CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521772486 - The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period, Volume IV
Edited by Steven T. Katz
Excerpt
More information

INTRODUCTION

STEVEN T. KATZ

I

The present volume of *The Cambridge History of Judaism* covers the period from the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE to the rise of Islam in the beginning of the seventh century.[1] This era, after the biblical period, is the most consequential in Jewish history, for it is the era when Judaism took on its classical shape as a result of a variety of historical and religious factors, both internal and external. Coincident with the history of the Roman Empire from the early years of the reign of Vespasian to the death of the Byzantine Emperor Maurice in 602, it includes the response(s) of Jews to the cataclysm of 70; the failed Diaspora uprisings of 115–17 during the reign of Trajan; the catastrophic rebellion and defeat of Bar Kochba by the legions of Hadrian between 132 and 135; the ascent of Babylonian Jewry to pre-eminence in the Jewish world after *c.* 235[2] (the year that marked the end of the Severan dynasty of Roman emperors); the expansion of the influence of rabbinic culture and the composition of the great rabbinic corpora: the Mishnah, Tosefta, Palestinian Talmud, Babylonian Talmud, and a wide variety of midrashim (biblical commentaries); the early and growing conflict between Christianity and Judaism; and the eventual rise, after 325, of Christianity to world power as a result of the efforts of Constantine and his imperial heirs,[3] a circumstance that, in turn, produced devastating consequences for Jews and the practice of Judaism in both halves of the Empire.[4]

[1] Muhammad died in 632. His successor Omar I conquered Jerusalem in 638. By 644 the Islamic Empire controlled much of what had been the Byzantine and Persian Empires.

[2] This, of course, is a backwards-looking judgment. At the time, it was not evident to the Jews in Palestine or elsewhere – or even in Babylonia – that such a transition would occur.

[3] Constantine made Christianity a "licit" religion within the Empire in 325 and died in 337. Among his heirs, the two who did the most to alter and undermine the status of Jews in the Empire were the Byzantine Emperors Theodosius II, who reigned from 408 to 450, and Justinian, who reigned from 527 to 565.

[4] The Roman Empire was divided into two parts after the death of Theodosius I in 395. The eastern branch of the Empire was centered in Constantinople, and the western branch in Rome.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521772486 - The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period, Volume IV
Edited by Steven T. Katz
Excerpt
More information

This was also a time when Jews continued to speak and write[5] in Hebrew and Aramaic; when they shaped, out of earlier beginnings, the synagogue liturgy and began to create a new form of religious poetry for the synagogue (*pyyutim*); when they continued to produce Aramaic translations of the Bible (the *Targums*; in Hebrew *targumim*); when they built magnificent as well as less grand synagogues in the Land of Israel and throughout the Diaspora; when their popular culture continued to evolve at home, in the synagogue, and in the academy; when they engaged in magic and mysticism, celebrated the holidays, and hoped for the coming of the Messiah to mark the end of their exile.

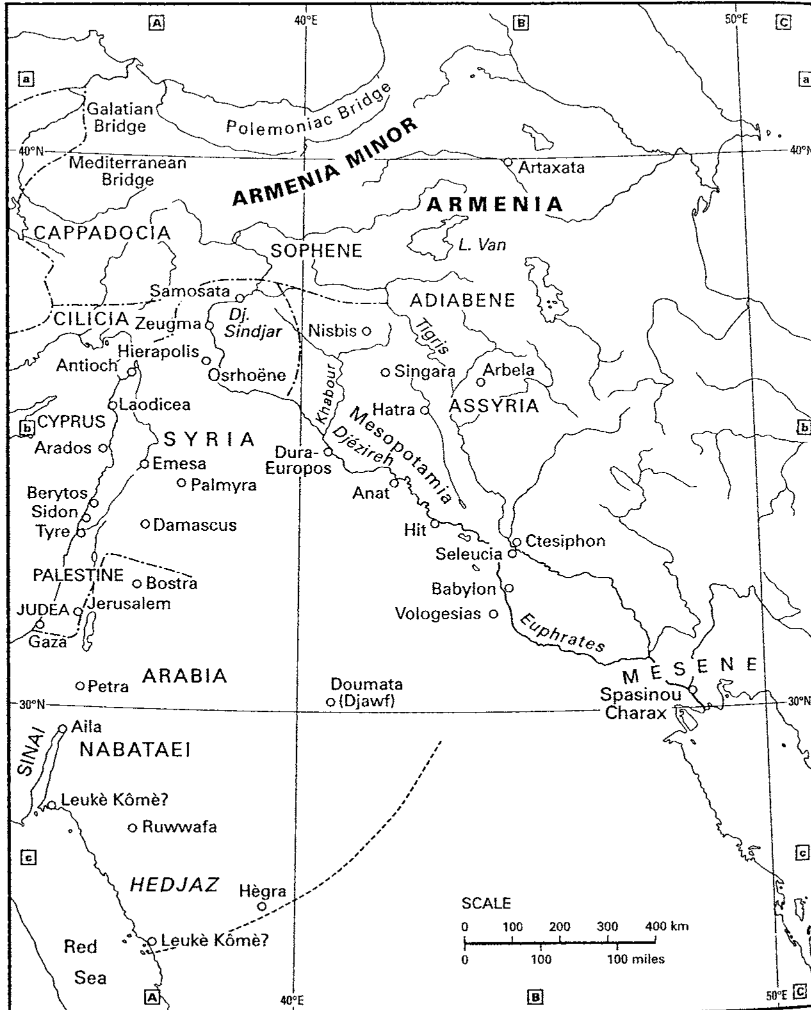
The first eight essays of this volume provide a historical context for these repercussive developments. The first contribution, by Seth Schwartz, offers a detailed review of the political and social history of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel between 70 and 135. Schwartz's study indicates the degree to which Rome controlled events and transformed Palestine – politically, economically and culturally – into a typical eastern province of the Empire, run by Roman governors and bureaucrats and secured by Roman soldiers. It makes the striking and fundamental point that in contradistinction to the historical reconstruction of events suggested by more traditional (and pious) historiography, rabbinic authority was still very limited in this period. Schwartz's study is followed by essays by Alan Kerkeslager, Claudia Setzer, Paul Trebilco, and David Goodblatt, which decipher the Jewish situation that then existed in the Diaspora. Kerkeslager focuses on the oppressive conditions in which Jews lived in Egypt and Cyrenaica following the defeat of 70; conditions that contributed to fomenting the uprising of 116–17 and a second great defeat for Jewish forces. In both Egypt and Cyrenaica the Jewish communities were almost completely destroyed as a result of this second round of conflict. Setzer gathers together and interprets the relatively sparse evidence, drawn from inscriptions, archaeological remains, rabbinic sources, and Christian North African writers, that depict communal life in Carthage and Western North Africa. These sources suggest that Jewish life in Carthage and its environs probably began in the late first century and continued uninterruptedly thereafter, and that Jews were little distinguished in their lifestyles except for matters of religious ritual. They do not appear to have been a political or economic force of any particular consequence. Nor is there evidence of any special animus towards them other than that displayed by the early Christian writer Tertullian. Trebilco summarizes what we know about the Jews of Asia Minor, especially in Sardis, Prienne, and Smyrna. He

[5] The relevant evidence suggests that relatively few Jews could write. Those who could wrote in Hebrew and Aramaic as well as Greek.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521772486 - The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period, Volume IV
Edited by Steven T. Katz
Excerpt
More information



Map B The Roman East in the second century

reviews the considerable extent of Jewish participation in the general cultural and political life of the region, and the essentially cordial relations obtaining between Jews and their neighbors for long stretches of time. This circumstance may well account for their lack of participation in the revolts of 66–70 and 115–17. For Babylonia, the data is sparse. David Goodblatt, reviewing what evidence does exist, reflects on the political alliances that the Jewish community forged with the ruling dynasty, the shape of Jewish

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521772486 - The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period, Volume IV
Edited by Steven T. Katz
Excerpt
More information

self-government, and the influence of Palestinian Judaism on the Babylonian Jewish community.

Against this broad background, Miriam Pucci Ben Zeev reconstructs the history of the failed Diaspora insurrections under Trajan and Hadrian between 115 and 117. She makes the important observation that the causes of the revolts of 115–17 were multiple. Jews revolted as an expression of their resistance to Roman hegemony, as a response to negative local conditions, and as a consequence of the animus of their neighbors. Jews in many places took up arms against Rome and its vassals and Ben Zeev provides an incisive assessment of their successes and failures. Next, Hanan Eshel examines the devastating Bar Kochba Revolt. Eshel, on the basis of the limited available evidence, reviews the causes, military preparations, leadership, and administration of the Bar Kochba Revolt in order to explain the course of the war from the early Jewish victories in 132 to the final defeat in 135. He emphasizes that, contrary to much previous scholarship, Bar Kochba never conquered Jerusalem. Still, the Romans saw the insurgency as a major threat and utilized close to 50,000 Roman soldiers to suppress the revolt. At its conclusion, the Romans issued a series of edicts aimed at uprooting the rebellious proclivities of the Jewish people that had led to two major revolts in seventy years.[6] Then Amnon Linder considers the fundamental issue of Jewish legal status in the later Roman Empire. He is careful to point to the influence of both Jewish and non-Jewish legal traditions in establishing the situation of the Jews, a situation that began to decline with the defeat of 70 and deteriorated further under the Christian Roman emperors of the fourth and later centuries because of Christian theological dogmas that fueled an antipathy towards Judaism and things Jewish.

Complementing these essays, Eric Meyers's chapter takes up the challenging issue of the artistic and architectural creativity of the Jewish people in the period between 70 and *c.* 235. An understanding of this sort of productivity broadens our conception of Judaism drawn from literary sources, and supports the asking of a whole series of pertinent questions about what "Judaism" meant in this era. For example, pagan themes on Jewish sarcophagi from Beth Shearim, and the figure of Dionysius on a floor

[6] There is still considerable dispute among scholars about just how many edicts were issued by Rome in the aftermath of the war and what their contents and purpose were. For a new appraisal of this topic see R. Kalmin, "Rabbinic Traditions about Roman Persecutions of the Jews: A Reconsideration," *JJS* 54/1 (Spring 2003), 21–50. Earlier studies of importance of this topic are P. Schäfer, *Der Bar Kokba-Aufstand: Studien zum Zweiten Jüdische Krieg Gegen Rom* (Tübingen, 1981); and M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule* (Leiden, 1976), 421–7.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521772486 - The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period, Volume IV
Edited by Steven T. Katz
Excerpt
More information

in a Jewish home in Sepphoris, provide evidence of and for a porous Judaism in which non-Jewish sources and visual images made a regular appearance. In opposition to an older scholarly and religious view that pictured a Judaism increasingly isolated after 70, both by choice and by circumstance, from the Hellenistic-Roman culture that surrounded it, this material evidence indicates how Roman Jewish life had become. And if this was the case, then the evaluation of the phenomenon of cultural borrowings, the analysis of the issue of religious (and cultural) assimilation, the meaning of "acculturation" in this context, and the decipherment of the elusive topic of syncretism, are all issues that once again require fresh examination. Moreover, the evidence presented here, along with that analyzed by Lee Levine for the period after *c.* 235 in chapter 20 below, forces us to reconsider the very nature of Jewish views of iconographic representation, that is, the range, limits, and meaning of "images" used by Jews in the Roman era.

What now follows in the next nine contributions is, with one exception (the essay by Moshe Bar Asher on Mishnaic Hebrew), a series of erudite essays on Jewish religious activity in the tannaitic period (i.e., 70 to *c.* 235), as this was manifest primarily in and through a number of rabbinic compositions. The first of these studies, by Robert Goldenberg, describes the Jewish theological responses to the loss of the Temple. Goldenberg knowledgeably explains the traumatic impact of the Temple's loss and the effort by the various Jewish groups of the day to explain how and why this loss occurred, both by recycling and by innovating theological positions. In particular, he pays close attention to rabbinic attitudes and the capacity of the rabbis to foster a religious system that provided a meaningful explanation and justification for continuing Jewish life despite national calamity. This discussion of rabbinic thought and influence is then extended by Hayim Lapin in his careful exploration of the historical and religious role of the Rabbis in the period after 70. He reconsiders and re-evaluates the traditions about Yavneh and the Patriarchate and the stages leading up to the redaction of the Mishnah. He also considers the cultural, social, and theological attributes of the Rabbis as a distinctive group of religious experts who existed, in the main, without official political authority and "possibly little popular appeal." What Lapin's minimalist reading does, along with the earlier argument of Seth Schwartz and the argument of David Goodblatt about the Sages in Palestine after *c.* 235 (in ch. 16 below), is support the need for a thorough reappraisal of the inherited historical understanding of the Rabbis and the influence of rabbinic Judaism that was developed in the scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (One thinks here, for example, of the work of Heinrich Graetz, Solomon Schechter, George Foot Moore, Louis Finkelstein, Solomon Zeitlin, Gedaliah Alon, and Ephraim Urbach.)

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521772486 - The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period, Volume IV
Edited by Steven T. Katz
Excerpt
More information

In the next three essays, by James Sanders, Peter Richardson, and Steven Katz, the categories of history and theology intersect in consequential ways. In the first of these, James Sanders takes up the subject of the final canonization of the Hebrew Bible in the period after 70. At this exceptional moment, in the aftermath of the loss of the Temple, confronted by an increasingly difficult political and religious circumstance, with an ever larger and more far-flung Diaspora, history had created the need for Jews finally to agree on what scriptures would be authoritative. As Sanders shows, this was a complex and contentious matter, with an already long history, about which it was difficult to reach a final consensus, though this was eventually achieved. History had also created a new theological and sociological circumstance, the rise of a sub-group of Jews (and others) who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was, at a minimum, the awaited Messiah of Israel. This belief put them at odds with the great majority of their Jewish co-religionists and began to engender the polemics that have defined Jewish–Christian relations for most of the past two millennia. Both Jews and Jewish (and other) Christians contributed to this growing schism. To help readers understand what was at issue in this theological confrontation, Peter Richardson reviews the early grounds of this conflict from the Christian side and Steven Katz examines the response of the Rabbis to the perceived danger of Christianity. Both authors emphasize that the full development of the animus between the two communities involved a more gradual process than is often thought, while Richardson stresses that there was considerable diversity within the early Christian view of Jews and Judaism and that the texts produced by the different Christian groups and authors reflected this diversity.

As fateful as the unprecedented encounter with Christianity would prove, it was internal Jewish developments, especially the production of the great rabbinic corpora, that would most profoundly affect the evolution of Judaism and the ongoing existence of the Jewish People. David Kraemer begins to introduce this rabbinic material by providing a helpful summary of the main features of the Mishnah, the first major compilation of rabbinic legal material that was redacted *c.* 200 by Judah Ha-Nasi ("the Prince") in Tiberias. This innovative and unusual collection, organized by subject matter rather than as a commentary on the Torah, and written in a new form of Hebrew, became the key text – mediated by the commentary provided by the two Talmuds – in all future Jewish halachic (religious-legal) discussion. A second collection of legal material, known as the Tosefta, literally meaning "Supplement," and produced, in the main, by the same Palestinian sages (the Tannaim), though edited in its present form after the close of the Mishnah somewhere between the mid-third and fourth centuries, is also historically significant, though it lacks the legal

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521772486 - The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period, Volume IV
Edited by Steven T. Katz
Excerpt
More information

importance of the Mishnah. The character of this less well known collection and its relation to the Mishnah, which it parallels in content and structure, is well described by Paul Mandel. This discussion of rabbinic sources is complemented by Jay Harris's analysis of the early halachic commentaries on scripture known as *midreshei halachah*. The main texts that comprise this body of material, all of which cite Palestinian sages of the tannaitic period, constitute a running commentary on the biblical books from Exodus to Deuteronomy. The value of this essay, in addition to its acute analysis of the textual and technical issues that arise in connection with study of these sources, lies in the fact that it shows how scriptural interpretation was pivotal to Jewish spiritual-intellectual creativity in this period. The rabbinic sages were committed to a constructive theological and exegetical encounter with the Bible without being literalists.

Moshe Bar-Asher completes the review of the rabbinic sources with a penetrating analysis of mishnaic Hebrew or, as it is traditionally known, "the language of the Sages." This is the Hebrew of the Mishnah, Tosefta, and early midrashim. A living language in Palestine until about 200 CE, it remained one of the two languages of scholarly discourse, the other being Aramaic, which, after 200, became the primary spoken language of the Jewish people in Palestine and elsewhere, up to the Muslim invasion, when it was displaced by Arabic.

These essays on the various early rabbinic corpora reflect the current scholarly understanding of their purpose, composition, and influence. Although many fundamental questions about these texts remain the subject of ongoing debate, these studies, while acknowledging the scholarly controversies that surround these sources, begin to explain how and why these legal and more than legal collections – initially the products of a rabbinic elite – became the fundamental, shared, basis of nearly all subsequent Jewish behavior and thought. Rabbinic literature supplemented the biblical narrative in providing for Jews a sense of national destiny and mission which helped them survive the difficult, often burdensome conditions of exile. In the pages of the rabbinic texts the Sages created a sociologically viable, psychologically powerful, theologically comprehensive, and persuasive portable culture that could – and did – provide Judaism with meaning, however hostile the environment in which Jews found themselves.

In the next two essays, David Goodblatt and Joshua Schwartz provide extensive reviews of the political, social and material realities in the Land of Israel in the later era between 235 and the Islamic conquest of Palestine in the mid-630s. After considering the demographic evidence, which shows that in many locales the Jewish population remained quite numerous and robust up until the early seventh century, Goodblatt judiciously revisits the relations between the Jewish leadership and the Roman authorities, the

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521772486 - The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period, Volume IV
Edited by Steven T. Katz
Excerpt
More information

history of the institution of the Patriarch (Hebrew *Nasi*), and the leadership role of the rabbis in the Palestinian community. Like Seth Schwartz (ch. 1) and Hayim Lapin (ch. 8), he argues that the Rabbis lacked institutional power as late as the fourth century. Accordingly, he supports a revisionist, scholarly paradigm of the nature of Jewish collective and religious affairs in the late Roman era. Complementing the analysis of these theological and political matters, Joshua Schwartz offers a wide-ranging study of the material culture of the Jewish People in the rural and urban environments of the Land of Israel after 235. He helps us to picture the conditions of rural subsistence centered around agriculture, and the nature of urban social and economic activity with its markets and fairs. He explains the nature of contemporary houses, courtyards, household utensils, roads, crops, farming instruments, and the city bathhouse. Thus he allows us to gain an understanding of life as it was actually lived.

Following this, the vernacular language of the day – Aramaic – is fully explored by Yochanan Breuer. Aramaic was the medium, along with Hebrew, in which Jews talked and thought for almost half a millennium. By so doing they indicated the reality of their integration within the encompassing, dominant, non-Jewish culture of the period. The continual need for Aramaic *Targums* (translations of Scripture), and the fact that the Babylonian Talmud was composed in Aramaic, attest to the degree – as well as the limits – of Jewish "acculturation."

Two informative essays on the Diaspora, the first by Leonard Rutgers and the second by Scott Bradbury, complete the broad picture of Jewish history after 235. Rutgers concentrates on the long-standing Italian Jewish community. Through a careful appraisal of the evidence – inscriptions, tombs, synagogues, and texts – he makes the case for an Italian Jewry that, while self-consciously Jewish, was quite fully integrated culturally and politically within the fabric of Italian life. Importantly, he shows that this position changed only very gradually and at a date later than would generally be thought. Bradbury's subject is Spain. Here, unfortunately, the lack of Jewish sources creates a dependency on secular lawcodes and Christian materials for an understanding of the Jewish presence in the country. What these sources reveal is a tale of growing, theologically grounded, anti-Judaism that translated into practical political and legal disabilities, especially after the Arian Visigothic monarchs were replaced by Catholic kings with the conversion of Reccared to Catholicism in 587. This explains much of the Jewish enthusiasm for Spain's Muslim conquerors in 711.

In chapter 20, Lee Levine extends the analysis of Jewish art and architecture begun by Eric Meyers. Levine's discussion covers all the later, main archaeological sites, including the cemeteries in Beth Shearim and Rome and a considerable array of synagogues from the breadth and length of the

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521772486 - The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period, Volume IV
Edited by Steven T. Katz
Excerpt
More information

Diaspora. Included in his survey is a detailed description of the famous third-century Dura Europos synagogue in Syria, an account of the impressive synagogue in Sardis, and instructive depictions of synagogues from late Roman-Byzantine Palestine. His examination of this material data concludes with a reconsideration of the significant question: why did Jewish art and architecture flourish in this era? His answer to this query is both provocative and persuasive: not only did Jewish authorities have a tolerant theological view of figural art in this era but, influenced by Christianity and the growing competition with Christianity, "iconography became the handmaiden of theology" and rose "to the level of theological commentary."

The crucial role of the religious calendar and of the synagogue, both in the Land of Israel and outside it, are described in the essays by Joseph Tabory and Reuven Kimelman that now follow. Tabory, after helpfully explaining the technical character of the Jewish calendar, reviews all the major Jewish religious festivals, as well as the weekly Sabbath, that were celebrated in the late Roman era. Many of these were based on biblical obligations – for example, Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot – but by this time the yearly cycle also included post-biblical festivals such as Purim, Ḥanukkah and a set of fast-days. For the most part, this calendar of religious happenings, sanctioned by rabbinic authority, has remained unchanged down to today. Taken altogether, these religious occasions create the rhythm of Jewish life and distinguish the way in which Judaism organizes time. Kimelman, in his decipherment of the rabbinic conception of prayer, throws considerable light on the question of the relationship between the Temple and the synagogue, and the rabbinic attitude towards God's presence and availability in the absence of the Temple. He makes the salient point – often misunderstood – that for the Rabbis, despite strong tendencies in this direction, the synagogue did *not* replace the Temple, though God was accessible through its liturgical performance, a liturgy now defined by a focus on the sovereignty of God, that is, on God as King. Most importantly, the ritual of the synagogue created a shared, communal, religious experience that provided much of Judaism's spiritual vitality.

Next, Michael Satlow examines the issues of marriage, sexuality, and family life. He begins his discussion by advancing the argument that most Jews in the Roman era viewed marriage and sexuality in ways that were little different from the attitudes held by their non-Jewish neighbors. However, as one moves into the third and fourth centuries, the rabbinic class, through their influential halachic compositions, began to construct a more specifically "Jewish" understanding of these topoi. Achieving this was not a simple matter, as the divergent interpretations on specific subjects between the sages of Palestine and those of Babylonia indicate.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521772486 - The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period, Volume IV
Edited by Steven T. Katz
Excerpt
More information

For example, the Palestinian sages saw the goal of marriage as creating a viable, functional, social unit within the national community, while the Babylonian sages saw marriage primarily as a means of controlling sexuality and its consequences. Likewise, they differed in their construction of sexuality and gender. Satlow, to the degree that the available evidence permits, helps us to understand the nature of these differences and why they are important.

Tal Ilan's essay on "Women in Jewish Life and Law" comes next. After a brief look at what the sources from Qumran have to tell us about gender issues, it presents a thorough re-examination of the rabbinic attitudes towards women, emphasizing the efforts of the rabbis to control the lives of women within halachically legitimate and socially desirable boundaries. Ilan scrutinizes the role of women at home, at work (done mostly at home in the form of a cottage industry), and in the main areas of religious life connected with the synagogue and study house. With regard to the former, she argues that, as a general rule, "the Rabbis were ideologically inclined towards the exclusion of women from Jewish religious life." In practice, however, that is, as a matter of practical *halachah* that defined the actual religious behavior of Jewish women, the situation was more inclusive and women were obligated to keep quite a number of *mitzvot* (commandments), including some that were "time-bound," that is, that had to be performed at specific times, and from which, as a general halachic principle, women were supposedly exempted. Alternatively, the situation *vis-à-vis* the study house, that is, with regard to formal, public Torah study, was exclusionary. Women were not permitted entry into the ranks of students (and teachers) in the rabbinic academies.

David Novak, in chapter 25, takes up the intricate subject of how the Rabbis understood the matter of Jewish–Gentile relations. He organizes his analysis of this issue through the use of seven different categories – ranging from "Amalakites" and "the seven Canaanite nations" to "slaves" and "proselytes" – that the Rabbis employed to classify non-Jews. He then carefully considers, based primarily on a wide array of rabbinic sources, just what the Sages thought was the appropriate form of behavior in each case. The "Amalakites," for example, were held by the Sages to exist no longer and therefore the biblical commandment to destroy them (Deut. 25.19, and see 1 Sam. 15.2–3) was understood as entailing merely an act of remembrance that involved no further initiative against any group or individual. At the other end of the spectrum, proselytes were welcome to join the Jewish People and "the Rabbis were supportive of conversion and converts." Given this accounting of the evidence, there is no one rabbinic view regarding the appropriate attitude and behavior towards Gentiles.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org