

Introduction: Jews and Judaism in Late Antiquity

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By focusing on Jews and Judaism in late antiquity, this Handbook fills a gap left by other volumes that deal with early Byzantine Christianity only. Jews interacted and competed with pagans and Christians and experienced a number of significant developments between the third and seventh centuries, which marks this period as a time of transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages: the emergence of synagogues as religious centers of local communities, the increasing significance of rabbinic Judaism and the compilation of rabbinic documents, the consolidation of Jewish Diaspora communities, and the expansion of rabbinic Judaism to Sasanian Persia (Babylonia), which eventually topped Byzantine Palestine in its importance for the development and survival of Judaism.

Late antiquity, that is, the time period between the third and the seventh centuries C.E., is a particularly interesting period as far as Jews and Judaism are concerned. Within the wider contexts of the late Roman, early Byzantine, and Sasanian Persian Empires, in competition and conflict with Graeco-Roman, Christian, and Zoroastrian cultures, Jewish religious leadership structures, institutions, and practices developed that are still relevant today. Major developments occurred in this period -- from small teacher-disciple circles to a distinct rabbinic group identity; from oral instruction to written documents; from synagogues as multi-functional buildings to centers of local religious communities; from the aniconism of the Second Temple period to the emergence of Jewish figurative art; from a focus on the Land of Israel to increasingly significant Diaspora communities -- which indicate a transition from the time after the destruction of the Second Temple to a medieval Judaism with an established communal structure based on rabbis, synagogues, and academies.

This transition was triggered by developments in the larger political, socio-economic, and cultural-religious contexts in which Jews lived. Political and economic relations between Rome and Persia may at times have enabled or hindered mobility and communication between Jews who lived under these rules. The increased power and hostility of Byzantine Christians may have felt threatening but also evoked the assertion of Jewish religious identity and self-expression. While the transformation of Roman Palestine into a Christian “Holy Land” involved the Christian appropriation of space and buildings, it may also have inspired the building and decoration of synagogues. At a time when anti-Jewish laws were issued by Christian emperors and church fathers appropriated biblical texts for their own ideological purposes, rabbis compiled their own legal and exegetical traditions in the large written compilations of the Talmud and Midrash. Therefore the earlier association of late antiquity with the “triumph” of Christianity and the “decline” and “dispersion” of Judaism must be corrected by a more complex and balanced assessment of the period.

1. Integrating Jews and Judaism into the Study of Late Antiquity

While a number of *Handbooks*, *Companions*, and *Guides* to late antiquity have been published in the last two and a half decades (Bowersock, Brown, and Gabar, eds. 1999; Lenski, ed. 2006; Rousseau, ed. 2009; Fitzgerald Johnson, ed. 2012; Bernheimer and Silverstein, eds. 2012), none of these volumes devotes even one chapter to Judaism. The focus of most of these works is on Byzantine Christianity, with some of them also covering the emergence of Islam. Jews, Judaism, and Roman-Byzantine Palestine are mentioned only incidentally, if at all. While the first part of Fitzgerald Johnson’s *Handbook of Late Antiquity* (2012) deals with “Geographies and Peoples” and is very wide-ranging, from the western kingdoms to the silk road in the East, Jews in Palestine and Babylonia are absent from the regional coverage. In the second part entitled “Literary and Philosophical Cultures” education and Hellenism feature prominently, whereas rabbinic literature is not discussed. Neither is Judaism treated in the fourth part on “Religions and Religious Identity”, with chapters on paganism, Christianity, and Islam. The volume edited by Bowersock, Brown, and

Gabar (1999) is an alphabetically arranged *Guide* or dictionary, covering the period covered between ca. 250 to 800 C.E. While there are introductory chapters on Christianity and Islam, there is none on Judaism. Rousseau's *Companion* (2009) focuses on Byzantine Christian theology and the later reception of the Byzantine period. Rather than dealing with Jews and Judaism in their own right, this huge volume merely contains a chapter on "Jewish-Christian Relations". In Lenski's *Companion to the Age of Constantine* (2006) "Religion and Spiritual Life" is, again, limited to Christianity and its "pagan" forerunners, the "traditional religions" of the Roman world. While Bernheimer and Silverstein (2012) move the focus to the East and include chapters on Zoroastrianism and Buddhism besides Christianity and Islam, Jews and Judaism in the Middle East are absent from the discussion.

What could be the reasons for the absence of Jews and Judaism from these collective volumes which claim to be comprehensive introductions and guides to late antique and early Byzantine history, literature, and culture? Perhaps inadvertently, the traditional Christian view that the "triumph" of Christianity led to the decline of Judaism and a dispersal of Jews from the Middle East may have played a role. Since Christians claimed to be the "new Israel", spreading monotheism to formerly polytheistic cultures and ethnicities, the innovative aspects of the Byzantine period were mainly associated with Christianity. This "triumphant" outlook is most noticeable in Lenski (2006: 1), who claims that under Constantine "Christianity blossomed into a thriving offshoot of Mediterranean religious life", which "cast its shadow over not just religious matters but art and architecture, philosophy and thought, literature and learning, politics and foreign relations, law and social practice", giving the impression of an all-encompassing impact and domination that marginalized and suppressed non-Christian cultures and identities. On the other hand, Fitzgerald Johnson (2012: xvii), stresses knowledge exchange: in late antiquity the Middle East, the Far East, and the West "changed into essential spaces for the movement of ideas and the creative interaction of religion, people, and goods", a development out of which Islam emerged, which is nowadays integrated into the late antique context (Neuwirth 2019; Al-Azmeh 2014). The absence of Jews from this discussion seems strange, especially since Christianity and

Islam developed on the basis of Jewish monotheism and the Hebrew Bible and show similarities with Judaism (Zellentin 2013 and 2022).

Perhaps even more astonishing is the almost total omission of Judaism, except for a chapter on the late antique reception of the biblical book of Esther (Patmore 2018), from a *Companion to Religion in Late Antiquity* (Lössi and Baker-Brian, eds. 2018). Again, the book heavily leans on Christianity and the West, with individual chapters reaching out to Egypt, Arabia, and small religious movements such as Manichaeism and Hermetism. Many aspects of Christianity in different regions are discussed in individual chapters, yet no chapter provides a discussion of rabbinic Judaism, late antique synagogues, and the compilation of the Talmud. Although Patmore (2018: 258) claims to use his focus on Esther as a “heuristic tool” to explore “the shape and nature” of late antique Judaism, this focus is much too narrow to do justice to the historical, cultural, and religious changes that Jews experienced between the third and seventh centuries C.E.

Two volumes that are dedicated to Jews and Judaism in late antiquity may have been meant to rectify this situation, yet the first one deals with rabbinic literature only (Millar, Ben-Eliyahu, and Cohn 2013) and the second one (Kessler and Koltun-Fromm, eds., 2020) is an introduction to Judaism in general rather than a focused treatment of the late Roman and early Byzantine period. With their *Handbook of Jewish Literature* Millar, Ben-Eliyahu and Cohn (2013) aim at introducing the various Jewish literary works and genres created in Roman and early Byzantine times to non-experts, notably classicists and ancient historians, who are usually not familiar with them. Kessler’s and Koltun-Fromm’s *Companion to Late Antique Jews and Judaism* (2020) was published by the same publisher who brought out Lössi’s above-mentioned *Companion to Religion in Late Antiquity*, perhaps noticing that the latter, although meant to deal with the varieties of late antique religion, did not include Judaism in an appropriate way. While the Judaism-focused volume addresses many aspects of Judaism (geography, languages and literatures, identity, gender, ritual), it does not focus on late antiquity but includes the literary and material culture of the Second Temple period. It is therefore unable to provide a proper overview of the innovations of the third and following centuries within the context of political and cultural changes that happened at that

time. In particular, the consequences of the Christianization of the Roman Empire and the Christian appropriation of the Jewish Bible and the “Holy Land” are not properly explored. What did these changes mean for Jews and Judaism in terms of expressions of Jewish identity, literary developments, and artistic and architectural competition in the public space? And how did the situation of Jews in Sasanian Persia differ from the situation in Palestine under Byzantine Christian rule?

A first step towards a better understanding of Jewish experience and culture in late antiquity, in the various regions in which Jews lived, was undertaken by Laham Cohen (2018), who already points to the sparseness of sources for Jewish Diaspora communities, except for Babylonia, where there is at least rabbinic literary evidence available. This problem has also been noted by Kraemer (2020: 1-42), who has suggested to understand “the absence of evidence” as “evidence of absence”, that is, as an indication of the decimation of Jewish life in certain regions of the Mediterranean Diaspora under Christian rule. Since Greek- and Latin-speaking Diaspora Jews hardly left any literary remains that are identifiably Jewish, “[t]o write their history we have only what others said about them and an assortment of archaeological remains” (ibid. 1), most of them from Rome (Rutgers 2021; Rocca 2022). On the basis of funerary art, architecture, and inscriptions, and the *Collatio Legum Mosaicarum et Romanarum* as a late antique Jewish compilation, Rutgers (2021) reconstructs Jewish life and interaction with non-Jews in late antique Rome. Rocca’s (2022) study is broader, tracing Jewish history in Roman Italy from Republican to late Roman imperial times, with a focus on the legal and social circumstances Jews lived in. For historical reasons, Roman Italy and Sasanian Persia were the regions with the largest Jewish communities outside of the Land of Israel in late antiquity. Yet Jewish communities also continued to exist in Egypt, Syria, Arabia, and Asia Minor and were affected in different ways by Christianization.

2. Relations Between Jews and Non-Jews

In late antique and early Byzantine times Judaism and Christianity were the main competitors in the Roman-Byzantine Empire while Babylonian Jews encountered Zoroastrianism as the main religion of the Persian Empire. The different political and religious contexts had a huge impact on the development of Jewish communal life, literature, and identity. In the last decades scholars have emphasized the formative role played by a “triumphant” Christianity in the development of rabbinic literature and a synagogue- and community-based Judaism that increasingly asserted its own public identity in Roman-Byzantine Palestine. Schwartz (2001: 177-274) has argued that the increased Christian presence in the “Holy Land”, with the establishment of churches and monasteries from the fourth century C.E. onwards, led to a re-Judaization that saw the building of lavishly decorated synagogues as the centers of local Jewish communities. In competition with an increasingly assertive Christian leadership that propagated its ideology in visual art, architecture, and sermons, Jews created a figurative visual art (Levine 2012) that presented their own interpretation of foundational biblical narratives such as the Binding of Isaac (*Aqedah*) (Hezser 2018: 31-80). They used Jewish symbols such as the menorah and ritual implements as visual markers of Jewishness (Hachlili 2018; Laderman 2021). Between the fourth and sixth centuries, numerous basilica-style synagogues were built in Byzantine Palestine, whose architecture and interior furnishings resembled those of churches (Levine 2000: 210-49; Milson 2007: 162-203).

Synagogues and synagogue art were probably the most noticeable aspects of marking the public spaces as Jewish. Yet the assertion of Jewish identity also took place in intellectual life, at least as far as Roman-Byzantine Palestine and Sasanian Babylonia are concerned. Rabbis had emphasized the significance of the Torah and Torah study as the basis of Jewish life and practice after 70 C.E., at a time when *paideia*-based Greek education was the Greek and Roman educational ideal. Rabbinic study became an alternative form of secondary education whose formal features - - small disciple circles and oral discussion -- resembled philosophical and legal studies. Rabbis’ focus on halakhah and their role as legal advisors in almost all areas of daily life aligned them with Roman jurists. Especially after 212 C.E. when Caracalla’s Edict (*Constitutio Antoniniana*) offered Roman citizenship to all subjects of the Roman Empire, rabbis must have feared that Roman law

might substitute Jewish law among the Jewish citizens of the Roman Empire. The compilation of the Mishnah as an alternative Jewish law code ensured the continued importance of rabbinic law, at least among rabbinic circles and their sympathizers (Hezser 2022). In the late antique public arena rabbis presented themselves as Jewish intellectuals who elicited the same respect that was granted to Graeco-Roman philosophers and sophists, church fathers and monks.

Whereas the form and extent of encounters and disputes between rabbis and Christians remains uncertain from a historical point of view, rabbinic literary sources provide evidence of rabbis' at least indirect interaction with Christian views and biblical interpretations. Based on an analysis of possible references to Jesus in the Babylonian Talmud, Schäfer (2007) had argued that Babylonian rabbis constructed detailed and sophisticated polemics against Christian exegetical arguments and christological ideas: "at precisely the time when Christianity rose from modest beginnings to its first triumphs, the Talmud (...) would become the defining document of those who refused to accept the new covenant, who so obstinately insisted on the fact that nothing had changed and that the old covenant was still valid" (ibid. 2). Whereas Schäfer reckons with a familiarity with certain New Testament texts among Babylonian rabbis, Murcia (2014) is more sceptical: the rabbinic texts, if they actually refer to Jesus and Christians, should be read as perceptions rather than actual knowledge. Whereas earlier accounts of Jesus and his followers as healers may reflect good neighborly relations between Babylonian Jews and Christians, later misunderstandings may indicate mutual hostilities and incomprehension.

The question of knowledge based on (Babylonian) rabbis' access to Christian literature and disputations with Christians is also addressed by Bar-Asher Siegal (2019: 5), who suggests that certain Babylonian talmudic narratives about heretics (*minim*) should be understood as reactions to "very common Christian notions" the rabbis would have been familiar with. Besides rejecting Christian biblical interpretations and theological claims, talmudic texts also show similarities to Christian literary forms, such as the Apophthegmata Patrum (Bar-Asher Siegal 2013) and parables (Teugels 2019). The rabbinic and Christian adaptation of these literary forms and the sharing of some of the topics and motifs indicate that rabbis and Christian teachers and monks lived in the

same Middle Eastern cultural context whose foundations were the Hebrew (and Greek) Bible and Hellenism. They used the same literary forms and motifs to express religious convictions that were usually quite different and need to be understood within the respective literary, social, and cultural contexts. Such differences are also evident in Jewish and Christian interpretations of the same biblical passages (Grypeou and Spurling, eds., 2009). Either directly or indirectly, late antique Jews and Christians may have been aware of each other's interpretations. Therefore, Jewish and Christian scriptural exegesis needs to be read side-by-side to bring to light the "powerful intertextuality between the two exegetical traditions" (Alexander 2009: 1).

The darker side of the late antique encounter between Jews and Christians must also be acknowledged, however. Once the Roman Empire had become Christian, the emperors began to side with bishops to suppress non-Christian religious practices that might compete with Christianity. The anti-Jewish laws of the Codex Theodosianus (16.8.1, 5, 6, 13, and 26; 16.9.1 and 2; Linder 1987; Rabello 2000), issued by the Christian emperors since 312 C.E., target the Jewish public institutions of the patriarchate and synagogues, prohibiting the building of new synagogues and the restoration of old ones. They also interfere with Jewish private matters by prohibiting the circumcision of non-Jewish slaves. Although their effectiveness remains uncertain, especially as far as Byzantine Palestine at the periphery of the empire was concerned, their aim was to reduce the public visibility of Judaism, to prevent the increase of non-Jewish converts to Judaism, and to generally undermine social relations between Jews and Christians.

The decrees indirectly testify to Judaism's continuous attractiveness to non-Jews, a phenomenon that is also evident in some church fathers' anti-Jewish polemics, such as those by the fourth-century writer John Chrysostom (*Against the Jews*). Thus, Wilken (2004: 67) writes: "By awakening curiosity, by bearing witness to another way of life drawn from the same ancient tradition, Judaism attracted Christians, some to the point where they actually joined with the Jews to celebrate Jewish festivals ...". Troianos (2012) describes the relationship between Byzantine Christians and Jews as "a love-hate relationship": Jews represented the biblical origins Christianity

was based on; yet Christian leaders claimed that Christianity was superior and even replaced Judaism.

Anti-Jewish messages proclaimed by bishops and priests in their sermons instigated Christians to attack synagogues, a phenomenon that seems to have been more common in the Diaspora than in the Land of Israel (Rutgers 1998: 119-21). Especially well-known is the case of Ambrose of Milan's support of the local bishop's incitement and the Christian mob's burning of the synagogue in Callinicum in 388 C.E. As Simonsohn (2014: 285) has pointed out, "Ambrose was a sworn enemy of Jews and Judaism and supported violence wreaked by the incited mob upon the Jews all over Christendom, in the East and West". He associated Jews with Christian heretics (Letter 11.3) and slandered the synagogue as a symbol of "unbelief" (Letter 31.1). Ambrose defended the bishop against accusations of unlawful behavior and even threatened emperor Theodosius with unforeseen consequences, if he decided to punish the bishop, arguing that the bishop could turn against the church and become an apostate or martyr, saying: "I openly affirm that I myself set the synagogue on fire, or at least, that I ordered others to do so; that there might be no place in which Christ is denied" (Letter 31.8). The Callinicum incident provides evidence of the complicity between local bishops and Christian mobs and the bishops' attempts to exert pressure on the highest political authorities (Hezser 2023). Whether they were successful depended on local Jews' complaints to the imperial authorities, the respective emperor's assessment of the situation, and the relationship between local bishops and courts.

3. Internal Jewish Developments

In several regards, internal developments within late antique Judaism constituted the basis of later medieval Jewish communal life and institutions. One of these developments is the greater public role of the rabbi, who emerged as a Jewish type of intellectual alongside philosophers, sophists, rhetoricians, bishops and monks. Late antique rabbis were keen on being visible and identifiable as scholars in the public space. They walked around in streets and market places, accompanied by their disciples and colleagues. It has been argued that from the third century onwards rabbis

became “urbanized”, that is, more rabbis lived in the cities of Roman Palestine than in the preceding century (Lapin 1999 and 2000). Their increased presence in cities such as Caesarea, Sepphoris, Tiberias, and Lydda meant that they had access to the cities’ institutions and facilities and contact with other urban inhabitants such as wealthy Jewish grandees and non-Jews, whether Greek or Roman, pagan or Christian.

Especially relevant is rabbis’ exposure to the Graeco-Roman culture of the cities, which included performances and spectacles in theatres and amphitheatres (Weiss 2014), philosophical, sophistic, rhetorical, and legal scholarship (Hezser 2019), and visual art in synagogues, churches, bathhouses, temples, and private villas (Laderman 2021). From the third century onwards, rabbis increasingly accommodated with this urban Graeco-Roman culture by adapting their own values and ideas to this environment, as is noticeable in the amoraic traditions of the Talmud Yerushalmi. For example, rabbis justified their visits to Roman bathhouses with statues of the goddess Aphrodite (Schwartz 1998); they perambulated in public spaces like philosophers (Hezser 2017: 28-31); and they delivered sermons that showed some familiarity with rhetorical training (Hidayat 2018). Lapin (2012) even views late antique rabbis as Romans, exploring the various aspects of the Roman provincial environment on rabbis as subalterns.

Palestinian rabbis’ increased integration into -- and reaction to -- their Graeco-Roman and Byzantine Christian environment led to a number of innovations and changes. While the Mishnah already shows certain similarities between rabbinic halakhah and Roman jurists’ law, after Caracalla’s reform in 212 C.E. rabbis familiarity with Roman law seems to have grown. Rabbinic discourse in the Talmud Yerushalmi addresses many legal areas that are also covered by Roman private law, codified in Justinian’s Digest. When Roman citizenship and Roman law were extended to all inhabitants of the Roman Empire, rabbis would have competed with Roman legal experts when trying to maintain and attract Jewish clients. Knowledge of at least some aspects of Roman law would have been advantageous in this climate. Rabbis would “try to usurp jurisdiction for themselves, a power-grab that attempts to reinforce the rabbis’ own authority, founded as it was in their skills in legal interpretation” (Czajkowski 2020: 85). That they were not always

successful in persuading their fellow-Jews to abide by their decisions is illustrated by the story about R. Abbahu and a woman named Tamar, who preferred the Roman civil courts of Caesarea to rabbinic jurisdiction (Niehoff 2019; Murray 2000).

Late antiquity was also the time when the large rabbinic compilations of the Talmud and Midrash were created. Graeco-Roman and Christian book cultures are likely to have inspired rabbinic scholars to collect their predecessors' halakhic and exegetical knowledge and preserve it in edited written compilations. While the patriarch R. Yehudah ha-Nasi is associated with the creation of a version of the Mishnah at the beginning of the third century C.E., its format and wording, including the order and number of tractates, may have been uncertain throughout the amoraic period until the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds were created in the fourth to sixth centuries or even longer, until the first complete Mishnah manuscripts with all six orders were written (the Kaufmann ms. of the 10th to 11th c. is considered to be the earliest full ms.). In contrast to the tannaitic and amoraic emphasis on oral instruction and transmission of rabbinic knowledge, at some stage at the end of the amoraic period or shortly afterwards scholars who identified with the authorities of the past decided to preserve their teaching in written form to enable future generations to access, study, apply, and further develop it. Once the large rabbinic compilations existed, Judaism -- or at least that form of Judaism represented by male scholastic circles -- became a "book religion", focused on studying the Talmud in academies and yeshivot of medieval times (Stern 2008).

The Palestinian patriarchate (*nasi*) was also a new development of the late second and early third century, with R. Yehudah ha-Nasi as its first representative (Jacobs 1995). Like the status of priests and Israelite monarchs, the role was hereditary and remained the domain of a wealthy aristocratic Jewish family. Rather than being acknowledged by Rome as a Jewish leader, the first patriarch seems to have emerged out of the rabbinic movement itself as a *primus inter pares* or highest-status rabbi. Accordingly, his role and influence would have been limited, depending on rabbis' and the Jewish populace's acknowledgement of his authority in areas such as the festival calendar, internal Jewish law, and the collection of money. Traditions in the Talmud Yerushalmi

indicate that rabbis' support of the patriarch was not unanimous. It likely depended on his scholarly credentials and reputation. The patriarchs of the late third and fourth centuries are not even mentioned by name in rabbinic sources. As provincial grandees, the patriarchs are likely to have possessed Greek *paideia* and socialized with other members of the elite, a phenomenon that seems to be reflected in stories about Rabbi and an emperor called Antoninus (Krauss 1910), whom some scholars identify with Caracalla (Levine 1996: 29). The rabbinic disregard for the later patriarchs may have contrasted with their "prestige and power" among (Hellenized Jewish and) non-Jewish elites (Curran 2011: 21). While the Byzantine government eventually acknowledged the patriarch's status and honored him (Cod. Theod. 16.8.8, 11, 13, 15, 20), the institution ended a few decades later for unknown reasons.

In Sasanian Persia the analogous office of the Jewish exilarch (*resh galuta*) emerged and continued to exist in Islamic times (Brody 1998: 67-82). Herman (2012), who has examined the sources in the context of Sasanian politics and culture, calls the exilarch a "king without a kingdom", indicating his high status and role as "the official representative of the Babylonian Jews before the king" (ibid. 1). Several rabbinic texts address the relationship between the patriarch and exilarch, suggesting both collaboration and competition between them. While Palestinian rabbis claimed the superiority of the Land of Israel and its scholars, by the late third and fourth centuries the Babylonian rabbinic movement was well-established and no longer dependent on Palestinian rabbis' custody. Nevertheless, network connections between Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis continued and were maintained by travel and mutual visits (Kiperwasser 2021). Babylonian Judaism developed in its Sasanian Persian context, in a religious environment that was determined by Zoroastrianism and also included eastern Christians. The significance of this context is nowadays recognized by scholars (see the contributions in Secunda and Fine, eds. 2012 and Elman's list of publications ibid. xv-xxii), in contrast to earlier scholars' conflation of the two Talmuds and their prioritization of the Graeco-Roman background for both. From the early fifth century onwards, when the Palestinian patriarchate had ended, Babylonia became the center of rabbinic Judaism in the Middle East and remained so in the early Islamic period. The creation of

the Babylonian Talmud and the institutionalization of rabbinic academies in the post-amoraic period of the fifth to seventh centuries may be linked to administrative changes and cultural influences at that time (Lightstone 1994: 265).

Whereas the material culture of late antique Babylonian Jewry remains inaccessible, numerous synagogues, private residences, and burial sites have been excavated in Israel and dated to the fourth to sixth centuries C.E. (Levine 2016; Laderman 2021). Especially noteworthy are the two recently excavated synagogues at Huqoq (Magness et al. 2014, 2018; Grey and Magness 2013; Britt and Boustan 2017; Gordon and Weiss 2018; Cielontko 2023) and Wadi Hamam (Leibner 2010; Leibner and Miller 2010), which greatly expand our knowledge of synagogue art and iconography in late antiquity. The depictions of an elephants, workers (Tower of Babel), a large male figure in military gear (Samson), among others, have elicited much discussion among scholars and different interpretations. Since elephants are never mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, the scene seems to depict a non-biblical narrative, probably an encounter between Jews and Greeks in the Hellenistic period. The depiction of biblical and non-biblical narratives in Jewish art needs to be examined both in connection with Jewish literary sources and in the context of early Byzantine art.

Although few sources are available on Jews in the eastern and western Diaspora in late antiquity (Kraemer 2020: 21-7), with the exception of Roman Italy (Rutgers 2021), Jews continued to live in regions such as Syria and Egypt, North Africa, Asia Minor and Greece. How were these mostly Greek- and Latin-speaking Jews affected by the expansion of Christianity in these regions and the eventual Byzantine political rule? At least to some extent Jewish epigraphy and non-Jewish Graeco-Roman and Christian literary sources and legal texts can be used to throw some light on these communities. For other more western regions such as Gaul and Spain some epigraphic and archaeological material is available, especially related to burial practices (Laham Cohen 2018). Obviously, the specific regional context with its population mixture, geo-political situation, and historical development needs to be taken into account.

This Handbook focuses on the major issues and debates in the study of Judaism in late antiquity. It provides cutting-edge overviews on the state of scholarship and methodological approaches and provides bibliographical guidelines for all of the addressed topics. Especially important is the relationship between internal Jewish developments and the respective regional, political, cultural, and socio-economic contexts in which they took place. The chapters pay attention to the impact of the Christianization of the Roman Empire on Jews, from administrative, legal, and cultural points of view. They also explore how the confrontation with Christianity changed Jewish practices, perceptions and organizational structures, such as, for example, the emergence of local Jewish communities around synagogues as central religious spaces. Other important aspects concern the development of a Jewish visual culture and figural art, mostly linked to synagogues, and its comparison with the pagan and Christian use of similar imagery. Since late antique Judaism was less a “religion of the book” than a “religion of the body”, attitudes toward the body and ritual practice also play an important role.

Since we know more about rabbis than about any other Jews in late antiquity, their comparison with other types of “sages” and intellectuals is an important aspect of the investigation. Jews in late antique Palestine and Babylonia lived in different political and cultural contexts. Therefore their experiences and literary expressions have to be examined separately. To create a proper balance, chapters on rabbis and rabbinic Judaism in Palestine and Babylonia are complemented by chapters on other Diaspora communities. While certain gaps remain, partly due to a lack of source material and/or authors, the Handbook tries to provide a fairly comprehensive overview of Jews and Judaism in late antiquity.

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