a confirmation of faith. But it should be noted that the tiles used changed their Christian, Jewish, or polytheistic identity depending on different owners and viewers over time, as the artisans that created them did not personally place them. However Jewish one makes the frescoes, the decorated roof tiles of the synagogue were clearly an absolutely standard local job of the sort that adorned domestic buildings and probably also the temples of other cults.<sup>168</sup> How then do we compromise their use of pagan characters with their rejection of them? Even if the ceiling tiles used were simply mass produced and commonplace, it still leaves much unanswered. When discussing the relationship between ceiling decoration and the practices of associated populations, perhaps it is more useful to ask not who produced the synagogue tiles, but rather why these tiles as opposed to others were specifically used.<sup>169</sup> The argument could be made that the wall depictions of biblical tales could represent subtle forms of resistance and declaration of identity. Conversely, or perhaps simultaneously, as the synagogue existed no more in a vacuum than the other religious centers in Dura at the time, it could be that they evolved beside and influenced one another in ways they either didn't notice or didn't care about. The existence of countless ambiguous cases is exactly what we would expect in a context where every cult reflected a range of views and practices, some of which will have been mutually exclusive and some syncretistic with other cults. Religions were identities to be claimed and redefined by different groups of adherents, and were often united in competition with the Roman state's

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<sup>167</sup> Jas Elsner, "Cultural Resistance and the Visual Image: The Case of Dura Europos," in *Classical Philology*, Vol. 96, No. 3, (The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 282.

<sup>168</sup> Jas Elsner, "Archaeologies and Agendas: Reflections on Late Ancient Jewish Art and Early Christian Art," in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 93, (Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 2003), p. 119.

<sup>169</sup> Karen B. Stern, "Mapping Devotion in Roman Dura Europos: A Reconsideration of the Synagogue Ceiling," in *American Journal of Archeology*, Vol. 114, No. 3, (Archeological Institute of America, July 2010), p. 501.

increasing tendency towards establishing its own religious universalism in the third century.<sup>170</sup>

Centuries of migration made the Jewish people highly adaptable. Perhaps these images were a sort of concession to the Empire, or perhaps they were a means of adapting elements from neighboring religions that they felt less distasteful to their own views.

The Dura synagogue then was a blend of ideas that fit in neatly among its neighbors. Both its design and artistic interpretations were of the norm among the other synagogues in the city. The question remains of what aspects of Judaism endorsed this relatively unique place of worship. The prevalent theory is that it took on such a fashionable design as a means of competing with other religions in the community. We have seen that the rabbis had a limited and informal influence over the synagogue and its congregation. But there is little we can say for certain about the everyday Jew. The religion of ordinary Jews left only a few, mostly negative remains in Talmudic sources. The rabbinical elite preserved the religion of the common folk only by criticizing it.<sup>171</sup> Still, Dura was a cosmopolitan city in a useful location for trade. At the same time, we should be careful not to fall into the trap of being led so far by the surviving objects in Dura, that we risk being misled in the absence of all the range of materials now lost elsewhere.<sup>172</sup> Regardless of whether or not the rabbis approved of or merely accepted the presence of this blasphemous synagogue, its existence is additional proof that not only were the Jewish people of Late Antiquity more extroverted and incorporated in to public society, but they were actively aware and participating in their religious practices, while infusing them with their

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<sup>170</sup> Jas Elsner, "Archaeologies and Agendas: Reflections on Late Ancient Jewish Art and Early Christian Art," in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 93, (Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 2003), p. 127.

<sup>171</sup> Jacob Neusner, *The History of the Jews in Babylonia: Part 4 The Age of Shapur II*, (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 434.

<sup>172</sup> Jas Elsner, "Archaeologies and Agendas: Reflections on Late Ancient Jewish Art and Early Christian Art," in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 93, (Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 2003), p.123.

own elements in ways that would allow them to preserve their identities while also allowing for the inevitable changes they would face in the post-Second Temple Period. There is still much to explore in how these Jewish communities differed and which of these external elements influenced Judaism in the modern day, and to what extent.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS AND THE IMPACT OF EXTERNAL CULTURES ON THE MYSTERIOUS COMMUNITY OF QUMRAN**

Now that I've laid down the ground work for some of the larger comparisons between early rabbinic Judaism and its external influences, I'd like to take a step back to shortly before the destruction of the Temple and examine the Dead Sea Sect at Qumran. These manuscripts have revolutionized our understanding of the world from which early rabbinic Judaism emerged and how diverse of a society it was, as opposed to the monolithic and uniform picture that was painted by sources such as Josephus or the New Testament. While the texts left behind by the sect reveal much, the followers themselves still remain somewhat of a perplexing topic to historians. It is with this in mind that I've chosen to leave the earliest subject matter for last, as I will be arguing not just for the influence of Zoroastrian culture on this Jewish community, but like the Dead Sea Sect, a branch of it that may have helped in its creation.

The first of what are today referred to as the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in a small cave around the Wadi Qumran near the Dead Sea by a Bedouin goat herder in 1947. The age of the scrolls were eventually tested via the flaxen material enshrouding the parchments by a scholar who established that the scroll covers may date from as early as 168 BCE and no later than 233 CE, with the scrolls themselves potentially being even older.<sup>173</sup> This date made the Dead Sea Scrolls the oldest texts of the Hebrew Scriptures in the world. Up until this time, the earliest copies of the Bible dated only to the Middle Ages, about 1,000 CE.<sup>174</sup> The emergence of these scrolls led to an explosive hunt for more ancient material within the caves near Qumran

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<sup>173</sup> Kenneth Hanson, *Dead Sea Scrolls: The Untold Story*, Council Oak Books, 2004), 23.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

and the end result was a number of nearly intact scrolls, but also thousands of parchment and papyrus fragments. Some of the contents of these texts are:

- A partial text of the book of Isaiah (the Hebrew prophet), written by the hand of a Jewish scribe some two centuries before the birth of Jesus;
- Another scroll of the book of Isaiah, some twenty-four feet in length and virtually entire and complete, containing all sixty-six chapters;
- A manual of rules for membership in an exclusive Jewish religious order, most likely the order which wrote the scrolls;
- A clever reworking of the book of Genesis, the so-called Genesis Apocryphon, containing many previously unknown expansions on the Biblical account;
- A letter, apparently written by the founder of the ancient sect that lived there;
- Previously unknown commentaries on the Biblical books of Isaiah, Psalms, Hosea, Nahum, and Habakkuk;
- A previously unknown commentary on the small and often overlooked Biblical prophet, Habakkuk, unknown until its discovery in 1948;
- A collection of non-Biblical psalms which look and sound like psalms from the Bible, but which had never been seen by modern eyes until their discovery in 1947;
- A strange document describing an apocalyptic battle heralding the “end of the world” – a war scroll.<sup>175</sup>

The authors of these scrolls and the unique community they seem to have formed has been a subject of great debate. Upon their initial discovery, the language they were written in, and thus their potential value, was unknown. When E. L. Sukenik was brought a few and discovered that they were in Hebrew, he purchased them immediately. Sukenik published in 1948 that one of the scrolls clearly offered a kind of book of regulations for the conduct of members of a brotherhood or sect. He hypothesized that this sect was that of the Essenes, who resided on the

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 20, 22, 28.



western side of the Dead Sea, in the vicinity of En Gedi, according to Pliny the Elder. This was the birth of the Qumran Essene hypothesis, the most popular suggestion as to who the Dead Sea sect were made up of.<sup>176</sup> Cross, one of the earliest scholars given access to the scrolls, published his findings in 1958 in “The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies,” where he spoke of the newfound existence of multiple versions of Hebrew books such as Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Kings. The uniformity of later medieval Hebrew manuscripts in fact dated back to careful revisions from early first century CE rabbis.<sup>177</sup> Sukenik’s Essene hypothesis was expounded on by Cross, as well as Milik in 1959 and Vermes in 1994, but it has not been without its detractors.

Due to delays in their publication, the scrolls were not largely available to the public until the 1990s. By then, scholars were looking at the scrolls from different angles. Golb for example, argued that the strategic location of Khirbet Qumran, its massive defense tower, the highly developed water system, and the evidence of a siege and pitched battle between Romans and Jews somewhere around 70 CE, were all evidence that the scrolls originated in Jerusalem and were taken to the desert for hiding.<sup>178</sup> Collins noted in 2010 that the Damascus Document, refers explicitly to people who live in ‘camps’ throughout the land, and who marry and have children. Furthermore, The Community Rule states that wherever there are ten members of the *yahad* there should be a priest, implying that the *yahad* was not one settlement, but rather an

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<sup>176</sup> Hartmut Stegemann, “The Qumran Essenes – Local Members of the Main Jewish Union in Late Second Temple Times,” in *The Madrid Qumran Congress: Proceedings of the International Congress on the Dead Sea Scrolls – Madrid 18-21 March, 1991*, edited by Julio Treballe Barrera and Luis Vegas Montaner, Vol. 1, (Brill, 1992), 84.

<sup>177</sup> Frank Moore Cross, *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies*, (Sheffield Academic Press, 1958), 125.

<sup>178</sup> Norman Golb, *Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls? The Search for the Secret of Qumran*, (Scribner, 1995), 33.

association made up of multiple communities.<sup>179</sup> A more specific theory came from VanderKam building off of the work of Boccaccini, who argued that while the sect contains elements from the Essenes, we should move beyond that and consider looking at them, at least in their earlier phase, as a splinter movement from a sect some scholars call Enochic Judaism, as the apocalyptic writings from the Book of Enoch found within the caves show little similarity to the classical accounts of the Essenes.<sup>180</sup>

Another issue that has muddied the waters of identifying the Dead Sea Sect is that of Gnosticism. Gnosticism refers to a specific group of mystical sects and movements between the late first century CE and the thirteenth, sects and movements which had different ideologies, symbolisms, and religious views, with very few, if any, characteristics common to them all. In all its many definitions the typological concept of Gnosticism always includes the dualistic concept of the divine world and the existence of an evil power which is the governor, and often the creator of the universe.<sup>181</sup> The study of a specifically Jewish form of Gnosticism dates back as early as 1898 when Friedlander proposed the existence of a pre-Christian Jewish Gnosticism based in antinomian circles Alexandria. These circles were made up of Jews whose interpretation of Scripture resulted from “Hellenization of Judaism in the Diaspora,” that is, from the effect of pagan contamination on Judaism.<sup>182</sup> However, while Gnosticism may potentially have its roots in Judaism, it is questionable whether any purely Jewish Gnostic texts exist. One

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<sup>179</sup> John Collins, *Beyond the Qumran Community: The Sectarian Movement of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 25.

<sup>180</sup> James VanderKam and Peter Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Their Significance for Understanding the Bible, Judaism, Jesus, and Christianity*, (T&T Clark International, 2002), 196.

<sup>181</sup> Joseph Dan, “Jewish Gnosticism?” in *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 2 No. 4, (Mohr Siebeck GmbH & Co. KG, 1995), 316-17.

<sup>182</sup> Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?*, (Harvard University Press, 2005), 175.

of the strongest cases for said type of text is *The Apocalypse of Adam*, which details a story the biblical Adam told his son Seth.

“When God had created me out of the earth, along with Eve, your mother...She taught me a word of knowledge of the eternal God. And we resembled the great eternal angels, for we were higher than the god who had created us and the powers with him, whom we did not know. Then God, the ruler of the aeons and the powers, divided us in wrath... Then we recognized the God who had created us. For we were not strangers to his powers. And we served him in fear and slavery...Then the God who created us, created a son from himself and Eve, your mother. Then the vigor of our eternal knowledge was destroyed in us, and weakness pursued us. Therefore the days of our life became few. For I knew that I had come under the authority of death.”<sup>183</sup>

However, later in the story Adam tells of a “great illuminator of knowledge” who will scorn the god of the powers and perform signs and wonders. He will make a generation of great men who will shine upon the whole Aeon.<sup>184</sup> King states that the illuminator is often seen by scholars as a Christ figure, and so even *The Apocalypse of Adam* can be seen through a Christian context and not only a Jewish one.<sup>185</sup> Pearson has gone so far as to claim that Gnosticism is not essentially Jewish, not even as Jewish heresy:

The Gnostic attitude to Judaism, in short, is one of alienation and revolt, and though the Gnostic hermeneutic can be characterized in general as a revolutionary attitude vis-à-vis established traditions, the attitude exemplified in the Gnostic texts, taken together with the massive utilization of Jewish traditions, can in my view only be interpreted historically as expressing a movement of Jews away from their own traditions as part of a process of religious self-redefinition. The Gnostics, at least in the earliest stages of the history of the Gnostic movement, who can aptly be designated as “no longer Jews.”<sup>186</sup>

When speaking of the community at Qumran the question isn’t necessarily whether the people were Gnostics in the strictest sense. Rather it is whether they belonged to the movement or shared similar tendencies. Burrows says that the first and most essential of the characteristic

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<sup>183</sup> *Apoc. Adam* V 64 1-30, 65 1-20

<sup>184</sup> *Apoc. Adam* V 76 10, 77 1-10, 83 1-5

<sup>185</sup> Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?*, (Harvard University Press, 2005), 176.

<sup>186</sup> Birger A. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, (Fortress Press, 1990), 130.

features of Gnosticism is the conception of salvation by knowledge, not achieved by learning but received by mystical illumination, either through lonely contemplation or through participation in sacramental rites, though an element of instruction is involved also.<sup>187</sup> There is a strong emphasis on knowledge within the scrolls. However, knowledge is not the way of salvation according to them. "Knowledge of the law is important, because only by obedience to the law can judgment be averted. Knowledge of prophecy is important for comfort and encouragement to persevere in obedience. Knowledge of God's mysteries induces praise of and humble dependence upon God. But knowledge has no saving power in itself; it is not the immediate vehicle of deliverance. It is rather the answer to the question, "What must I do that I may inherit eternal life?"<sup>188</sup> Nor does Burrows see the Gnostic idea of dualism as compatible with the scrolls. The dualism of the Dead Sea Scrolls is that of good and evil while that of Gnosticism is spirit and matter. The Gnostic conception of reality is seen as pure spirit, uncontaminated by matter. The spiritual world of reality is often referred to in terms of light, the material world of delusion in terms of darkness. So while the dualism is there, to call the ideas in the Dead Sea Scrolls Gnostic is, according to Burrows, to stretch the term until it loses all specific meaning.<sup>189</sup>

There is unfortunately a lack of evidence that has made proposing alternatives such as VanderKam's difficult. Joan Taylor published an extensive account of references to the Essenes in 2007, noting that while there are problems with identifying them as the definitive Dead Sea Sect, we lack in Second Temple Judaism an array of highly educated Jewish schools from which to choose, and the Essenes were the only people we know of during this period who demonstrate

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<sup>187</sup> Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, (Secker & Warburg, 1955), 253.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 257-58.

the kinds of concerns and lifestyle reflected in the books from Qumran.<sup>190</sup> So while a number of modern scholars have debated the overgeneralization of attributing the Scrolls simply to the Essenes, instead of exploring the complexity of Jewish thought, Essenism is still commonly argued to be the parent movement of the Dead Sea sect.<sup>191</sup>

The Essenes were a sect that flourished during the Second Temple Period, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, although not in as large of numbers. Josephus describes them in great detail. They have a great affection for one another, see conquest over passion as a virtue, have two orders that differ on whether or not marriage is permitted, despise riches or having more than another, do not call any one place their home, are extremely pious, and are very scrutinous about allowing new members. The Essenes also believe that bodies are corruptible and the soul is immortal, as well as in divination.<sup>192</sup> Pliny describes them as being weary of life, and while a celibate people, eternal in that others dissatisfied with their existence continue to join them.<sup>193</sup> Philo states that they are taught what is naturally good and bad, right and wrong, and stick to a strict adherence to the principle of looking towards their Deity as the cause of everything which is good and nothing of which is evil.<sup>194</sup> It is the dualistic nature of this sect that I wish to focus on in this chapter.

To reiterate, mystic dualism is an idea profoundly rooted in Zoroastrianism. Jews lived for about two centuries under Persian rule, so the development of postbiblical Judaism built with an

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<sup>190</sup> Joan Taylor, "Philo of Alexandria on the Essenes: A Case Study of the Use of Classical Sources in Discussions of the Qumran-Essene Hypothesis," in *Studia Philonica Annual* 19, (2007), 18.

<sup>191</sup> Gabriele Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis: The Parting of Ways between Qumran and Enochic Judaism*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998) 6.

<sup>192</sup> *The Complete Works of Josephus*, translated by William Whiston, (Kregel Publications, 1970), 615-17.

<sup>193</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History: A Selection*, translated by John F. Healy, (Penguin Books, 2004), Book 5.73

<sup>194</sup> Philo, *The Works of Philo*, translated by C. D. Yonge (Hendrickson, 1993), 12.81-84.

Iranian influence is, at least in theory, an easy connection to make. Writing about rewards and punishments, heaven and hell, Zaehner says that "the similarities are so great and the historical context so neatly apposite that it would be carrying skepticism altogether too far to refuse to draw the obvious conclusion."<sup>195</sup> This idea also depends on the confidence that the development known in the later Old Testament and in Judaism is not intelligible except on the basis of external influences. Kuhn demonstrates this by lining up the marked similarities between Iranian texts and the Dead Sea Scrolls and then arguing that the conceptions shared by the two could not possibly have developed out of the earlier Old Testament religion. He indicates the differences and thus, as he sees it, shows how these conceptions, borrowed from Iran, were developed in a peculiarly Jewish way.<sup>196</sup> Barr argues that our biggest limitations with connecting Zoroastrianism to Judaism are mechanism and motivation, meaning, what was the mechanism through which Iranian religious influence worked upon the Jews, and what was the motivation that led Jews to suppose that Iranian religion and its categories had something positive to offer them?<sup>197</sup> He attempts to answer these questions by looking back to the liberal acts of King Cyrus and his warm treatment towards the Jews, noted in 2 Chronicles and 2 Isaiah where Cyrus is hailed as a liberator and even the Messiah. This may have given the Jews warm feelings towards the Persians and made them more receptive to Zoroastrian influences.<sup>198</sup>

Our first document of interest is what is referred to as "The War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness," or "The War Scroll" for short. Found in Cave 1 of Qumran in 1947, the

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<sup>195</sup> R. C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961), 57.

<sup>196</sup> K. G. Kuhn, "The Sectarian Writing and the Iranian Religion," in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, Vol. 49, No. 3, (Mohr Siebeck GmbH & Co. KG, 1952), 309-10.

<sup>197</sup> James Barr, "The Question of Religious Influence: The Case of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 53, No. 2, (Oxford University Press, 1985), 206.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

War Scroll is a manual for military organization that will help the faithful Sons of Light win against the Sons of Darkness, also known as the Kittim, in a forty year war at the end of time. Based on the type of weapons and other military terminology used in the scroll, Yadin dates it to the second half of the first century BCE.<sup>199</sup>

The Sons of Light are stated to not only be waging war against the wicked Kittim, but also a being called Belial. Belial is a Hebrew word translating literally to “without use” and is often used in reference to idolaters in the Hebrew Bible. But within the context of the War Scroll, he is elevated to the position of a wicked god that leads the sons of darkness, which include the Israelites’ ancient enemies of Moab, Edom, Ammon, and the Philistines, as well as their more recent enemies, the Kittim, who are oftentimes argued to be the Romans.<sup>200</sup> The apocalyptic narrative here echoes that of the Zoroastrian story of the two twins, the malevolent spirit Angra Mainyu and the benevolent spirit Ahura Mazda, written in the Gathas. I mentioned in chapter one the good versus evil conflict between these two beings. Bruce spoke of this dualism in both the Community Rule, and the War Scroll:

In 1QS iii 18-iv 26 we have the well-known passage about the two spirits who between them have received all mankind as their lot. The one is the spirit of truth, of light, of holiness; the other is the spirit of falsehood, of darkness, of impurity. To this last idea there are certainly parallels in Qumran thought, but hardly in the passage where the two spirits are contrasted. To this passage there is a notable parallel in the War scroll, where the priests, Levites and elders bless God and curse Satan, expressing their gratitude to God for appointing the Prince of Light to come to their support against the Angel of Hostility who governs the realm of darkness and is destined for the Pit (1 QM xiii 1 ff.).<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Yigael Yadin, *The Scroll of the War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness*, (Oxford University Press, 1962), 245.

<sup>200</sup> Alexander Bolotnikov, “The Theme of Apocalyptic War in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 2, (Andrews University Press, 2005), 262; 264.

<sup>201</sup> F. F. Bruce, “Holy Spirit in the Qumran Texts,” in *Annual of Leeds University Oriental Society* 6, (1966/68), 51.

There is an important element that separates the Dead Sea Sect's theology from that of Zoroastrianism however, and for that we need to return to The Community Rule just previously mentioned. This scroll, found in Cave 1 in 1947 like the War Scroll, is a sectarian work that details the Essene's way of life in Qumran. It deals with how they admit new members, how they should behave, and some of their theological doctrines. As Bruce pointed out, said theology contains dualistic elements. Winston points out three specific characteristics of this dualism. It moves within a monotheistic framework, it is predestinarian, and it uses the imagery of light and darkness.<sup>202</sup> When describing the Essenes, Josephus states that they affirm that fate governs all things, and that nothing befalls men but what is according to its determination.<sup>203</sup> Another notable example of this can be found in 4Qsap A, known as a wisdom text. In it, a sage is admonished three times to recognize the mystery of becoming, the wickedness of the people and the corresponding plagues, and the deeds and creations of God. With this knowledge the sage will learn truth and wickedness, be able to distinguish good from evil, and know the Glory of God and his mysteries. Understanding and knowledge is possible for the sage on the basis of a dualistic order of the world. Furthermore, the sapiental order of the world can only be known because God revealed it in the form of the Torah via Enosh, the son of Seth.<sup>204</sup> Predestination, however, is not an element found in the Gathas. It is however an element found in a branch of Zoroastrianism called Zurvanism.

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<sup>202</sup> David Winston, "The Iranian Component in the Bible, Apocrypha, and Qumran: A Review of the Evidence," in *History of Religions*, Vol. 5, No. 2, (The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 202.

<sup>203</sup> *The Complete Works of Josephus*, translated by William Whiston, (Kregel Publications, 1970), 429.

<sup>204</sup> Armin Lange, "Wisdom and Predestination in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Dead Sea Discoveries*, Vol. 2, No. 3, (Brill, Nov. 1995), 341-343.



Our only surviving original Zurvanite text is the Ulema-i Islam. Translated a number of times since 1831, Zaehner attempted to piece the creation narrative together. Zurvan is the god of time. All other things were created except for it. Following the creation of fire and water came Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu, Ahura Mazda saw Angra Mainyu as its enemy that must be destroyed and began the work of creation with the aid of Zurvan to that end.<sup>205</sup> Orthodox Zoroastrianism, or Mazdeism, was clear in its opposition to this. Fate and effort on man's part each have their proper part to play. The golden mean between fate and purposeful action must be found; for the man who puts his trust exclusively in fate makes himself contemptible, and he who continually exerts himself and makes efforts and denies fate and destiny, is a fool and puffed up with pride.<sup>206</sup> The Zurvanite doctrine, however, states good things which have not been fated cannot be acquired; but if fated, they always come if an effort is made. Effort, if it is not favored by Time, is fruitless on Earth, but later, in the spiritual world, it comes to our aid and increases in the balance.<sup>207</sup> To relate this back to Qumran there is a battle destined between the forces of good and evil outlined in the War Scroll. The Essenes argued that certain individuals were assigned to the lot of evil at the time of their creation. In the Community Rule (3:15-17), the Thanksgiving Hymns (9:7-34), and the Damascus Rule (2:7-10) we see they posited that the entire course of world history and individual action has been predetermined by God, and is impervious to change by human action. Even in the sense of free will where one converted from the Sons of Darkness to the Sons of Light, this was already preordained by God.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> R. C. Zaehner, *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma*, (Biblo and Tannen, 1972), 410.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 255-56.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>208</sup> Alex P. Jassen, "Religion in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Religion Compass Vol. 1 No. 1*, (University of Minnesota, 2007), 11.

The study of Zurvanism has conflicting views on its origins and areas of influence, but it has been argued that Zurvan is an ancient Iranian god, whose cult, older than Zoroaster, has been partly adopted into, and partly obliterated by, orthodox Mazdeism. Its focus on time, numbers, and years, is the outcome of contact between Zoroastrianism and the Babylonian civilization, and it may have originated in the second half of the Achaemenian period.<sup>209</sup> Its influence waxed and waned from this period through the Sassanian. We don't know the relationship between Zurvanism and Mazdeism, but Manichaean evidence suggests that in the third century CE, Zurvanism was dominant in the south-west of the Empire and Mazdeism among the Parthians in the east, leading to the probability that Zoroastrianism was strongest in areas near Zoroaster's supposed homeland, and farthest in areas of Babylonian and Greek influence.<sup>210</sup>

It is from here that we can begin to see where Zurvanism may have penetrated the Dead Sea Sect. It begins with the notion of eschatological judgment by fire. Zaehner connects this idea of fire used as judgment specifically to Zurvanism through Zatspram's writings, a ninth century CE scholar whose work is one of our few surviving proofs that Zurvanism existed. Zatspram claims that the final transfiguration of the world, its final ideal state known as Frashkart, is an image of the universe ablaze with the auroral light. Zaehner argues that the idea of fire absorbing the other elements before merging into the infinite is in fact Zurvan by nature as it is the directing force behind the four elements who are thus the terrestrial tetrad reflecting the tetrad of genesis, decay, rebirth, and the Infinite in eternity.<sup>211</sup> Winston takes a series of steps to

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<sup>209</sup> Mary Boyce, "Some Reflections on Zurvanism," in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 19, No. 2, (Cambridge University Press on behalf of the School of Oriental and African Studies, 1957), 304.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 308-09.

<sup>211</sup> R. C. Zaehner, *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma*, (Biblo and Tannen, 1972), 227-28.

make the connection of fire between Zurvanism and Qumran. He begins by looking at the Thanksgiving Hymns (3.27-32,) which claim that when judgment is at hand, the torrents of Belial will overflow like a devouring fire, wandering about with flaming flashes, and the foundations of the mountains shall become ablaze with fire. This, he claims, is Iranian in origin, as the Young Avesta speaks of glowing fire which will bring hurt to the wicked and benefit to the righteous. Winston argues that the Magi of Asia Minor transformed this idea found in the Young Avesta of fire as judgment into a cosmic catastrophe, perhaps under Zurvanite influence, and passed it on in this form to the Mithraic mysteries. The Babylonians then combined this notion with their doctrine of planetary cycles. It can then be seen transmitted to Greek myth via Dio Chrysostom's recounting of "The Song of the Magi" (Oratio 36) where he tells a story of Zeus driving a chariot whose horses set the whole cosmos ablaze. He then arrives at the Jews, where the Iranian-Babylonian ideas of world conflagration are seen in Philo (Vit Mos 2.3) and Josephus (Ant 2.3.1). Finally he arrives at the Essenes, arguing that the rites of Mithraism were well known in Eastern Asia Minor and the Zoroastrian character of the Essene faith may be due to a fresh migration of Jews to the Holy Land in the middle of the Second Century BCE.<sup>212</sup> The community at Qumran broke off from the other Jews of the diaspora for unknown reasons, but there seems to have been a predominant interest in new ideas regarding spirits, demons, and eschatology that Zoroastrianism and Zurvanism were already very familiar with. Whether the adoption was intentional or not may never be known, but the Iranian elements found in the Scrolls are at the very least worthy of a wider range of attention than they have received thus far.

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<sup>212</sup> David Winston, "The Iranian Component in the Bible, Apocrypha, and Qumran: A Review of the Evidence," in *History of Religions*, Vol. 5, No. 2, (The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 206-210.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The narrative in both academic and religious circles for decades was that Judaism was a unique religion. It was an organization that did not wish to rely on outsiders, and as “people of the book,” their scripture could be dated back thousands of years to Moses at Mt. Sinai. Modern scholarship has done an excellent job showing that Judaism did not in fact exist in a bubble, however. As Neusner said, there was never one Judaism, but many, and each of the religious texts require an independent eye that can examine its historical and cultural context. While they were often allowed a certain degree of autonomy, they still lived in a world surrounded and ruled by Hellenistic Polytheists, Zoroastrians, and Christians, and there were many who were not willing to shut themselves off from their neighbors for the sake of preserving a pure, singular form of Judaism that may never have existed to begin with.

Beginning with the first rabbi, Yohanan ben Zakkai, and his formation of a religious center at Yavne and the re-establishment of the Sanhedrin court, the seeds were planted for an updated form of Judaism that became necessary after the fall of its central institution, the Second Temple. The Talmud became the new focal point as rabbis argued and debated how to transcribe their oral laws and apply them to their current living situations. Following multiple failed revolts and the expulsion of the Jews from Jerusalem under Hadrian, Judaism began to migrate more towards Mesopotamia where Talmudic academies sprung up all along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers by the sixth century CE. These academies were a place where new ideas could freely be exchanged. The synagogue would come to serve a similar role, which rose to prominence in the fourth century CE and served as a hub for the lay people. With the lack of a strong, central, authority to keep Judaism somewhat organized, they were left with diverse and scattered groups

of Jews that were more receptive to outside influences. In order to maintain any semblance of structure, the rabbis needed to adapt. What was previously seen as heretical would at times be begrudgingly accepted. Thus, stories from Hellenistic religions would make their way onto the synagogue walls, magic was practiced more freely, and an expansive afterlife could be expected based on one's actions while alive.

It continues to be difficult to trace where and how this transmission of ideas moved. While the rabbis were forced to be more open-minded with their non-Jewish neighbors, they did not go so far as to give them direct credit. They were still referred to as *minim* (heretics) throughout the Talmud. We know as early as the sixth century BCE the Jews held a fondness for the Persian king, Cyrus the Great, and that rulers who did not force their ways on the Jews were less likely to receive animosity in return, but making the direct connection between Judaism and religions such as Zoroastrianism will continue to prove frustrating to historians. The limitation of sources continues to be an issue as well. Our primary source of information, the Babylonian Talmud, is certainly extensive in length and detail, with its 63 tractates and thousands of pages of stories and laws. But how trustworthy the tales within are is debatable. It is an ideal form of Judaism edited by hundreds of rabbis over hundreds of years. As Neusner said:

So far as history claims exactly to spell out events that happened at a particular place and time, the Talmud and the rest of the Rabbinic canon of late antiquity do not serve. They do not supply reliable historical information about once upon a time. Rabbinic documents contain stories about things that allegedly took place, which we cannot validate or invalidate. They record statements in the name of biblical and Rabbinic authorities, which we have no means of verifying or falsifying. They describe a social order, evidence for which we cannot locate in material records, and institutions the record or impact of which we cannot recover. The same sayings are given to two or more authorities, or a named authority may be given contradictory opinions.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Jacob Neusner, "From History to Hermeneutics: The Talmud as a Historical Source," in *Review of Rabbinic Judaism*, Vol. 11, No. 2, (BRILL, 2008), 200.

To supplement the issues that come with using the Talmud as a historical source, there is a strong need to focus more on the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and Dead Sea Scrolls literature with regards to the development of early rabbinic culture, even if their fragmented nature can oftentimes make them difficult to analyze.

It has been my aim within this work to draw a greater attention to a period of history that I believe has not received a sufficient amount due to the lack of primary sources at hand, as well as the small but growing field of study surrounding it, that of non-Jewish religions, particularly Zoroastrianism, on Judaism, specifically after the Second Temple's destruction. I have attempted to gather many of the leading arguments in one place to show that these are not just isolated examples, but ideas that were widely appealing during this time. The popular argument against said influence is that direct connections have yet to be made. It is my hope to contribute to the study of Judaism in late antiquity by showing enough similarities to, if not make a direct case for the influence of these external cultures, then at least invite further examination into the matter. Analyzing the Persian religious texts is not an easy job for a scholar of post Second Temple Judaism as it requires examining even more fragmented documents that are difficult to date, and which are in multiple Old Iranian languages. But the reward for the expansion of this field could potentially be a complete reshaping of our views on the early rabbis and the texts they wrote that continue to be read by Jews around the world to this day.

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