Introduction

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Although Judaism traces its roots to the Hebrew Bible, many of its practices and beliefs differ from those mandated there. Most conspicuously, the Bible never mentions synagogues or rabbis, prescribing instead a regimen of sacrifices led by priests at sacred shrines, most often in Jerusalem. Even its depiction of familiar customs often differs from modern-day practice, as when it requires that the Passover holiday be observed by slaughtering and eating a lamb (Exod 12:1–10) rather than gathering for a family meal and reciting the story of the exodus as Jews do today.

The most striking difference between biblical religion and Judaism is the failure of biblical figures to invoke written authority from sacred texts. Thus, the prophet Nathan condemns David’s adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:1–12) without citing the Ten Commandments’ prohibition of such behavior, much as Miriam’s criticism of Moses’s marriage to a non-Jew (Numbers 12:1) does not refer to Deuteronomy’s prohibition of such unions (7:1–4). Nor is there any evidence that holy books were read regularly during the biblical period, although a sacred book (presumably Deuteronomy) was discovered and its teachings enacted toward the end of the kingdom of Judah.¹ This impression is supported by documents, from a Jewish colony that existed on the island of Elephantine in the Nile Valley late in the biblical period, that do not appeal to sacred texts, even when addressing practices covered by biblical law.²

Judaism’s roots may lie in the Bible, but many of its practices and beliefs took shape later than the events depicted there. Much of its development occurred in the centuries between the Babylonian exile (586 BCE) and the rise of Christianity, during which time Jews were under the rule of Greeks and Romans as well as their own Maccabean dynasty. In other words, Judaism as we know it today emerged well after the period described in the Bible.
Yet Jewish tradition claims otherwise, finding biblical precedent for many of its practices. The Talmud, which is the primary source for Jewish practice, often supports its mandates with texts from the Torah, even though close scrutiny reveals many of those claims to be weak. The Mishnah (the earliest part of the Talmud) itself concedes that some of its laws “float in the air with nothing to support them,” while the rabbis sometimes acknowledged that these verses are “merely an asmakhta” (lit. “support”).

One of the most significant developments during the Second Temple period (520 BCE–70 CE) was the rising importance of sacred texts, which seem not to have played a role for most of the biblical era, even if they were in the process of being written then. That focus on texts began early in the Second Temple period. Ezra is said to have publicly read a holy book to those Judeans who returned from Babylonian exile; and the book of Daniel, which is the last book to have been written in the Jewish Bible, cites Jeremiah as scripture, suggesting that the process of creating a Bible was under way by the second century BCE. Other works from that period, such as the Wisdom of Ben Sira, abound with allusions to sacred books, as do the New Testament and the Mishnah, which were compiled in the first and second Christian centuries. These texts also refer to synagogues, rabbis, and scripture reading, suggesting the changes that had already transpired in the tradition’s development toward its contemporary form. Indeed, the Mishnah’s description of Passover closely matches the way that the holiday is observed today. It also records discussions about which books were sacred and which not. The New Testament’s account of scripture reading in a synagogue visited by Jesus (Luke 4:16–21) is supported by the inscription from a first-century synagogue in Jerusalem, which describes the building as a place “for the reading aloud (anagōsin) of the law and the study of the commandments.” An early rabbinic code also insists that synagogues be equipped with copies of both the Torah and the Prophets.

In short, the Bible itself and, certainly, its liturgical and legal use appear to be products of the “postbiblical” period, beginning around the sixth-century BCE Babylonian exile. That is not to say that its contents were written then, but that the process of collecting them and treating them as sacred—what scholars call “canonization”—took place after the events described within them.
shayahu Leibowitz put it, “Judaism is not founded on the Bible; the Bible is founded upon Judaism!”

The goal of this book is to present what modern scholars have learned about this early form of Judaism—the time in which Judaism as we know it took shape in the wake of the Second Temple period. Only after the Temple was destroyed did a normative Judaism emerge out of the previous diversity, with the proliferation of synagogues, the standardization of the liturgy, and the coalescence of a more-or-less uniform set of beliefs and practices.

As we will see, at the beginning of this period there were various groups under the large canopy of Jewry, each with its own beliefs and behaviors. That diversity is one of the most striking features of Jewish life during the Second Temple period. Ancient authors such as the first-century philosopher Philo, who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, and Josephus, who compiled a history of the Jews while living in Rome, tell of several competing parties—most famously the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. They also describe a group called Therapeautae, who lived in Egypt and interpreted the Bible allegorically, as did others. There were also Jewish temples in the northern part of what is today Israel as well as in Egypt, despite the biblical restriction of sacrifice to Jerusalem.

The New Testament and rabbinic writings mention several of these groups, while other sources tell of individuals who followed Jewish beliefs and practices without becoming fully Jewish. At this early stage, the rabbis were only one of many competing forms of Judaism rather than the “mainstream” it later became. Scholars have, therefore, reexamined rabbinic writings both to glean what they can about the diversity of ancient Jewish life and also to construct the rabbis’ own history, including their eventual rise to normativity.

The resulting picture has been dramatically supported by the discovery and publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls over the past half century. Although the identity of the group that produced them is still a matter of debate, there is no doubt as to their Jewishness. However, as James VanderKam explains in this volume, their beliefs were significantly different from those that came to be normative. The fact that these documents were found in the desert, away from the authorities in Jerusalem, suggests that theirs were not the officially approved practices or beliefs
at the time. Indeed, the scrolls themselves describe a confrontation between the community’s leadership and the priestly authorities as to when the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) should be observed.\textsuperscript{16} This community also seems to have followed several books that were not accepted by later Jews.

Some of those documents, which have come to be known as the Apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, are preserved in the Old Testaments of various Christian communities.\textsuperscript{17} Martha Himmelfarb’s chapter describes the beliefs of one of the groups among which these writings originated, while Erich Gruen draws on inscriptions found at various sites along the Mediterranean that demonstrate that Jewishness was understood very differently then than we might assume. Collectively, these sources confirm that Jewish identity was very fluid in antiquity. Some scholars, therefore, speak of the religion of that period as “Judaisms,” while others point to pervasive practices, such as circumcision, purity laws, Sabbath observance, sacred gatherings, and support of the Temple, as evidence of a “common Judaism.”\textsuperscript{18} However, Seth Schwartz’s chapter warns against letting our understanding of that period be colored by contemporary concerns.

Christianity, which began as one of the many forms of ancient Judaism, also took shape during this period. Jesus’s earliest followers were all Jews, and as late as the fourth century there were still “Christians” who preferred to worship in synagogues. That phenomenon raises the question of how and when Christianity came to be seen as a separate religion. Adele Reinhartz discusses the different scholarly views of how that split, which is still controversial in some circles, took place.

The Romans’ destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in the year 70 CE played a major role leading to the emergence of Judaism as we know it today. Although archaeologists have shown that synagogues already existed before that event, Steven Fine’s chapter describes how later synagogues commemorated that now-lost institution in both their architectural design and practice. Many of the rituals that had been conducted at the Temple were also incorporated into daily life, albeit in significantly different ways. Even so central a practice as prayer has a history: in biblical times, it seems to have been largely spontaneous and private.\textsuperscript{19} However, the Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrate that by the Second Temple period it had come to be a fixed activity. Communal prayer was later
standardized, as outlined in Ruth Langer’s chapter, and considered a replacement for Temple sacrifice by the rabbis.

Although scholars continue to debate the rabbis’ history and their relationship to the other groups that existed prior to the Second Temple’s destruction, it was their views that came to be normative. Elizabeth Shanks Alexander’s chapter explores the rabbis’ understanding of gender, which informs debates about women’s roles in Judaism to the present day, though it may not accurately reflect daily experience. Finally, Christine Hayes describes the various reconstructions that scholars have offered for how rabbinic Judaism achieved mainstream status.

The shift from the diversity of the Second Temple period to the dominance of rabbinic Judaism illuminates the roots of many of the features that characterize Jewish life today. Modern Jews are again remarkably diverse, practicing their religion in ways that extend well beyond familiar categories of Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist. There are also competing definitions of what it means to be a Jew—whether it is a nationality, a culture, or a religion (which can, itself, take several different forms). Some communities even think it possible to combine Christian beliefs with Jewish practices. And, of course, the emergence of modern Israel has restored Judaism’s geographic center, resulting in the presence of a Jewish nation alongside the diaspora for the first time in two thousand years. At the same time, recent studies, such as those embodied in a 2013 Pew Center report, suggest that long-established Jewish social and community structures are dissolving even as Jewish life and practice become more varied. These developments lead Robert Goldenberg, in this volume’s conclusion, to infer that we may be experiencing a reversion to the kind of Jewish reality that existed prior to the year 70.

Exploring Jewish antiquity is, thus, of value for understanding contemporary dynamics, at the same time that it illuminates an important and often misunderstood part of the Jewish past. Our growing knowledge about a long-ago period demonstrates the value of academic research for understanding the present as well as the past—in other words, how things are as well as how they came to be.

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NOTES
1 Cf. 2 Kings 22–23.
3 M. Ḥagigah 1:8, t. Ḥagigah 1:9, t. Eruvin 11:23–24, b. Yoma 74a.
5 Nehemiah 8:1–8; Daniel 9:2.
7 E.g., m. Yadayim 3:5.
9 T. Baba Meṣia 11:23.