Judaism in Antiquity: Ethno-Religion or National Identity

MARTHA HIMMELFARB


In the decades following the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls the scholarly fashion, at least in North America, was to emphasize the diversity of beliefs and practices that made up ancient Judaism. Some scholars preferred to speak of Judaisms in the plural on the theory that no single ism could do justice to the range and variety reflected in the ancient texts. In part this emphasis on diversity grew out of the effort to integrate the new and sometimes startling glimpses the Scrolls provided of the worldview of the sectarians who wrote and preserved them. In part—thanks to the work of scholars such as Elias Bickerman, Saul Lieberman, and Martin Hengel—it grew out of an attempt to take account of the new understanding of the importance of Hellenistic culture not just for the Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora but also for the Jews of Palestine. It also helped to move scholars away from the habit once common in New Testament scholarship of understanding ancient Judaism in dualistic pairs: (proto-Christian) Hellenistic Judaism in the Diaspora vs. (proto-rabbinic) Palestinian Judaism, or the (proto-Christian) prophetic strand of ancient Judaism vs. the (proto-rabbinic) legalistic strand.

There can be no doubt that the emphasis on diversity had some salutary effects, encouraging careful attention to the significance of the specifics of individual texts that might once have been too quickly assigned to a larger category. But it also raised questions of its own, most importantly, the problem of the connections among the various individual strands on which attention was now being lavished. Or, as Shaye J. D.
Cohen puts it in *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, his introduction to Judaism during the period indicated by his title, “With such diversity, was there any unity? What links these diverse phenomena together and allows them all to be called Judaism?” (p. 12).

Cohen answers his own questions thus:

The most potent [unifying] force . . . is self-perception or self-definition . . . the Jews . . . felt (and still feel) an affinity for their fellow Jews throughout the world, in spite of differences in language, practice, ideology, and political loyalty. Such feelings are normal for minority groups in both ancient and modern times (p.12).

Though this description of Jewish identity is clear and apparently commonsensical, the parallel between the self-perception of the Jews of antiquity and the Jews of modernity is by no means as self-evident as Cohen implies. Evidence for the ancient world is so partial and fragmentary that scholars often draw on sociological or anthropological studies of contemporary groups in order to deduce things about antiquity that the surviving evidence does not reveal. Yet any discussion of similarities between ancient and modern Jewish identity should take account of significant structural differences. Most important, whereas in pre-Christian antiquity the Jews were one minority among many, with the rise of Christianity to imperial power Jews became the minority par excellence, a status they have retained at least in the West among the heirs of Christendom. Furthermore, one defining feature of Jewish modernity is the significant number of Jews who have no connection to Jewish communal life at all, sometimes on ideological grounds; as Cohen points out, in antiquity ideological rejection of Jewish identity was not a significant phenomenon (pp. 32–34).

*From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* was a first-rate introduction to ancient Judaism when it first appeared in 1987. It was one of the few introductions to treat institutions as well as texts in both the Diaspora and Palestine, and it did so in a thoughtful, historically informed fashion. It did an excellent job of taking account of early Christian evidence and discussing questions relevant to early Christianity without pressing early Jewish evidence into categories derived from later Christian concerns. It offered original insights on topics such as the emergence of rabbinic Judaism, and where Cohen was not original, he was judicious. The new edition is only lightly revised, as Cohen writes quite straightforwardly in his preface (p. xiii). That it nonetheless remains a useful introduction to its subject is a tribute to the high quality of the first edition. The main changes
consist of the integration of more material from the Dead Sea Scrolls into the chapter on Jewish “religion” (the quotation marks are Cohen’s) and a new a section on women’s Judaism in the same chapter, as well as a more extensive introduction to the Mishnah in the final chapter. Of the remaining chapters, the chapter on sectarianism in particular would have benefited from more thorough revision to take account of advances in the study of the Scrolls. As Cohen notes (p. 128), 4QMMT had not yet been published when the first edition of From the Maccabees to the Mishnah appeared. But though 4QMMT has played a central role in the discussion of sectarianism since its publication in 1994, Cohen has done little more than update the reference in the new edition.

The lack of significant revision is particularly disappointing in areas where Cohen himself has made a major contribution. In the passage quoted above, Cohen claims that Jewish identity transcends ideology and practice, yet throughout the book he treats Jews as adherents of a religion. In the years following the publication of the first edition of From the Maccabees to the Mishnah Cohen examined the nature of Jewish identity in a series of articles that became part of an influential book, The Beginnings of Jewiobness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties (1999). There he argues that during the centuries of the Second Temple period the Jews of antiquity were transformed from an ethnic group into an ethno-religion. He links this development to the two possible translations of the Greek term Ioudaios. Until the end of the second century B.C.E. the term Ioudaios had a geographic meaning; it referred to a resident of Judea, whether or not that resident was someone we would identify as a Jew. By the end of the second century another meaning had emerged: Jew, someone who shared the culture of the inhabitants of Judea, wherever he might reside or have been born. The new meaning reflects a transformation that Cohen argues took place in the period surrounding the Maccabean Revolt. While from one point of view the Maccabean Revolt reflected the conflict between Greek culture and Jewish tradition, Cohen shows that the experience of the confrontation also brought Jews to understand their traditions as constituting a culture that shared with Greek culture the fact that it could be learned; even the word for this culture, Ioudaismos, “Judaism,” was modeled on the term for Greek culture, Hellenismos. The concept of Judaism necessarily led to a new understanding of Jewish

2. Ibid., 109–39.
identity in which people who were not ethnically Jewish could adopt Jewish culture just as non-Greeks adopted Greek culture.

This aspect of Cohen’s work is an important influence on the theory of Jewish identity David Goodblatt puts forward in *Elements of Ancient Jewish Nationalism*. Many scholars have argued that there was no such thing as nationalism in antiquity and that the Jews and other ancient peoples are better categorized as ethnic groups, a view reflected in Cohen’s choice of ethnic terminology. Goodblatt devotes much of his first chapter to demonstrating what a difficult time the theoretical literature has in distinguishing between ethnicity and national identity. One salient feature of many definitions that helps to explain why nationalism is often understood as an exclusively modern phenomenon is its association with mass culture or a mass audience. Goodblatt’s own definitions of national identity and nationalism face the issue head on by insisting on the possibility of mass culture in antiquity: “By national identity I mean a belief in a common descent and shared culture available for mass political mobilization . . . By nationalism I mean the invocation of national identity as the basis for mass mobilization and action” (pp. 26–27). In the following chapters Goodblatt sets out to demonstrate how a belief in common descent and a shared culture could “achieve an audience large enough to make mass political mobilization possible” (p. 28) even in antiquity, that is, how that belief and culture could move from elite circles to the larger group.

Before we turn to examine Goodblatt’s arguments, it is important to note that his definition of “national identity” includes the same two central categories as Cohen’s “ethno-religious” definition, ancestry and culture. Of course this is not surprising in light of Goodblatt’s view that ethnicity and nationality are virtually indistinguishable. Further, like Cohen in *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, Goodblatt does not insist on common ancestry but rather the belief in such ancestry (pp. 18, 26–27). But while Cohen stresses the centrality of culture in defining Jewish identity after the Maccabean Revolt, Goodblatt argues that kinship remained primary for Jewish identity throughout antiquity, noting that most Jews in antiquity understood a bad Jew or a disloyal Jew as a Jew (pp. 19–26). This was certainly not the view of the sectarians we encounter in the Dead Sea Scrolls, who saw the true Israel as consisting of their group alone; other Jews were as surely children of darkness as were the gentiles. Yet despite the sectarians, Goodblatt seems to me correct at least for rabbinic Judaism. If the most practical implication of the understand-

3. Ibid., 7.
ing of Jewish identity in cultural terms is the possibility of conversion, it is striking how little impact this idea has on the rhetoric of rabbinic literature, which so frequently emphasizes descent from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as a key to redemption. I have suggested elsewhere that this emphasis is at least in part a response to Christian denigration of mere physical descent from Abraham.4

Goodblatt singles out three interrelated phenomena that formed ancient Jewish nationalism: Scripture (chapter 2), the Hebrew language (chapter 3), and the priesthood (chapter 4). Written texts, especially the Torah, played a central role in the shift from ancient Israelite religion to the Judaism of the Second Temple period, and reading the texts in question would surely have served to promote national identity. But how could the Torah and the other texts have had an impact on the large majority of Jews who were illiterate? Goodblatt notes the lack of evidence for synagogues and schools—instutions later associated with Scripture—in the Second Temple period, and the limited literary evidence for public reading of Scripture until the first century C.E. Yet, he argues, the quantity of surviving manuscripts of works that became part of Jewish Scripture points strongly to public reading. Surviving manuscripts are by definition only a fraction of the number that once existed, and using Keith Hopkins’s calculations for Egypt, Goodblatt shows that the number of manuscripts recovered from the Judean desert is truly extraordinary, far larger than one would have predicted given the likely size of the population of Judea at the time.

The role of Hebrew in forming Jewish national identity is closely connected to the role of Scripture. By the time the Torah was established as an authoritative text sometime during the Persian period, Hebrew was already on its way to being displaced as the everyday language of Palestine by Aramaic. Thus, “writing in Hebrew was a choice taken in pursuit of national continuity with preexilic Israel, whether real or imagined” (p. 65). Against scholars who see the emergence of Hebrew as a language expressing nationalist aspirations in the period leading up to the Maccabean Revolt, Goodblatt argues that Hebrew played this role as far back as the Persian period, perhaps most strikingly through the publication of the Torah. The fact that Hebrew remained the preferred language of literary composition in Judea throughout the period of the Second Temple as indicated by the latest biblical texts and the Dead Sea Scrolls, in which

Hebrew compositions far outnumber Aramaic, is a clear measure of its significance for national identity (pp. 66–67).

The last major feature of Jewish nationalism discussed by Goodblatt is the contribution of the Jewish priesthood. The focus on priests rather than on the temple, which clearly played a central role in the consciousness of ancient Jews, reflects Goodblatt’s concern for understanding the propagation of mass culture. Unlike the inanimate temple, priests, a hereditary class imbued with considerable prestige, were in a strong position to spread their beliefs. Goodblatt points to three aspects of the priestly contribution to Jewish nationalism. The first is “the role of priests as preservers and teachers of the national literature” (p. 75); thus priests are the stewards of Scripture, the first central aspect of Jewish nationalism, and consequently also the stewards of the second aspect, the Hebrew language. Goodblatt also notes the “function [of priests] as actual rulers of Judah whether as independent authorities or as the highest-ranking native officials” (p. 75), a function that at least at some moments in the period under discussion gave them actual political power in addition to the prestige and authority associated with Torah and temple.

The third aspect of the priestly contribution to Jewish nationalism, an ideology of resistance to foreign rule that emerged in the period leading up to the revolt in 66–70 C.E., is the most original aspect of Goodblatt’s discussion of the priesthood. Goodblatt points to two clusters of ideas, one associated with the insistence that Israel should have “no lord but God,” the other focused on the ideal of “zeal” (p. 88), that he believes originated among priests but had an influence far beyond priestly circles (pp. 106–7). Goodblatt argues that the implicit devaluation of human kingship in the slogan “no lord but God” would have been particularly congenial to priests, and he suggests a line of development from priestly traditions of the earlier Second Temple period to the Sicarii and the “fourth philosophy” described by Josephus (pp. 91–99). Zeal, the quality from which another anti-Roman group, the Zealots, took its name, also has strong priestly associations: according to the Torah, it was his zeal in opposing idolatry at Baal Peor (Nm 25.1–13) that won Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron and ancestor of the high priestly line, an eternal covenant of priesthood. Goodblatt points out the importance of the figure of Phinehas for 1 Maccabees and presumably the Hasmoneans themselves: though the Hasmoneans came from a less exalted branch of the priestly family, 1 Maccabees represents them as the legitimate heirs to Phinehas’s covenant by comparing the zealous opposition to idolatry of Mattathias, the patriarch of the Hasmonean family, to that of Phinehas.
After presenting the elements that he believes formed Jewish national identity, Goodblatt devotes the rest of the book to three historical moments, of which the first is a consequence and the latter two are instances of mass mobilization: the Hasmonean kingdom that followed on the Maccabean Revolt, the revolt against Rome in 66–70 C.E., and the Bar Kokhba Revolt, considered through the lens of three different names they used for the Jewish nation: Israel (chapter 5), Judah (chapter 6), and Zion (chapter 7). This lens provides some interesting results. The name used during both revolts against Rome was “Israel,” the dominant name for the people in Scripture. The coins of the Hasmoneans, on the other hand, refer not to Israel but to the “hever of the Judeans.” This difference calls into question claims for the continuity of the nationalism of the revolts and Hasmonean nationalism. Indeed, the choice of “Israel” over “Judah” in the first revolt could represent a conscious effort at distance from the Hasmonean state. Alternately, it could reflect distaste for the Roman designation “Iudaea.” The preference of the Hasmoneans for “Judeans” over “Judah” also requires explanation. Goodblatt suggests that “Judeans” may have seemed more appealing because of their efforts to extend their rule beyond the traditional boundaries of Judah, although, as he notes, “Israel” with its more expansive geographic possibilities might have served them better.

Goodblatt also discusses the significance of the bronze coins from the first revolt that read “freedom of Zion” or “for/of the freedom of Zion.” These coins constitute the only positive evidence for the use of the name “Zion” in a political context, but Goodblatt notes the prominence of the name in 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, apocalypses written in the wake of the failure of the revolt. In light of the coins and the apocalypses, he argues that the absence of the name Zion in the works of Josephus and the earliest rabbinic documents, the Mishnah and the Tosefta, reflects a conscious effort to avoid an “emotionally charged” name too closely linked to the first revolt (p. 202). He explains the apparent lack of interest in the name during the Bar Kokhba Revolt by suggesting that with the temple already gone for decades, the name had less relevance.

This learned and thoughtful book makes several important contributions. I have just noted its illuminating discussion of continuity and change in Jewish nationalism on the basis of the names it invoked. Goodblatt’s attention to the problem of how elite culture was communicated to a larger group is admirable, and his discussion the evidence for public knowledge of the Torah is helpful. The discussion of the priestly aspects of Jewish nationalism is particularly provocative and thought-provoking though I am not convinced that ideas with a priestly tone necessarily
originate among priests since all Jews had good reason to be concerned about the temple and those who ran it.

In his preface Goodblatt disavows any claim to a “comprehensive treatment” of his subject, reminding the reader of the first word of his title, “Elements” (p. xiv). The missing topic from which I think the book would most have benefited is the Diaspora. Although Goodblatt announces his decision to focus almost exclusively on the inhabitants of Yehud-Judea (p. xiii), he never explains the reasons for it, nor does he consider its implications. He clearly believes that Judeans and Diaspora Jews belong to the same nation, as his emphasis on the centrality of the belief in shared kinship and his ample use of Philo imply. Yet even a brief discussion of the question of the Diaspora would have required him to adjust his arguments at certain points. For example, there can be little doubt that the Torah was central to Jewish identity in the Diaspora. But one of the most important pieces of evidence for this, the translation of the Torah into Greek for the Jews of Alexandria, also demonstrates that Hebrew did not play the same role in the Diaspora that it did in Palestine. Goodblatt comments in passing that even those who took the Greek translation of the Torah as inspired, as a story told by Alexandrian Jews claimed, recognized that it was a translation of a Hebrew original (p. 69). He also cites approvingly Seth Schwartz’s idea that Hebrew served a “talismanic function,” that is, it served to evoke the central symbols of Jewish identity, the Torah and the temple, even among those who did not understand it (pp. 62, 69–70). Goodblatt emphasizes that though ordinary Jews in Judea did not understand Hebrew, a learned elite chose to write in it throughout the Second Temple period. But he does not confront the fact that when Diaspora Jews wrote religious works, they used their everyday language, Greek.

At other points, Goodblatt’s insights about Judean nationalism might have illuminated the evidence from the Diaspora. Thus, for example, though Goodblatt notes an echo of the priestly admiration for zeal in Philo’s enthusiasm for Phinehas, the original zealot (p. 104), he does not consider its implications. During the same period in which the Jews of Judea twice revolted against Roman rule, the Jews of the Diaspora too engaged in “mass mobilization.” Philo himself was member of a diplomatic mission to Rome that followed the anti-Jewish riots in Alexandria in 38. The spring of the fateful year of 66 saw a flare-up of hostilities between Jews and Greeks in Alexandria; the Jewish uprising was quickly and forcefully

put down by Philo’s nephew, Tiberius Julius Alexander, the newly appointed Roman Prefect of Egypt. The revolt in Jerusalem began that summer. There is no clear evidence for Diaspora participation in the revolt, but in 74, after mopping up the last Jewish resistance in Judea, the Romans shut down the Temple of Onias in Egypt, which had been in operation for 200 years. Was this simply a precautionary measure, or was there some reason to believe that with the loss of the Jerusalem temple the Temple of Onias had become a focus of Jewish opposition to Rome? The most important Diaspora uprising, in which the Jews of Egypt and North Africa fought their neighbors and their Roman rulers, came in 115–17 C.E., between the two revolts in Judea. There was terrible bloodshed, and when the war ended, the Jewish communities involved had been dramatically weakened. Although the war appears to have started with a series of local riots, Eusebius, presumably relying on an earlier source, refers to the leader of the rebellious Jews as “their king,” perhaps suggesting that the rebellion had a messianic agenda. These events are important evidence for the nature of the national or ethnic identity of Diaspora Jews, and even brief consideration would surely have uncovered implications for the Jewish nationalism that is Goodblatt’s focus.

As Cohen notes in *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, it is hard to miss the contemporary echoes in discussions of Jewish identity in antiquity. Indeed Cohen provides a brief autobiography at the end of the book in acknowledgment of the likelihood that his personal circumstances shaped his reading of antiquity despite his best efforts. Cohen’s anxiety on this point makes Goodblatt’s lack of interest in the possible correlations of ancient and modern Jewish nationalism all the more striking. Goodblatt raises the issue in the first three sentences of his first chapter (p. 1) and then drops it until almost the end of the book, when he wonders whether his effort to explain the absence of the name “Zion” after the first revolt is subconsciously motivated by the role the name came to play in modern Jewish nationalism (pp. 202–3). As Cohen’s reflections indicate, it has become difficult to speak of “objective” scholarship. Nonetheless both Goodblatt and Cohen, despite his anxieties, deserve credit for at least trying to avoid reading the past in light of an ideological agenda. Both have made major contributions to the study of Jewish identity in antiquity.

7. Ibid., 347–49.