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978-1-107-04127-1 - The Ancient Jews from Alexander to Muhammad
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Introduction

The administration of Ventidius Cumanus as governor of Judaea (48–52 CE) was, according to the historian Josephus, an ominous one for the Jews, featuring several cases of provocative military misbehaviour and the governor's anti-Jewish intervention in a civil mini-war between Jews and Samaritans, which ended badly for everyone, including the governor. On one occasion, though, Cumanus' decisive action forestalled what would otherwise have quickly degenerated into mass rebellion. Some Roman troops, on patrol in the western Judaean hills in the wake of an attack on an imperial slave, found in one village a scroll of the Law of Moses, and one of the soldiers cut it to pieces and burned the scraps.[1] News quickly spread, and the Judaeans, 'aroused as though it were their whole country which had been consumed in flames', marched *en masse* to the governor's palace in Caesarea Maritima, where Cumanus found the responsible soldier and had him executed. 'On this, the Jews withdrew' (*Jewish War* 2.228–31).

Is this episode self-explanatory, or deeply bizarre (Schürer-Vermes I:456–7; S. Schwartz 2001:60–1)? We live in a world where group symbols are destroyed in acts of provocation which everyone seems to understand. Flag-burnings are routine and routinely cause outrage. The public burning of a copy of the Quran by an extremist Protestant pastor in Florida sparked violent protests in Afghanistan, but, perhaps more relevant to the pastor's stated intentions, offended enlightened opinion at home.[2] Public outrage at the provocative treatment of central Christian symbols is also familiar. Nearly twenty-five years after its creation, according to a story widely circulated on the Internet, Andres Serrano's notorious *Piss Christ* (a photograph of a plastic crucifix suspended in what was allegedly the artist's urine) was attacked and destroyed by pious Catholics in Avignon in

[1] In the alternative version, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.115, he simply – and more plausibly, if it was in fact a very large parchment scroll – ripped or cut it down the middle (διέσχισεν).

[2] Lizette Alvarez, 'Koran-Burning Pastor Unrepentant in Face of Furor', *New York Times*, 2 April 2011.

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April 2011.[3] The fact that this story appears to have been at the very least greatly exaggerated suggests that whatever happened functioned primarily as a convenient peg on which to hang a larger debate on the embattled secularism of the French Republic.[4] Personally offended and wary of controversy, authorities in the late 1990s routinely banned display of Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary*, a painting composed partly of elephant dung; it was subsequently purchased by a collector and now hangs peacefully in Tasmania.[5]

On reflection, the idea that the destruction of a single copy of a book – admittedly, necessarily an extremely valuable item when considered merely as a commodity, given its size and the expense involved in its production (Haran 1983; 1985) – might cause a revolt, that in response to such a piece of misbehaviour a hard-headed (if none too competent) Roman administrator might execute one of his own soldiers, is very strange indeed. Modern nation states promote symbols which are inherently meaningless. Flag-burners are strictly speaking doing practically nothing beyond producing a bit of air pollution. They are engaging in a purely symbolic and also completely self-explanatory expression of hostility to a state – however complex the politics behind the act may be. A Torah scroll, or indeed a copy of the Quran, was to be sure a symbol in a somewhat similar sense, as Josephus observed. But it was something more specific, too, and more complex: the Jews argued to Cumanus that the perpetrator of such an outrage 'against their god and their law should not be left unpunished' (*War* 2.230).[6] The Torah scroll, then, stood not only for the Jews as corporate body, like a flag ('as though their whole country had been consumed in flames'), it also stood for God, that is, the Jews' god – who was both a universal divine principle (*ho theos*, or even *to theion*, without further specification) and a particular national patron god – its putative author, and 'the law', that is, it represented its own contents. The provocative soldier (if that is what he was, and not simply stupid)[7] and the provoked Jews actually had somewhat different things in mind: the soldier was insulting the Jews, the Jews understood this but also thought the soldier, who, like the Florida pastor (as he

[3] Angelique Chrisafis, 'Attack on Blasphemous Art Work Fires Debate on Role of Religion in France', *The Guardian*, 18 April 2011.

[4] A photograph at reuters.com demonstrates minor damage to the glass cover of the photograph, pretty clearly produced by a single hammer blow.

[5] 'Chris Ofili', *Wikipedia*.

[6] Slightly different at *Jewish Antiquities* 20.116: the Jews beseeched Cumanus to 'avenge not them but the god whose laws had been subjected to outrage; for they could not bear to live with their ancestral (laws) thus insulted'.

[7] The alternative version of the story, in *Jewish Antiquities* 20.115, makes the soldier's insolent intention explicit.

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admitted to the press), presumably had little knowledge of the contents of the book he was destroying, had insulted God and the Torah itself. The scroll was indubitably a symbol but it symbolized different things to different people. This is why the soldier got more than he bargained for.

How did the contents of the scroll – a narrative of group origins and a collection of laws – and the scroll as a physical object come to assume such importance? Why, in this story, were 'the Jews', or some group of Jews, so swift to take offence at the isolated act of a small group of Roman soldiers? How and why did the news spread so quickly? However provocative the act of the soldier was, it is possible to imagine circumstances in which the Jews would have responded differently. Fifty years ago, who would have noticed if a small-town minister in the southern United States had destroyed a Quran? Indeed, why would he have bothered? Provocations occur and are effective in very specific circumstances, in our case, circumstances of growing tension over Roman rule in Palestine. Ostensibly spontaneous outbursts of public rage never fail to have a politics and a culture, which does not mean that they do not also embody and enact emotions. It is itself a political argument to represent them as pure and unmediated expressions of the popular will, as if the popular will does not need to be intentionally mobilized and organized in order to be expressed. In this case, though both the Roman act and the Jewish response have a familiar ring to them, they are in neither case self-explanatory: they too have a politics and a culture. Why did the Romans have more trouble imposing their rule in Palestine than almost anywhere else, as they demonstrably did? Why did the Jews resist, and why did their resistance take the specific forms it did? What led to the repeated breakdown of Roman–Jewish relations, which is foreshadowed in Josephus' account? These questions, how to account for the emergence of the Jews as a distinct and enduringly distinctive group, their impact on their social and political environment and its impact on them – to phrase them differently – are the core concerns of this book. I will address an additional set of questions as well, which emerge from the first, about why and how these issues retain their urgency as objects of study, including for classicists and ancient historians. But the remainder of the introduction treats still more basic questions: who and what were/are the Jews and how do we know anything about them at all?

What sort of a group are the Jews?

Most people who think about this question take for granted the continuous existence of a distinctive group called the Jews from some period in

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the remote past down to the present,[8] while acknowledging that certain aspects of the character of the group changed over time. In its most basic version, this view is shared by Jewish and Christian traditionalists, and by many others as well. Many Christians believed that the Jews had once been a great and spiritually gifted nation that had condemned itself to suffering and eternal decline by its role in Christ's crucifixion and by its subsequent failure to accept him as Saviour and Son of God. The Jews, Israel according to the flesh, had been superseded in God's affection by a new, spiritual, Israel, the Christian Church. The Jews were thus heirs of the prophets but modern Judaism was not identical with prophetic religion. The Jews had become debased (Simon 1986: 65–97; 135–78; 202–33).

The Jews had a somewhat similar view of the shape of their past. They, too, traditionally believed that their ancestors had once constituted a great nation which for its sins (not including the execution of Jesus) had been expelled from its land and deprived of its holy temple, on which Judaism had once strongly focused. But for Jews who retain traditional ideas the Jews never actually lost divine favour and access; God continued to speak, in however mediated a form, through the rabbis of the Talmud (70–600 CE) and through the writings and teachings of their successors and interpreters down to modern times. Jewish traditionalists awaited and await the restoration of the Jews – a dead letter in Christian thought unless the Jews converted to Christianity, at which point in the view of most theologians the question of their *corporate* restoration would be rendered moot: there would be no separate Jewish people after the Second Coming. In fact the idea of corporate redemption or restoration remained important in altered form even for those Jews who abandoned or modified traditional ideas –mainly after 1800 – inspiring and energizing modern nationalist and utopian political movements like Zionism, territorialism, socialism and communism (the latter two in their Jewish versions aspired to redeem the Jewish people by redeeming all the oppressed peoples of the world).[9]

The *idea* of a continuous Jewish history thus was in no need of invention by the first professional Jewish historians, who lived mainly in German states and the Habsburg Empire in the early and mid-nineteenth

[8] This is why a book like Sand 2009, which argues against this view, has the power to shock. On 'Jewish genes' see Ostrer 2012; Abu El-Haj 2012.

[9] Territorialism was the view that the Jews should possess an autonomous or partly autonomous national home: it was Zionism without Palestine. Specifically Jewish branches of the socialist and communist movements survive only vestigially, but from the late nineteenth through to the mid-twentieth centuries were significant movements in eastern Europe, the United States, and Palestine/Israel. On these movements and their complex interrelations see J. Frankel 1981, with updating in J. Frankel 2009.

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century. But the *content* of such a history had to be laboriously mined out of obscure and neglected texts and documents, among other things, since corporate memory, Jewish, Christian and Muslim, had failed to preserve more than snippets of the past (Yerushalmi 1982; Schorsch 1994). Such investigations only added fuel to debates about the essential character of Jewish group identity – were/are the Jews a nation? Or are they a religion or rather an ethnicity or a 'race'? Are the Jews bound together by shared descent? Religious belief and practice? Culture? Are they bound together at all? These were all debates, among the Jews themselves and between the Jews and the leadership and intelligentsia of the countries they lived in, driven by contemporary ideological and political concerns about the status and role of the Jews in the emerging nation states of Europe, in which traditional modes of Jewish life and long-standing arrangements with political and religious authorities no longer seemed relevant (Rechter 2002). Though the nation state is by now a well-established concept, the questions it raises about the nature of Jewish identity, sharpened by the success of one of the responses, Zionism, remain unresolved; the debates persist. Scholarship is inevitably entangled in contemporary concerns.

This means that to write in a synoptic and summary way about the ancient Jews is to tread through a minefield. It will be best to begin by confronting some of the points head-on: what sort of group were the ancient Jews and what is their relation to modern Jews? What categories can we use most productively to think about them? What was the nature of their relationship to their social and cultural environment in antiquity? Let me open the discussion with a provocative soundbite before moving on to more systematic examination: if you were to stop a man on, say, West 86th Street in Manhattan and ask him if he is Jewish he is not unlikely to respond, 'Yes, but I'm not religious or anything.' What happens if you replace the word 'Jewish' in the question with 'Presbyterian' or with 'French'? The man's response is reduced to nonsense. In other words, Jewishness nowadays does not quite fit into our standard categories of religion or nationality, but straddles the border (Gitelman 2009); even people who have pared their Jewishness down to one or the other category – usually ethnicity – retain, like the New Yorker in the vignette, the sense that it is not really just the one. Did it work in a similar way in antiquity, too?

ANACHRONISM

Anachronism entails assuming that what is true now has always been true. If Jews are thought nowadays to have a special disposition towards

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commerce or the professions, or to have a preference for liberalism in politics (true in the USA but not the UK), then one might automatically assume this to have been the case in the past as well. Even historians can fall prey to such assumptions, but they have known since the birth of modern historiography in Renaissance Italy that they should not (Schiffman 2011), that one of their jobs is precisely to expose and criticize such thinking as unhistorical in failing to recognize that things change and that groups like the Jews do not (necessarily) have stable essential features. It is easy to show that Jews developed their orientation towards trade only in the Middle Ages, and their orientation towards the professions and liberal politics only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Penslar 2001). The 'Jewish sensibility' – let's say a predisposition to self-ironizing gallows humour – traces of which survive to the present, is manifestly a response to the dislocations of modernity; we should not expect to find it among ancient or medieval Jews.

Admittedly, some anachronisms of this type are much harder to locate and eradicate. On the most basic level, the fact that ancient Jews were overwhelmingly rural and agrarian, not urban and mercantile, has profound cultural implications that scholarship has been struggling to come to terms with. For example, it implies that most ancient Jews, like most of their neighbours, were not literate. This fact not only flies in the face of modern stereotypes, in this case shared by Jews themselves and many others, about the Jews' predisposition to higher education, their being 'the people of the book' (originally a metaphorical extension but later a vulgar misunderstanding of an expression which originated as a description of the technical status of Jews *and Christians* – as opposed to pagans – in Islamic law – they are the *ahl al-kitab*, the people of the Book [the Bible], not the book (M. Cohen 1994)); much more importantly, it crucially affects the way we understand the literature they did produce, among many other things. Not all anachronism of this sort involves crude stereotype. One of my goals in this book is to produce an account of the ancient Jews which resonates oddly because so much of it (like so much of classical antiquity in general) is simultaneously uncannily familiar and completely unrecognizable.

Some regard the use of modern categories as tools of analysis as an additional and equally objectionable type of anachronism. Such scholars think that past societies should be described only in their own terms, using their own thought categories. Some anthropologists apply the same stricture to the contemporary or recent societies they study: to use non-native categories of analysis in this view is to engage in ethnocentrism,

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the anthropologist's equivalent of historians' anachronism. But I disagree. In fact I believe that this type of anachronism or ethnocentrism can be an essential item in the historian's or anthropologist's toolkit (this does not mean that every modern category is equally useful). To take as an example a concept especially relevant to this book, it has been argued that the term 'religion' as we now use it is shaped by the concerns of the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, and so is invalid if applied to earlier cultural practice, or outside areas that are part of the European cultural sphere. This is because the word is too freighted with modern baggage to use without misleading, but also because the abstract concept 'religion' allegedly did not exist in any meaningful way before the Enlightenment. Now this second point is inaccurate, since medieval Christians – and Muslims and Jews – indubitably had the term, and it indubitably had a meaning related, though not identical, to its post-Enlightenment meaning. On the other hand, it is demonstrably true that extremely cautious and sophisticated scholars (even of the stature of the celebrated anthropologist Clifford Geertz [1926–2006]) sometimes allowed the modern sense of religion to interfere with their understanding of the phenomenon in premodernity or outside Euro-America, demonstrating the contention that anachronistic/ethnocentric concepts have tremendous power to mislead and certainly should never be used thoughtlessly (Asad 1993).[10] In any case we may admit that in Greco-Roman antiquity there existed no term or conceptual category which corresponds to 'religion' (Nongbri 2008).

It can be argued that while 'religion' is applicable to some varieties of modern Judaism (Reform – truly a religion of the Enlightenment; Ultraorthodoxy; 'Renewal'; but not Zionism or Yiddishism, which may contain 'religious' elements but are essentially versions of romantic nationalism), no version of premodern Judaism can validly be understood as a religion, that, indeed, since the very English words 'Jew' and 'Judaism' have religious, as opposed to ethnic or cultural, denotations, even these words we must replace, when referring to antiquity, with the ethnic or geographical term 'Judaean' (person from the land of Judaea), and with a periphrastic phrase referring to the latter's culture (also a fraught modern concept, see note 10!), respectively (Mason 2007; cf. Boyarin 2009).

[10] On the enduring conceptual utility of certain observers' categories, e.g., culture, see Brumann 1999, with responses following especially of Lila Abu-Lughod and Ulf Hannerz; for critiques of religion, culture and ethnicity, see, respectively, Asad 1993; Ortner 1999; Ortner 2006: 11–16; 107–28; Hall 2002: 9–19. See also de Vries 2008. For all his show of epistemological caution, though, de Vries' discussion seems mired in empirically dubious presentist presupposition.

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But 'religion', if understood to refer simply to practices, social and cognitive, which embody people's relationships with their god(s), is too useful a term to discard, even if it admittedly has a dangerous tendency to mislead. Those who advocate the abolition of such terms, as opposed to their cautiously sceptical and self-aware analytical deployment, are forgetting that historians' primary job is translation or explanation, and that we can begin to make sense of worlds which are different from our own only by using concepts familiar to us with all due caution and self-consciousness. 'Religion', 'culture', 'nation', 'ethnicity', all terms which bear heavy modern baggage, all terms which have on occasion been used with aggressive intent by the dominant, all nevertheless have a place in making sense of the ancient Jews (S. Schwartz 2011).

What we must not do, though, is assume that they were a lot like modern Jews. I would insist, in fact, that we cannot assume that ancient Jews were necessarily even recognizable to us as such. This tremendously complicates our attempt to recover a satisfactory account of the ancient Jews from fragmentary and opaque sources.

DO WE KNOW A JEW WHEN WE SEE ONE?[11]

In most places in the world in the early twenty-first century Jewish identity has become ineffably complex; one could say that it has fractured. Some Jews, mainly but not only among the orthodox, live lives of complete immersion in a demanding version of the Jewish religion and have meaningful connections only with others who share their dedication. For others, Jewishness has no meaningful religious components, its cultural component has been reduced to a matter of sensibility or inner state, and even as a mode of sociability it no longer holds sway (by contrast, the parents or grandparents of such Jews might also have lived a highly attenuated type of Jewishness but socialized exclusively with Jews: Endelman 2009). Furthermore, even for people with a 'thick' Jewish identity, what counts as 'Jewish culture', or indeed as Judaism in the religious sense, has become, in true postmodern style, hugely various. In the twenty-first century, even positivists and essentialists would have to admit that Jewishness is a constructed identity, so much so that one begins to wonder whether

[11] Shaye Cohen's answer to this question for antiquity was more or less 'no', but his treatment is rather simplifying. The answer must be that some (non-Jewish) people sometimes could. This is a straightforward sociological corollary of the fact that some Jews strove to maintain some measure of separation from their neighbours. Whether we can spot them in the evidence is a different question; see S. Cohen 1993.

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it has any real implications at all, whether, that is, there is any sense, however remote or symbolic, in which all or even most of the people who call themselves Jews constitute a meaningful category, let alone a group. We begin to suspect that 'Jewish identity' is losing its meaning as a term of sociological analysis (Brubaker 2004: 7–63).

This was not the case for medieval and early modern Jews (M. Cohen 1994). Whether they lived under Christian or Muslim rule, Jews in the medieval and early modern periods belonged to a religious community which was defined by laws. Its institutions of governance, furthermore, were generally authorized by the state, implicitly or explicitly. To be Jewish meant to belong to a distinct legal category and to live your life according to a well-defined (if not always and everywhere uniform) set of rules. It required at very least conformity with the laws of the Torah as refracted through the Talmud and interpreted by contemporary rabbinic legal experts. It is true that Jews lived then in widely scattered communities. Each one individually was a very strongly marked and extremely tightly integrated group, and in some times and places there emerged structures which constituted or facilitated integration on the regional level, like the Council of the Four Lands (*Va΄ad Arba΄ Ha'aratzot*), based in Lublin and Jaroslaw, in early modern Poland, or even transregionally, like the Leipzig Fair (*Leipziger Messe*), which brought together Jewish merchants, among others, from eastern and western Europe (Rosman 2010: 83; Carlebach 2011: 141–59). The question of intercommunal integration, which applies to all periods of Jewish history, even the very earliest ones (because even then there was a Jewish 'diaspora'[12]), and has a great multiplicity of responses depending on the historical specificities, is one of the factors which has always complicated the 'groupness' of the Jews. But two things are certain about the medieval and early modern experience of the Jews: wherever they lived they constituted a strongly marked separate group, and whatever patterns of intercommunal integration prevailed in reality, Jews at least *thought* that they all were a single group, because of both shared descent and shared dedication to a religious system, wherever they lived (a subjectivity which facilitated intercommunal integration when external circumstances enabled it). They exemplified in an eccentric way Benedict Anderson's (1983) notion of the imagined community – which is not to say that they were a precocious nation.

Where on this spectrum of modes of identification should we place ancient Jews? Scholarly consensus on this question has shifted dramatically

[12] 'Dispersion', a Greek word Jews used even in antiquity to refer to Jewish communities outside Palestine.

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in the past generation. It used to be assumed that ancient Jews as a group resembled medieval Jews, possessing a thick, fixed identity, thorough dedication to the norms of Jewish law and belief, and a tendency to separate themselves as fully as possible from their social and cultural environments, to the point of having a tendency to resist foreign rule militarily (Moore 1927–30; Hengel 1974; 1989). In fact, at least until the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 CE, and possibly even long after that, the Jews had an even more strongly marked group identity since, unlike the medieval Jews, they possessed a country and an acknowledged religious centre which in some periods served to integrate them, even those scattered in the diaspora, in quite practical ways, for example through donation and pilgrimage. To be sure, there were outliers, as there were even in the Middle Ages. Aside from the famous sectarian groups discussed below, which older scholarship imagined to have been something like medieval heresies which had rejected a presumed Pharisaic or rabbinic orthodoxy, some Jews, it was thought, were 'hellenized', and this was often understood to mean that they were on the verge of disappearance as Jews, of merging into their Greek or Greco-Roman environment completely, or eventually of drifting off into Christianity (Niehoff 1999). A crucial figure in this category was Philo, scion of an aristocratic Alexandrian Jewish family who lived in the early first century CE. Philo wrote in Greek a long series of essays in which he interpreted passages of the Pentateuch (in Hebrew, the Torah), the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, allegorically and in accordance with the main ideas of Platonism and Stoicism. Some scholars regarded Philo as unrepresentative of the Jews of the first century. He was either an isolated eccentric, or he stood for a kind of Judaism which was very soon to die out among the Jews, both because it was compromised, a blind alley, and devoid of 'authenticity', and because the Jewish community of Alexandria was in any case doomed to extinction by the failure of the blood-soaked Diaspora Revolt of 116–17 CE (Lieberman 1975 [1948]). That Philo's nephew Tiberius Julius Alexander was an 'apostate' who worked for the Roman state in its most anti-Jewish phase, and that Philo's works were forgotten by the Jews until the age of humanism and preserved only by Christians – indeed some church fathers even regarded Philo as a kind of honorary Christian – seemed to prove the case against him (or for him, depending on the disposition of the scholar). Others defended Philo's Jewishness by arguing that his Hellenism was just window-dressing or spin meant to attract pagans or lapsing Jews, concealing authentic rabbinic theology and practice (Belkin 1940; Wolfson 1947). In any case, the popularity or persistence of varieties of Judaism in

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