SEVEN

The World of the Talmud: From the Mishnah to the Arab Conquest

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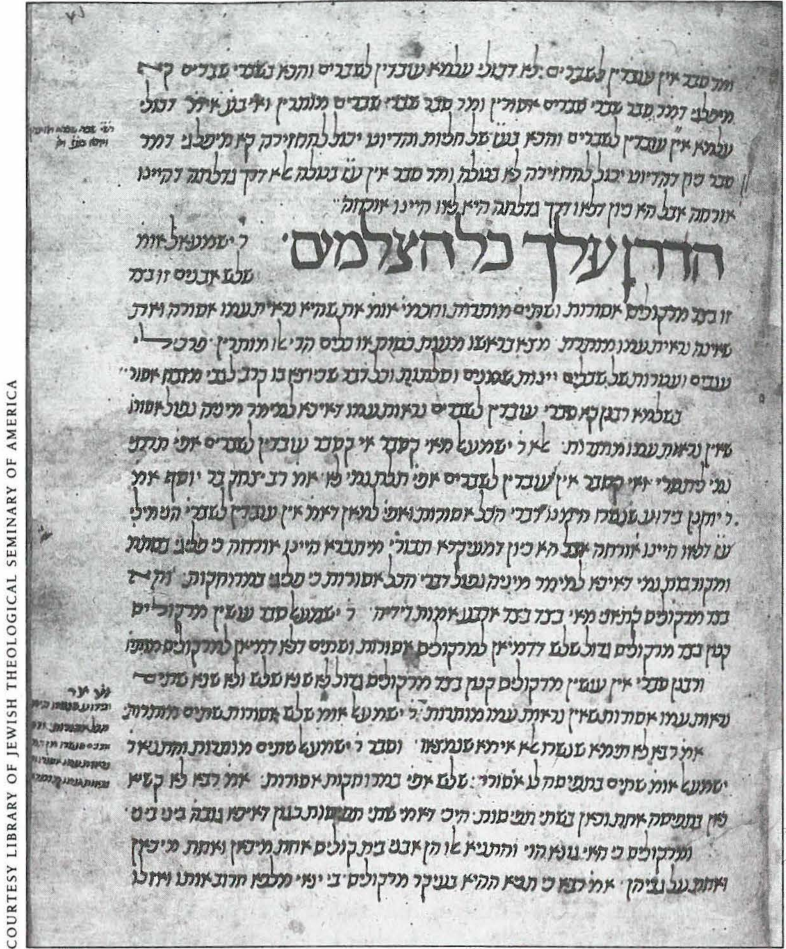
TO SOME EXTENT, THE FOUR CENTURIES OF JEWISH HISTORY surveyed in this chapter–from the completion of the Mishnah (c. 220 C.E.) to the Arab conquest of the East (early seventh century)–represent a continuation of the post–Bar-Kokhba period. No longer do we encounter major political or military opposition to the empires that ruled over those lands where the vast majority of Jews lived–whether in Palestine or the Diaspora. While the yearning for messianic redemption still asserts itself at certain major junctures, this messianism evinces itself in a far more spiritualized way (as it did in the previous period when the Mishnah was produced), rather than being centered around another Bar-Kokhba-like Jewish military figure. Indeed, these messianic passions henceforth arise primarily as a Jewish reaction to events totally beyond the control of the Jewish community itself–whether it be the pagan-Christian clash in the days of the Roman emperor Julian (361-363 C.E.) that almost led to the restoration of Jewish Jerusalem, or the three-way struggle for control over the Land of Israel (Byzantium-Persia-Arabia) that paved the way for the Muslim conquest.

More radical in its ultimate consequences is the slow but constant shift in the delicate relationship between the Jewish center in Palestine and the emerging Jewish community of Babylonia. While


הדרן עלך כל הצלמים

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A PAGE FROM THE TALMUD. The Talmud (Hebrew for instruction) is an authoritative collection of rabbinic commentary that includes the Mishnah (a collection of Jewish laws compiled by Judah ha-Nasi at the beginning of the third century C.E.) and the Gemara (an elaboration and commentary on the Mishnah). Here we see part of the tractate *Avodah Zarah*, copied in Spain in 1290 C.E.

the unchallenged status of the Mishnah as the definitive compilation of Jewish law still suggests a preeminent role for Jewish leadership in Palestine, this in itself served as a watershed in Jewish communal life. For the Mishnah represents the last such case of a uniquely Palestinian dominance over the legal development within Rabbinic Judaism. The subsequent parallel development of the two monumental corpora of rabbinic discussions and interpretation of the Mishnah, that is, the Palestinian Talmud (also known as

Yerushalmi or the Jerusalem Talmud, JT) and the Babylonian Talmud (BT)—with the ultimate superior status attached to the latter—is only the most obvious of a growing number of signs pointing to changes on a worldwide scale that reshaped the face of the Jewish community.

At the beginning of the third century, the Jews were still the predominant ethnic community in the Land of Israel,[1] notwithstanding the fact that Hadrian had already attempted to blur this reality by changing the name of the Roman province from Iudaea to Syria Palaestina.[2] If there was another major community for the Jews of Palestine to contend with, it was still probably the Samaritans,[3] not the fledgling Christian community, which had not yet begun to multiply in the Land of Israel at the same swift pace apparent in the rest of the empire. Even by the year 325, one year after all of the Eastern empire came under the rule of the first Christian emperor, it is still evident that the vast majority of Christians in Palestine continued to reside primarily in the Greek cities of the land, and had a long way to go before emerging as a major demographic force.[4] Within one century, however, these proportions slowly began to reverse themselves; by the end of the fourth and the early fifth centuries, the Jews comprised barely one-third of the total population, while the Christian community gradually emerged as a dominant demographic factor. Toward the latter part of the period surveyed in this chapter, and certainly by the sixth century, the Christian community of Palestine had grown to become the overwhelming majority among the inhabitants of the land.[5]

This new demographic reality naturally influenced the nature of Jewish-Christian confrontation and polemics, at least as reflected in the writings of the religious leaders of both groups. Beginning in the third century, the rabbinic attitude toward Christianity was no longer expressed as one dealing with an internal Jewish social and religious schism that must be resolved through a reappraisal or redefinition of what was legitimately "Jewish."[6] What emerged now, and remained a constant factor in the Palestinian rabbinic literature of the talmudic era, was a confrontational attitude toward Christianity as a distinct religion, which nevertheless required the attention of the rabbis in light of its growing strength and influence in the Land of Israel as well as throughout the empire. By the fourth century the rabbis, like most Jews, were aware of the fact that "the Kingdom [Rome] had become a heresy (*minut*),"[7] and this dramatically affected the status of the Jews. With the Church now able to assert a major degree of authority over the empire's administration, the Jews in Palestine and the empire at large found themselves—for the first time—at the mercy of their religious rival.

While the official status of Judaism as a legitimate religion did not change overnight, it was only a matter of time before the antagonism and hostility between the two groups erupted on various levels: legislation, religious decrees aimed at separating the Christian masses from all Jewish influence, even physical clashes.

Beyond all this, the third century served as yet another turning point–one in the realignment of Jewish leadership. After centuries of almost total absence from the historical scene, save for isolated first-century anecdotes recorded primarily by Josephus,[8] the Jewish community beyond the Euphrates River resurfaced, ultimately laying claim to a growing degree of independence, if not outright hegemony, regarding all aspects of Jewish communal life dependent on rabbinic leadership. This reemergence coincided dramatically with the political changing of the guard in Persia. After hundreds of years of Parthian Arsacid rule, the Jews (as well as others) found themselves not only under the rule of a new Persian dynasty founded by the Sassanians (c. 224 C.E.), but also in the midst of a major religious revival of the Zoroastrian church and a political radicalization that led to the outbreak of new hostilities between Persia and Rome. And thus, while scholars argue, not without some justification, the merits of designating the period of Jewish history beginning in the third century C.E. as the "Talmudic Era,"[9] the fact is that the new literary development that followed the compilation of the Mishnah dovetails precisely with major political and religious developments that reshaped for all time the history of all the peoples of the Near East, and to a very large degree that of the Jewish people among them.

The Jews of Palestine in the Late Roman period: 220-324 C.E.

The first years of the post-Mishnaic period in Palestine coincided with the reign of the last of the Severan emperors, Alexander Severus (222-235 C.E.). Following his death, the Roman empire sank into 50 years of political chaos and economic crisis. Emperors rose to power only to be assassinated within a few months, or a year or two at most; rampant inflation rendered Roman coins worthless; ultimately, the *principate* system of government that had existed for over two centuries collapsed, thus requiring a total restructuring of imperial administration.[10] (This was carried out by Diocletian in the final decades of the third century.) The Jewish nation was just one of many passengers on this storm-tossed ship. The vicissitudes of Roman rule in the third century were as strongly felt in Palestine as in the rest of the empire.

Jewish life under the Severan dynasty can arguably be considered the high point of Roman-Jewish relations,[11] which dated back to the initial contacts between the two nations during the early stages of the Hasmonean uprising. Moreover, while the pact be-

tween Rome and Judah Maccabee was essentially nothing more than a declaration resulting from common political aims and interests, the favorable relationship between the Jews and the empire under the Severans was far more striking. Not only did it yield practical advantages for the Jewish side, but it evolved a mere two generations after the terrible devastation wrought by Roman legions upon the land and people of Israel during the Second Jewish Revolt.

The growth of the Patriarchy

The most obvious result of the improved relations with Rome was the enhanced status of the patriarchate in the days of Judah ha-Nasi–which is frequently translated as Judah the Prince–(c. 180-220 C.E.), the redactor of the Mishnah as noted in the previous chapter. Judah's unique position, combining political power with rabbinic authority, did not go unnoticed by the rabbis ("From the days of Moses until Rabbi [Judah] we have not found Torah and [political] greatness in one place [i.e., in one person]"),[12] and while the spiritual and halakhic power wielded by subsequent patriarchs may have wavered, the political role of the patriarch remained a constant factor in Jewish life until the abolition of the office in the early fifth century. While our knowledge of the patriarchs in the fourth and fifth centuries derives exclusively from non-Jewish sources, the third-century patriarchate is well documented in rabbinic literature, and thus we enjoy certain insights into the nature of Jewish communal leadership of this period in Palestine that tend to become somewhat obscured in later centuries.

The patriarch was the Jewish representative before imperial authorities.[13] Simultaneously, he provided a unifying factor within the Jewish community. Rabbinic as well as non-Jewish sources attest to the fact that messengers (*apostoli*) were dispatched to Diaspora communities for purposes of collecting funds as well as supervising local communal authorities.[14] It was this role, together with the fact that the patriarchs claimed Davidic lineage, that ultimately rendered the office a major target of ecclesiastical pressure.

As we proceed into the third century, a number of changes in the nature of the office emerge, as well as in the expressed attitudes of the rabbis toward the various patriarchs. One major departure from the days of Judah is the physical removal of the court of the patriarch from Sepphoris to Tiberias (c. 250 C.E.). This move of the focal point of Jewish leadership appears to have taken place in two stages, and is indicative of a major development within the rabbinic class. Following the death of Judah we can clearly discern a decentralization of the all-embracing powers maintained by the patriarch.[15] Under Judah, for instance, ordination of rabbis was the sole prerogative of the *nasi*, or patriarch; afterwards this au-

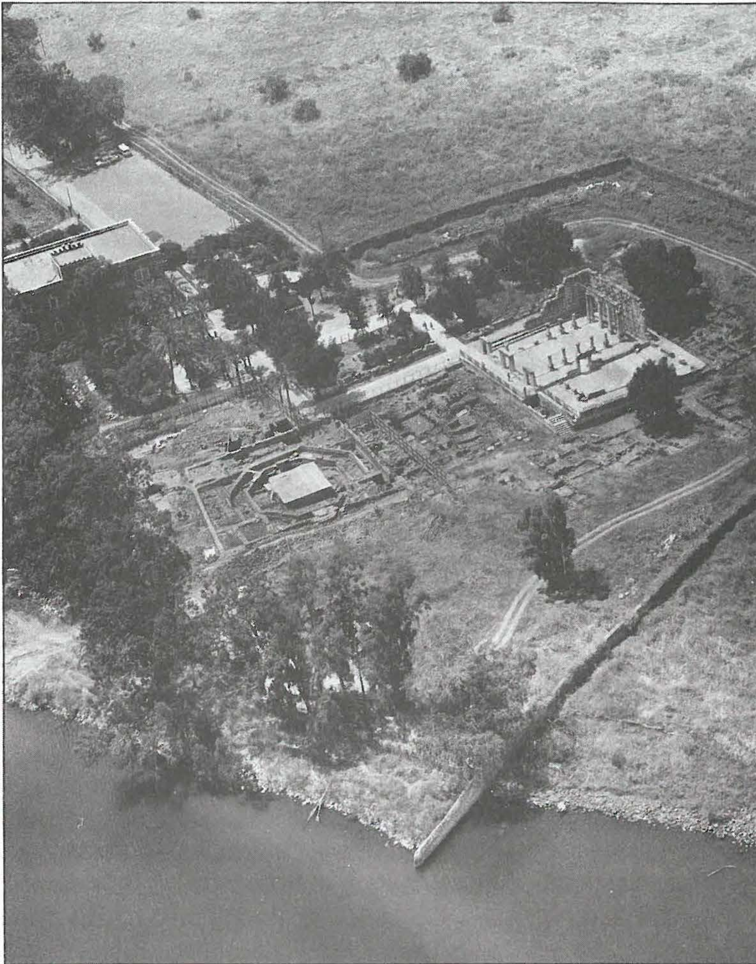
thority was divided between the office of the patriarch and the rabbis.[16] The wish to assert their independence as a distinct class may have induced the rabbis, following Judah's death, to remove their central academy from Sepphoris to Tiberias. Apparently, only later, during the days of Judah's grandson Judah II (c. 250 C.E.), did the patriarch's court move to Tiberias.[17] While this move rendered Tiberias the main center of Jewish Palestine for the next few centuries, it also suggests a heightened degree of tension in the relationship between the patriarchs and the rabbinic class.[18] In fact, numerous sources raise serious questions surrounding the propriety of patriarchal behavior during the third century, in particular regarding the ordination–"for money"–of unqualified judges.[19] Rabbinic criticism of the patriarchs sometimes alludes to other examples of improper behavior, especially their heavy-handedness in the collection of various taxes from an already overburdened population.[20]

From a purely historiographical perspective, it must be stated that we have only one side of the story–that of the rabbinic class as reflected primarily in the Talmud and Midrash, and we can only speculate on what response the patriarchs might have made to these attacks. Nevertheless, the weakening of the central power structure within the Jewish community should not surprise us, for, as we have seen, it coincided precisely with the collapse of central Roman authority throughout the empire.

New forms of taxation

Social tensions were of course linked to the difficult economic situation. With Roman currency in essence rendered worthless, it was now meaningless to exact taxes in fixed sums. Rabbinic literature introduces us to a whole new system of painful taxation: forced labor (*angaria*) in the service of the Roman administration; billeting of soldiers and Roman officials (*akhsania*), which frequently created various religious problems; supplying food and clothing to the army (*annona*); and a host of other levies.[21] The well-known phenomenon of *anachoresis*, whereby members of a municipal council, individuals or even whole communities simply abandoned their homes and fled to avoid taxation is vividly documented in rabbinic literature.[22] Appointment to the municipal council took on a new and ominous significance, for members of the *boule* (council) were responsible for the full payment of local tax assessments, even if this meant paying it out of personal funds. Thus we understand Rabbi Yoḥanan's warning to the potential appointee to the council: "If you have been named to the *boule*, let the Jordan become thy neighbor [i.e., take flight across the Jordan]."[23]

The economic situation notwithstanding, the multifaceted spiritual activity of the rabbinic class seems to have flourished during



WERNER BRAUN

CAPERNAUM. In this aerial view of the ruins of Capernaum, the columns of a synagogue can be seen on the right. This structure dates from the fourth or fifth century C.E., but almost certainly stands on the site of the first-century synagogue in which Jesus worshiped when he was in Capernaum. A short distance in front of the triple doors of the synagogue is a fifth-century octagonal church believed to be built above the first-century home of the apostle Peter. In the foreground is the Sea of Galilee.

the third century. Indeed, the most outstanding authority of the second half of the third century, Rabbi Yoḥanan bar Napha (d. 279 C.E.), may be considered the supreme Palestinian sage of the entire talmudic era.[24] His influence as head of the Tiberian academy transcended the boundaries of Palestine. Even in the Babylonian Talmud, almost every page bears his name or reflects

one of his traditions. Together with his colleague (talmudic tradition makes him a brother-in-law as well) Resh Laqish, as well as a host of other sages—many of whom were recent arrivals from Babylonia—the rabbinic movement of third-century Palestine seems to have played a major role in transforming the rabbis from a somewhat elitist and remote group of scholars into an influential, community-oriented class of social leaders. Whether this was the result of the creation and spread of permanent academies in numerous urban centers,[25] or possibly a consequence of the economic plight of the time which served as a great equalizer, contributing to the removal of social barriers, is unclear. Other factors, such as a growing need for intellectual leadership capable of fending off confrontation with the growing Christian community may also have played a role, but what is clear is that the rabbis now assumed a heightened degree of communal responsibility, primarily on a local scale, but sometimes as national figures as well.[26]

The role of the sages in Jewish-Christian confrontations

One of the roles played by certain sages in the Land of Israel was as disputants in the growing debate between Jews and Christians. Sometimes the dispute was carried on by the dispensation of responses to hypothetical questions before purely Jewish audiences, most likely in the synagogue. But live confrontations also occurred, probably in major cosmopolitan centers such as Caesarea. It is not by chance that one of the major figures involved in these disputes was Rabbi Abbahu of Caesarea. One need not tax the imagination to uncover the targets of some of Abbahu's statements,[27] frequently based on an exegetical interpretation of Scripture:

> "Rabbi Abbahu said: If a man says to you: 'I am God'—he lies; 'I am the son of man'—in the end he will regret it. 'I will rise up to heaven'—he says this but will not do it."[28]

> "Rabbi Abbahu said: A parable of a mortal king: he reigns and has a father or a son or a brother. Said the Holy One Blessed be He: I am not like that. 'I am first' (Isaiah 44:6)—I have no father. 'I am last'—I have no son. 'And beside me there is no God'—I have no brother."[29]

The implications of these confrontations and the need of Palestinian sages to be well versed in Bible and biblical exegesis for just such occasions, may help to explain an important literary phenomenon as well. The rabbis of Palestine were responsible not only for the formation of the Palestinian Talmud, but also for the birth of a different literary genre—aggadic *midrash* (see pp. 255-256). These works reflect the broad spectrum of social and spiritual activity in third- and fourth-century Palestine. Oddly enough,

no equivalent midrashic corpus was produced by the sages of Babylonia. This fact has led to much speculation. One solution may be supplied by Rabbi Abbahu himself: In the course of explaining to his apparently Christian co-residents of Caesarea why he, Abbahu, was well versed in the Bible while his Babylonian colleague Rav Safra was not, the Palestinian sage replied: "We [in the Land of Israel] live among you, hence we take it upon ourselves to learn."[30]

The nature of the debates between Christian figures such as Origen (and later Eusebius) and the rabbis of the day can be seen most clearly by comparing the contemporaneous writings of the two groups regarding the very same Scriptures. Such a comparison makes it clear that each side was well aware of the attacks launched against it by its adversary. Indeed, the comparison makes one wonder whether the two disputants were not in fact arguing face-to-face "before a live audience."[31]

These debates–and other contacts between certain sages and their non-Jewish counterparts–assume not only a familiarity with the adversary's theological claims, but also a shared knowledge of language, folklore and popular culture. It is not by chance that of all the sages it was Rabbi Abbahu who claimed it was permissible to teach one's daughter Greek "for it is an ornament on her";[32] nor should we be surprised that this sage was capable of repeating riddles based on knowledge of the Greek language and the numerical values of the Greek letters of the alphabet.[33] Rabbinic familiarity with "Greek wisdom" has been amply discussed in modern scholarship.[34] The brilliant studies of Saul Lieberman[35] have shown that although there is no explicit citation in rabbinic works to specific Greek literature, and although no Greek philosopher is discussed by name, it is clear that knowledge of Greco-Roman ideas, phrases and parables–as well as grammatical and rhetorical systems–infiltrated not only rabbinic literary work, but even religiously motivated deliberations.[36] We assume that these Greco-Roman elements were transmitted through a variety of intermediaries, most probably in oral rather than written form. Thus, the rabbis had no trouble comparing the stages of the Jew's daily *Amidah* prayer (as well as the praises of Moses, David and Solomon) with the structure and sequence found in the presentations of Roman rhetors.[37] Nor did Resh Laqish think it improper to compare the activity of the public preacher in the synagogue with that of the Greek mime in the theater.[38]

Obviously, these Greek influences were more pronounced among certain social strata within the Jewish population of Roman Palestine. Geographical proximity to large urban centers also played a role in determining the degree and intensity of such influ-

ences. While the use of Hebrew may have receded somewhat following the Bar-Kokhba uprising, it appears that many Jews in the land were bilingual, with Aramaic and Hebrew serving as their primary languages. But this situation was not uniform throughout the land. The number of Greek synagogue inscriptions found in Galilee, for instance, greatly exceeds those found in the synagogues of Judea and southern Palestine,[39] where Aramaic (and Hebrew) inscriptions were the norm rather than the exception. For our purposes, it is important to note that these Greek influences seem to have intensified in the third and fourth centuries as opposed to their prevalence in Mishnaic times. It is a good guess that *amoraim* (the sages of the Talmud) knew more Greek than *tannaim* (the sages of the Mishnah). The post-talmudic Jewish population became even more familiar with aspects of Greek-pagan culture than their predecessors.[40]

Transition to Roman-Byzantine era

The 50 years of Roman anarchy came to an end with the reign of Diocletian (284-305 C.E.), but in a larger sense Diocletian's rule represents a period of transition from the Late Roman period to the Roman-Byzantine era. While the religious upheaval brought about by Constantine affected Palestine only from the year 324 C.E., many of the administrative practices of Roman rule in the Byzantine period had their roots in the reforms introduced by Diocletian.[41] It was he who finally realized that the very size of the Roman dominion would ultimately be its undoing, and thus he decided to divide the empire into East and West. This division did not become permanent until the end of the fourth century, but its very inception had an impact on the administrative framework in which the residents of Palestine found themselves. Added to the basic geographical division was the innovative system of imperial rule known as the tetrarchy: Each of the two sections of the empire was ruled by an Augustus, under whom served a Caesar, who was designated as his eventual heir. The empire was thereby in effect divided into four sections, or prefectures, and these in turn were divided into dioceses. Palestine would henceforth be part of the prefecture of the East, with the seat of the governor of the prefecture (*praefectus praetorio*) situated in Constantinople.

The diocese in which Palestine was included was also called Oriens. Among its other provinces were Arabia and Egypt. This subdivision was designed not only to create a more efficient administration, but also to weaken the military power of any local governor. Interestingly, while the tendency under Diocletian was to limit the size of the provinces, the boundaries of Palestine in fact grew; major territories were added to the province in the south—the Negev and central and southern Sinai—at the expense of the

province of Arabia. However, within the next century the province of Palestine would be divided twice. In 358 Palestine was split into two provinces, with much of its southern territory as well as parts of southern Transjordan becoming Palaestina Salutaris, with its capital first in Haluza in the Negev and then in Petra. The capital of the northern province of Palestine remained at Caesarea, but in 409 this province was itself split in two: Palaestina Prima comprising the central portion of the land (Judea, Samaria, the coast and parts of Transjordan), with the capital remaining at Caesarea; and Palaestina Secunda comprising the Jezreel Valley, the Galilee, portions of the Golan, and northern Transjordan. The capital of Palaestina Secunda was Scythopolis (Beth-Shean). It is this province that was home to the greater portion of the Jewish population in the Land of Israel.

Diocletian's fiscal and administrative reforms were favorably received by the Jews of Palestine. Moreover, under his rule, the Jews apparently maintained the status of a *religio licita* (permitted religion): "When King Diocletian came up here[42] he decreed and proclaimed: 'All the nations will pour libations save for the Jews.'"[43] This passage is particularly noteworthy, in that it contrasts sharply with the steps taken by Diocletian against the Christian community in the final years of his reign.

The third century in general introduced some of the harshest persecution of Christians, particularly in the days of Decius (249-251). Although Diocletian seems to have tolerated Christian communities during the earlier years of his reign, events took a sharp turn for the worse in the year 303, possibly at the urging of the Caesar Galerius. That year saw the beginning of what may have been the severest persecution of Christians in all of the Late Roman empire, lasting until the year 311. From an edict requiring the burning of all Scriptures and the dismantling of churches, events quickly turned to the torture and execution of Christians. Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, was eyewitness to these events in Palestine and in other portions of the Eastern empire. He recorded them vividly in his *Ecclesiastical History*, as well as in a special treatise on the Palestinian martyrs. For those acquainted with the Jewish martyrdom stories of 200 years earlier, during the Bar-Kokhba uprising, Eusebius' descriptions are strikingly similar, even to the system of torture employed by the Romans.[44]

One can only wonder how Jews in Palestine reacted to the punishment of Christian martyrs by descendants of the very same rulers who had used the same modes of torture against the generation of Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues. If Saul Lieberman, in his famous study on "The Martyrs of Caesarea," is correct, there is testimony in rabbinic literature to a degree of respect and admira-

tion expressed by the rabbis for these martyrs, displayed just a few years before the "kingdom would become a heresy,"[45] and Jews suddenly found themselves subject to Christian rule.

The Jews under early Roman-Christian rule: 324-361 C.E.

Constantine's victory over his last major opponent, Licinius, on September 18, 324, at Chrysopolis, near Chalcedon, effected not only a reunification of the Roman empire under one ruler, but for the first time placed the Land of Israel, as well as the Jews of the entire empire, under Christian domination. The social and legal status of the Jews underwent a steady redefinition in Roman eyes. While it would be mistaken to suggest that Judaism was immediately rendered illegitimate and subjected to outright persecution,[46] it clearly found itself the target of a series of declarations issuing from ecclesiastical as well as legal sources. Indeed, it is in the various decrees of the Church councils of the fourth century, on the one hand, and the laws promulgated by Constantine and his successors, on the other, that one notes the dual nature of the steps now taken to define the role of Jews within society. Already in the decisions of the pre-Constantinian Church council at Elvira, Spain (306 C.E.), one senses the efforts of the Church authorities to isolate the Jews and remove any influence they might still possess over the growing numbers of adherents to Christianity. The thrust of these decisions, the long list of decrees that followed in the various Eastern councils, was to create as great a distance as possible between the old Israel and the followers of the Church.

At Elvira, for instance, special attention was given to the prevention of intermarriage between Jews and Christian women, as well as any sort of concubinage wherein a Christian male might have relations with a Jewish (or pagan) woman. Accepting any sort of Jewish hospitality was forbidden. Jews were even prohibited from blessing the fields of a Christian.[47]

It was in the East, however, that the Church authorities felt the greatest need to separate Jews from Christians. Not only were Jews far more numerous in this part of the empire, but they apparently still wielded influence over the religious behavior of certain Christian communities.

The most obvious and sensitive example of ongoing ties between the two religious groups was related to the celebration of Easter and its undeniable ties to the Jewish feast of Passover. Different Christian groups celebrated Easter on different days, many of them in conjunction with the Jewish Passover. For these groups, the intolerable reality was that the Jewish leadership in Tiberias (the patriarch and the Sanhedrin), by virtue of its ongoing intercalation of the Jewish calendar, in effect determined when Christians celebrated Easter. The agenda of the Council of Nicaea (325)

therefore included, possibly at the request of Constantine himself, not only issues of theological differences within the Church, but also the need to establish a new system for determining the date of Easter. As stated by Eusebius, "It seemed very unworthy of this most sacred feast, that we should keep it following the custom of the Jews."[48]

Various other councils in the East forbade any participation of Christians in Jewish worship or attendance at Jewish synagogues. One intriguing decree explicitly forbade Christians to tend the lamps in Jewish synagogues on certain holidays, apparently alluding to a practice whereby non-Jews performed certain services forbidden to Jews themselves.[49]

Parallel to this new ecclesiastical demarcation between Jews and Christians, Constantine's victory also brought in its wake new legislation intended to define the status of the Jews. In certain instances a degree of continuity was maintained under Constantine,[50] but this could not overcome the basic fact that in embracing Christianity the empire would be left with no choice but to redefine the legal status of its Jewish subjects. Thus, while the state continued to recognize Judaism as a *religio licita*, it nevertheless created the impression that Jews would not be encouraged to play a major role in society.

Protection was granted to Jews who abandoned their religion; the legislation to this effect under Constantine suggests that the process of Jewish conversion did not go uncontested by the Jewish community:

> "We want the Jews, their principals and their patriarchs informed, that if anyone . . . dare attack by stoning or by other kind of fury one escaping from their deadly sect and raising his eyes to God's cult, which as we have learned is being done now, he [the attacker] shall be delivered immediately to the flames and burnt with all his associates."[51]

Roman legislation also made it more difficult for Jews to own Gentile slaves.[52] In this way, a religious scruple (lest the Jew convert the slave) had a major economic impact. It has even been suggested that this prohibition led the rabbis to rethink Jewish law regarding the conversion of Gentile slaves, with the aim of circumventing the new legislation.[53]

Other Roman laws enacted during the first decades of Christian rule seem to have steered a middle path. Thus, while Jews were now required in principle to participate in curial liturgies (compulsory functions imposed on local council members), certain exemptions were granted to leaders of the community "in order to leave them something of the ancient custom as a solace."[54] In the

late fourth and fifth centuries, however, the situation became progressively worse, although variations evolved in different parts of the empire: Legislation in the West followed a more rigid approach in its attitude toward the Jewish community than in the East, where possibly out of deference to the far greater concentration of Jews in that part of the empire, a more moderate policy was embraced.[55]

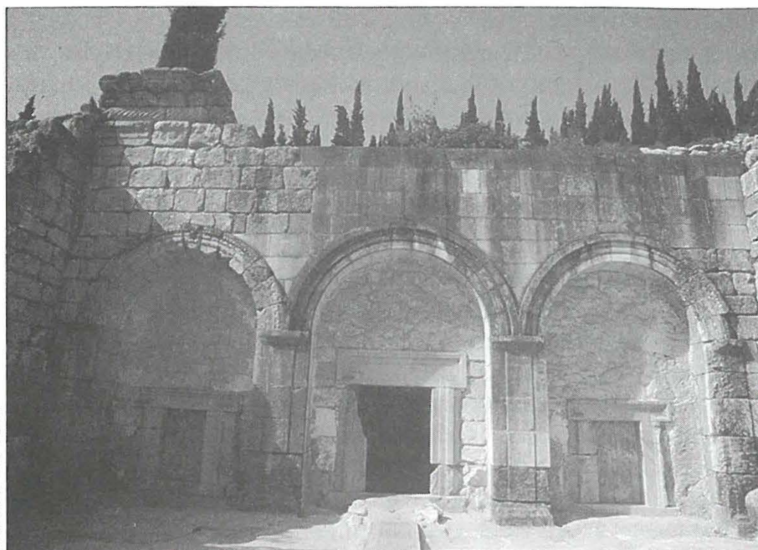
It is unclear whether the legal status of the city of Jerusalem was redefined, or whether the Jews were again—as in the days of Hadrian—denied access to the city, both as pilgrims and as residents.[56] However, it is clear that the character of the city changed. Christian pilgrims began to flock to the Holy Land in general and to Jerusalem in particular. One of the most prominent of these pilgrims, Helena, mother of Constantine, established several churches in the city. If indeed Jews were forced to reside beyond the confines of the city, it is possible that this regulation took effect in 335, coinciding with the consecration of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.[57] But the large concentrations of Jews in other parts of the land, most particularly in the Galilee, prevented a similarly swift introduction of Christianity and its symbols into those regions.

Testifying to this Jewish communal vitality is the unique story of the Jewish apostate Joseph. At first a high official in the court of the Tiberian patriarch, Joseph clandestinely embraced Christianity but was ultimately discovered and removed from the Jewish community. As a friend (*comes*) of the emperor, however, Joseph was granted permission to establish churches "in the cities and villages of the Jews, where *heretofore* no man could erect churches, for they [the Jews] do not have [living] among them either a pagan or a Samaritan or a Christian [but only Jews]."[58] Joseph's attempts to build churches in the Galilee proved unsuccessful; in the end he removed himself to Beth-Shean, where, as a somewhat bitter old man, he managed to tell his story to Epiphanius.

Clashes between Romans and Jews; the Gallus revolt

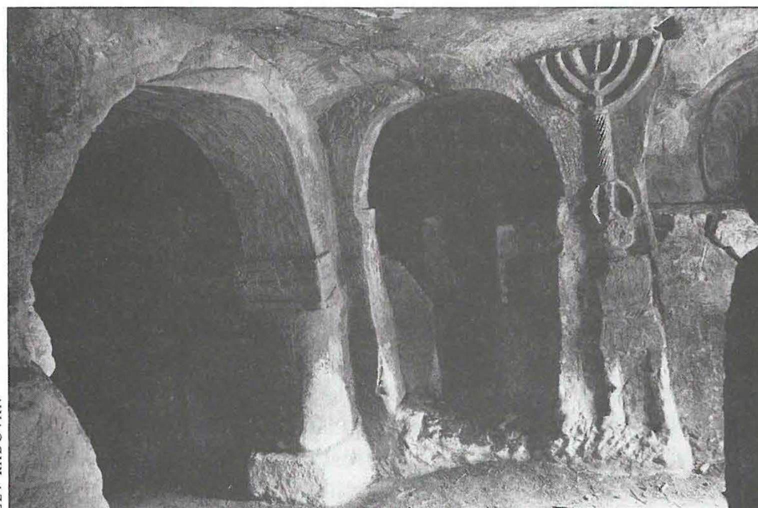
The determination of the Galilean Jews to assert themselves came to the fore again in the middle of the fourth century, in the so-called Gallus revolt. Following the death of Constantine in 337, the empire was divided among his three sons, with the East, including Palestine, falling to Constantius. After a series of civil wars, by the middle of the century Constantius was the sole ruler of Rome. While he was off in the West, however, delivering the decisive blow to his opponent Magnentius, events in the East once again led to a Jewish uprising in Palestine, albeit of limited proportions. Before leaving for the West, Constantius had appointed his cousin, Gallus, to the rank of Caesar.

If we are to believe the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus,



RICHARD NOWITZ

THE NECROPOLIS OF BETH SHEARIM. Three limestone arches frame the entrance to catacomb 14 at Beth Shearim, a complex of 26 catacombs cut into a limestone hillside in the Galilee. Judah ha-Nasi, called Judah the Prince or simply "Rabbi," was buried here in the third century C.E.; indeed, the cemetery became the final resting place for pious Jews from all over the Diaspora as well as Palestine. In the fourth century, Roman armies destroyed the city of Beth Shearim and use of the necropolis came to an end.



ZEV RADOVAN

INSIDE THE CATACOMBS OF BETH SHEARIM, a menorah is on top of the head of a man in a Roman military tunic. Jewish symbols such as the menorah are side by side with pagan motifs of eagles, bulls' heads and garlands in the tomb carvings.

Gallus was ill-equipped for the job, and his ineptness soon became apparent. The pagan historian Aurelius Victor relates that "at that time a revolt of the Jews, who nefariously raised Patricius to the royal power, was suppressed."[59] To this brief report, which leaves vague not only the question of Patricius' identity but also the causes of the revolt, a number of Christian historians add some details. Jerome relates that the Romans, in suppressing the revolt, destroyed not only Sepphoris, but also Tiberias, Lydda and "many other fortresses."[60] This report, with certain variations, is repeated in the writings of other Church historians.[61] Interestingly, while mention is made of Jewish slaughter of Roman soldiers as well as of "Gentiles, Hellenes and Samaritans," no mention is made of any attack on the Christian community. If such an event had occurred, it would surely not have gone unnoticed by Christian historians. We may therefore conclude that religious tension between the two communities was not the cause of the uprising. Furthermore, we would expect a Christian reaction, if "Patricius" were in fact a Jewish pretender to the throne, thereby suggesting messianic overtones. Since this was not the case, it seems likely that the Gallus revolt of 351-352 was the result of some local disturbances in the eastern part of the empire, when various local commanders appear to have tried to capitalize on the absence of Constantius and the presence of an ill-equipped Caesar, Gallus, to assume positions of power.

Rabbinic sources, as well as archaeological evidence, suggest that various clashes occurred at this time between Roman forces and Jewish civilians. Some Jewish towns may have been destroyed, the most important of which was Beth Shearim.[62] But the disturbances seem to have been local in nature, probably in reaction to certain isolated injustices rather than the result of a new quest for national independence. It is difficult to point to any lasting result of the Gallus uprising.[63]

The Jews and Julian: 361-363 C.E.

Gallus was executed by order of Constantius in 354. One year later, Constantius appointed his younger stepbrother, Julian, as Caesar of the western provinces of the empire: Spain, Gaul and Britain. To everyone's surprise the young caesar, who until then had been occupied with intellectual, rather than administrative, endeavors, proved an overwhelming success in defeating the various invading tribes in Gaul and in restoring a measure of tranquility to the western provinces. Slowly Julian gained the enthusiastic support of the legions under his command. By the year 360, word reached Julian's legions of Constantius' plans to invade Sassanian Persia. Julian's legions thereupon revolted and declared Julian the new Augustus. Constantius' sudden death in 361 saved Rome from

a civil war; the empire was united under the rule of Julian, a 30-year-old descendant of Constantine who suddenly declared his total opposition to Christianity and the marriage of Church and empire that had begun to evolve just a few decades earlier.

Julian did not abandon plans for a Roman invasion of Persia, and in 362, after having made his way to the East, he spent some nine months at Antioch preparing for a military campaign. Here the young emperor issued a startling declaration, which must have caught Jews as well as Christians totally off guard—he offered to restore the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem!

Julian had already made public, in late 361, his wish to abandon Christianity and restore pagan religion to its rightful position in the empire; to this end he had declared a renewed religious tolerance throughout the empire. He had restored the status of pagan temples to their pre-Constantinian position and reintroduced pagan ceremonies into the military. He even went so far as to remove all Christian clerics from their positions as teachers of literature. His justification for this is interesting: How could anyone teach a literature replete with allusions to Greek deities while concurrently denying the very existence of the entire Greek pantheon. The true aim of the decree was not lost on his contemporaries, for in fact it was intended as a means of removing all Christian influence from the educational institutions of the empire.

Only in this larger context can we understand Julian's turning to the leaders of the Jewish community with an offer to restore the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Julian, it must be remembered, was only one link in the chain of Neoplatonic philosophers who—beginning with the likes of Celsus in the second century, Plotinus and Porphyry in the third century and Julian's own (albeit indirect) mentor Iamblichus in the fourth century[64]—either championed a revival of Hellenistic philosophy and religion, or went further and, like Celsus, considered Christianity something of a barbarian superstition, which now threatened the very existence of the empire. The mystic element of Neoplatonic thinking led directly to an appreciation of sacrifices and temple worship; thus Julian (along with his spiritual predecessors) attacked Christians for abandoning sacrificial worship. This attack on Christianity did not really need the Jews for support. Recent scholarship suggests that, although the Jewish phenomenon of sacrificial worship in the Temple was introduced into this essentially pagan-Christian conflict, Jews themselves were not really an integral or active part in the confrontation.[65] Yet the Jews could not have totally ignored these developments. The paucity of our sources relating to their reaction is probably due more to the nature of extant Jewish literature from the period than a total ignorance of,

or indifference to, the events surrounding them.

In any event, during his stay at Antioch in 362, Julian apparently invited a Jewish delegation to meet with him and inquired why they did not resume sacrificial worship in their accustomed manner. This question, as well as the reported reply (i.e., that they were forbidden to perform these rituals outside the Temple of Jerusalem), smacks of a degree of innocence or poetic license that may be attributed to Christian sources for the story.[66] Nevertheless, as a result of this meeting Julian promised to restore the Jewish Temple. Two letters written by the emperor himself attest to the nature of his promise. Only one of the letters has survived in its entirety, and much has been written surrounding its authenticity,[67] which today is accepted by the broad majority of scholars. The critical portion of the letter reads:

"To the Community of the Jews:

"In times past, by far the most burdensome thing in the yoke of your slavery has been the fact that you were subjected to unauthorized ordinances and had to contribute an untold amount of money to the accounts of the treasury. Of this I used to see many instances with my own eyes, and I have learned of more, by finding the records which are preserved against you. Moreover, when a tax was about to be levied on you again I prevented it. . . .

"And since I wish that you should prosper yet more, I have admonished my brother Iulus [Hillel], your most venerable patriarch, that the levy which is said to exist among you should be prohibited, and that no one is any longer to have the power to oppress the masses of your people by such exactions; so that everywhere, during my reign, you may have security of mind, and in the enjoyment of peace may offer more fervid prayers for my reign to the Most High God, The Creator, who has deigned to crown me with his own immaculate right hand. For it is natural that men who are distracted by any anxiety should be hampered in spirit, and should not have so much confidence in raising their hands to pray; but that those who are in all respects free from care should rejoice with their whole hearts and offer their suppliant prayers on behalf of my imperial office to Mighty God, even to him who is able to direct my reign to the noblest ends, according to my purpose. This you ought to do, in order that, when I have successfully concluded the war with Persia, I may rebuild by my own efforts the sacred city of Jerusalem, which for so many years you have longed to see inhabited, and may bring settlers there, and, together with you, may glorify the most High God."[68]

To understand the reasoning behind this letter and its promise to rebuild Jewish Jerusalem and the Temple, one need go no further than Julian's major literary attack on Christianity, *Against the Galileans*.[69] Julian's admiration for Jewish ritual is manifest in that work, as is his disdain for the Christians who, while professing to have inherited Israel, have in fact abandoned the loftiest components of that religion, only to have preserved the one unacceptable tenet of biblical Judaism, which is the claim that God is an exclusive deity, jealous of all other Gods:

> "For envy and jealousy do not even draw near the most virtuous of *men*; they are all the more remote from angels and gods. . . . Like leeches, you have sucked the worst blood from that source [i.e., the Jews] and left the purer."[70]

Julian's claim, then, is that in fact biblical Judaism is praiseworthy; Christianity, on the other hand, has ignored the positive elements of Judaism:

> "Why is it, I repeat, that after deserting us [pagans] you do not accept the law of the Jews or abide by the sayings of Moses? No doubt some sharp-sighted person will answer, 'The Jews too do not sacrifice.' But I will convict him of being terribly dull-sighted, for in the first place I reply that neither do you also observe any of the other customs observed by the Jews; and secondly, that the Jews do sacrifice in their own houses, and even to this day everything that they eat is consecrated . . . but since they have been deprived of their temple, or as they are accustomed to call it, their holy place, they are prevented from offering the first fruits of the sacrifice to God."[71]

This argument, of course, serves as the theoretical underpinning for providing the Jews with precisely what they are now lacking. In Julian's eyes a natural coalition ought to exist between pagans and Jews, with Christians being odd man out:

> "I wished to show that the Jews agree with the Gentiles [pagans] [in that the Jews too would sacrifice if their Temple were restored], except that they believe in only one God. That is indeed peculiar to them and strange to us [pagans]; since all the rest we have in a manner in common with them–temples, sanctuaries, altars, purifications and certain precepts. For as to these we differ from one another not at all or in trivial matters. . . ."[72]

Needless to say, Julian was well aware of the fact that by restoring the Jews to Jerusalem he would also be destroying the Christian argument that placed so much importance on the destruction of the city (Matthew 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 21:6) and the removal

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ISAIAH INSCRIPTION found in the retaining wall of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. When the Roman emperor Julian, called "The Apostate," sought to reduce the power of the Christian church in 363 C.E., he allowed Jews to return to Jerusalem. Work began on a new Temple, only to be halted by Julian's death within the year. This inscription, "You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice; your bones shall flourish like the grass" (Isaiah 66:14), may date from that year of hope when the Jews began construction of a new Temple.

of the Jews from it.[73] Subsequent Christian authors who described the events caught the message perfectly, and Sozomen, for instance, was absolutely correct when he claimed that Julian "thought to grieve the Christians by favoring the Jews."[74]

The whole affair ended as abruptly as it began. Although the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus relates that the building of the Temple was undertaken,[75] and certain archaeological discoveries, including an inscription from the prophet Isaiah, unearthed at the recent excavations of the Temple Mount, may indeed date to the years of Julian,[76] his death in 363 during the campaign against Persia—legend attributes the fatal spear to one of his own Christian soldiers—put an end to any hopes the Jews may have entertained for rebuilding their Temple.[77]

From Julian's death to abolition of patriarchate: 363-c.425 C.E.

Julian's immediate successors did not retaliate with any anti-pagan or anti-Jewish reaction. Following Jovian's brief rule (died February 364), the empire was again divided, this time between brothers—Valens in the East and Valentinian in the West. These rulers continued to grant a degree of tolerance to the Hellenistic religions, and Judaism benefited from this moderation. As an Arian Chris-

tian, Valens had enough on his hands just maintaining his position versus the growing orthodox majority within the Church; this probably explains why he was careful not to arouse opposition among the other minorities in the East, including the Jews.

The two brothers promulgated the first law by Christian emperors relating to the status of the synagogue. The law exempted the synagogue from the forced imposition of *hospitium*, i.e., the requirement to lodge either soldiers or officials.[78]

In another, later law the brothers extended the exemptions of "the elders and others occupied in the rite of that religion [Judaism]" from serving in the curial liturgies.[79] The Jewish officials mentioned in this law, we are told, are "subject to the rule of the Illustrious Patriarchs." This point is important. From a variety of sources–all of them non-Jewish–it appears that the Palestinian patriarchs of the late fourth century were a potent force in the Jewish community, both in Palestine and in the Diaspora communities.[80]

This situation soon came under attack by various leaders of the Church. Beginning with Theodosius I (383-408), both the synagogues and the patriarchal leadership were subjected to a variety of pressures. Legislation took a decidedly negative turn. Outspoken attacks came from prominent personalities in the Church; these verbal attacks soon led to physical attacks on Jewish synagogues.

The synagogue as a focus of attack

Why did the synagogue become a prime target in the late fourth century? First, because, more than any other institution, the synagogue was the focal point of Jewish communal life. Here the Jew not only prayed, but here he was also the recipient of a varied Jewish education: On any given Sabbath he would hear a reading of the Scriptures (from the Prophets as well as from the five books of Moses), together with a translation (*targum*) which was frequently not just a verbatim rendition of the texts into the local Aramaic vernacular, but also an enhancement of the text intended to enrich the message of the Scriptures.[81] To this was added a sermon (*derasha*) that probably served as the major vehicle for the transmission of rabbinic oral tradition, encompassing legal as well as moral guidance for the masses. So the synagogue provided the most immediate source of spiritual enrichment to the common Jew.

But to all this was added, at least in the minds of certain Church authorities, the knowledge that Gentiles too, whether Christians or those with leanings in that direction, might also be attracted to the activities in the synagogue. Thus the need to restrict the institution by rendering it unattractive in the minds of the masses. At the same time, Church leaders sought legislative steps to prevent

the synagogue from continuing to flourish.

In 386 C.E. John Chrysostom, presbyter at Antioch (later bishop of Constantinople), delivered the first of a series of sermons against the Jews. While his words may be an extreme example, they reflect the growing distrust and even fear of the powers of the synagogue:

> "A place where a prostitute offers her wares is a house of prostitution. But the synagogue is not only a house of prostitution and a theater, it is also a hideout for thieves and a den of wild animals."[82]

Chrysostom knew that Christians sometimes frequented synagogues:

> "When they see you, who worship the Christ who was crucified by them, observing Jewish customs and reverencing Jewish ways, how can they not think that everything done by them is the best? How can they not think that our ways are not worth anything when you, who confess to be a Christian and to follow the Christian way, run to those who degrade these same practices?"[83]

Two years after Chrysostom delivered this sermon, a Christian mob, led by the local bishop, destroyed the Jewish synagogue at Callinicum on the Euphrates. The emperor Theodosius demanded that the offenders be punished and the synagogue rebuilt, but Ambrosius, bishop of Milan, convinced him to rescind this decree.[84]

Subsequent Roman legislation makes it clear that this was not an isolated case. A law issued in 393, defending the synagogues, referred to the "excesses of those persons who, in the name of the Christian religion, presume to commit unlawful acts and to despoil the synagogues."[85] Such warnings continued into the early fifth century, but by then they were joined with threatening statements intended to project a more "even-handed" approach:

> "No one shall be destroyed for being a Jew . . . their synagogues and habitations shall not be indiscriminately burnt up, nor damaged without any reason. . . . But just as we wish to provide in this law for all the Jews, we order that this warning too should be given, lest the Jews, perchance insolent and elated by their security, commit something rash against the reverence of the Christian cult."[86]

Another law, issued in 423, prohibited the indiscriminate seizure or burning of a synagogue, but also stated that if the structure was dedicated to the Church, "they [the Jews] shall be given in exchange new places."[87] This could well be interpreted as encouraging the confiscation of synagogues; indeed, so as not to leave

any doubt as to the ultimate intentions of the legislators, the law concluded by proclaiming: "No synagogue shall be constructed from now on, and the old ones shall remain in their state."[88]

The archaeological evidence of synagogues in Palestine during the Byzantine period makes it evident that these laws were frequently more symbolic than practical. Not only did Jews continue to build synagogues in the land, but they felt no qualms at incorporating into those structures elements obviously borrowed from the scores of churches that were now part of the Palestinian scene. These contacts were preserved "in the detailed construction, ornamentation, furnishing, stone-carving, and mosaics of [the] respective houses of worship in the Byzantine period."[89]

The decline of the Patriarchy

The office of patriarch did not fare as well. By the late fourth century the patriarchs found themselves under growing pressure, again obviously coming from ecclesiastical circles. Church leaders attempted to influence the emperors to limit the powers of the Jewish leaders. Given the fact that the patriarchs provided a convenient link between the Jewish community and the Roman administration, it was not in the latter's interests to limit the influence of the patriarchs.

In 396 a law was issued that prohibited public insults to the patriarchs: "If someone shall dare make in public an insulting mention of the Illustrious Patriarchs, he shall be subjected to a vindicatory sentence."[90] Three years later, however, a series of attacks on the Jewish leader began. He was referred to in one law as the "despoiler of the Jews"; he was warned, as were his messengers, to desist from gathering funds from the Jewish communities to be sent to the patriarch.[91] Chrysostom referred to the patriarchs as "merchants" or "traders," stressing their greed.[92]

At least in the East, these anti-Jewish laws met with considerable opposition, probably from the Jews themselves. Their efforts were initially successful. In a law promulgated in February 404, the privileges of the patriarch were reinstated.[93] A few months later, another law renewed permission to send funds to the patriarch.

This, however, was the last law that gave unqualified support to the office of the patriarch. With the ascension to the throne of Theodosius II (408-450 C.E.) pressure against the patriarch began to mount. In 415, a number of new restrictions were imposed on the Jewish community: New synagogues were prohibited. The patriarch was encouraged to destroy synagogues in places that had been deserted, provided this would not cause a disturbance. Patriarchs and Jews in general were prohibited from converting non-Jews. Any Christian slave belonging to the patriarch was to be transferred to the Church. This detailed law was, in effect, a direct

attack on the patriarch, beginning with a personal reference—"Since Gamaliel supposed that he could transgress the law with impunity"—and proceeding to demote Gamaliel to a lower rank than he had hitherto enjoyed.[94]

This was not simply another attempt to weaken the unity of the Jewish community. Much more was involved. The patriarchs still claimed Davidic lineage. Although the messianic implications of this pedigree played no practical role in Jewish life, it did reflect Jewish commitment to the claim that the House of David still had a prophetic role to play in history's unfolding drama. Beyond this, a blow to the patriarchate was interpreted as a major step toward the ultimate dissolution of the Jewish community.

We do not know precisely what led to the final abolition of the patriarchate. A law in 429 stipulates that the Primates of the Jews, whether in the provinces of Palestine or in the other provinces, must transfer to the imperial treasury those funds that they have received "since the cessation of the patriarchs."[95] True, this law makes no direct mention of an imperial act that had eliminated the office of patriarch, but it is difficult to suppose that a lack of legitimate heirs brought an end to an office that had existed for centuries and had played such a crucial role in Jewish history since at least the destruction of the Second Temple.[96] Accordingly, many scholars believe that sometime between 418 and 429 C.E. some event sufficiently aroused the imperial administration that it forcibly brought an end to the office of patriarch. Yaron Dan notes that according to one source a rebellion broke out in Palestine in 418 and was put down by the Goth *comes* Plinta, who was later appointed consul.[97] If the Jews were believed to have played a role in this rebellion, this might have served as a pretext for the abolition of the patriarchate.

The law of 429 quoted above points to the existence of two Sanhedrins in Palestine. This too may have been the result of a Roman attempt to decentralize Jewish communal life and thereby weaken it.

The Palestinian Jewish community was not really devastated by the cessation of the patriarchate. Other institutions of Jewish leadership in Tiberias continued to exercise influence not only over the Jews of Palestine, but, in certain cases, in the Diaspora as well.[98]

The final two centuries of Byzantine rule in Palestine: 425-614 C.E.

The effects of the last two centuries of Roman-Christian rule in Palestine on the Jewish community are enigmatic, and even somewhat surprising. All signs should have pointed to the slow demise of the Jewish community's vitality: Central leadership in the form of the patriarchate had been abolished; beginning with Theodosius II, the legal status of the Jews came under renewed pressure; de-

mographically, the Jews of Palestine were clearly outnumbered by their Christian counterparts. And yet an apparently active and vital Jewish community continued to exist in the Holy Land.[99]

Synagogue building and restoration continued at full steam. Many of the synagogue structures that can be securely dated by means of inscriptions were either constructed or restored precisely at this time. The mosaic floor at Beth Alpha was produced during the reign of "King Justinus" according to the Aramaic inscription at the entrance to the main hall, almost certainly referring to the reign of the emperor Justin I (518-527 C.E.). The mosaic in the synagogue of Gaza was laid in 508. What is possibly the most interesting synagogue dedicatory inscription was found on the lintel from what must have been the the entrance to the synagogue at Kfar Naburaya: "In the year 494 to the destruction [of the Second Temple, i.e., in 564 C.E.], the house was built under the leadership of Hanina ben Liezer and Luliana (Julian) bar Judan."[100] Other impressive dated synagogue inscriptions come from Rehov, Ein Gedi and elsewhere. Clearly this was not a period of decline in the building and refurbishing of Palestinian synagogues.

All sorts of reasons have been proposed to explain the continued viability of the Jewish community in what should have been a period of decline. In purely economic terms, the late Byzantine period in Palestine was a prosperous one.[101] Christian pilgrims in ever-growing numbers continued to make their way to the Holy Land, not only spending money while there but frequently bringing with them donations for a variety of religious institutions, primarily churches and monasteries.[102] Moreover, the religious inclinations of some of these pilgrims were at times quite friendly toward the Jews. For example, Eudocia, the wife of Theodosius II, visited Palestine in 438. During her stay[103] she evinced much sympathy for the Jewish community. She may even have revoked the prohibition against Jews residing in Jerusalem, much to the consternation of Church leaders, such as Barsauma of Nisibis, who visited Palestine at the time.[104] According to Barsauma's biography, as a result of the empress' benevolence, the Jewish leadership issued the following proclamation to their people:

> "To the Great Nation of the Jews, from the Priests and Leaders in Galilee, Peace: Know you that the end of the dispersion of our people has arrived and the day of the ingathering of our tribes is upon us. For the Kings of Rome have decreed that our city of Jerusalem shall be restored to us. Hurry then to come to Jerusalem for the feast of Sukkoth, for our Kingdom is destined to arise in Jerusalem."[105]

While the authenticity of this letter, in precisely this version, is

not above suspicion, there is no reason to doubt Eudocia's generosity, nor the existence of a certain degree of messianic fervor among the Jews.

This proclamation also indicates that a recognized Jewish leadership existed in Galilee even after the abolition of the patriarchate. Testimony to this leadership appeared again in the sixth century. Then its influence extended beyond the borders of Palestine, reaching as far as southern Arabia. Numerous Christian-Byzantine authors attest to the fact that the tribe of Himyarites in southern Arabia–modern Yemen–adopted Judaism in no small measure as a result of the activities of Jews sent from Tiberias. In the sixth century, the Himyarite Jews, in cooperation with Jews from Palestine, came to the aid of the local king, Dhu-Nuwas, who had also converted to Judaism and was resisting Ethiopian efforts to dominate the area. Southern Arabia was critical because it controlled important trade routes to the east. The Jewish leadership in Tiberias apparently felt it could alleviate its own plight under Byzantine rule by using the Himyarites as leverage.[106] The Christian author, Simon of Beth Arsham, describes how "these Jews of Tiberias send priests every year and all the time and arouse disputes with the Christians of Himyar"; Simon clearly understood the intentions of the Jews. He therefore warned them that "if they do not cease, their synagogues will be burnt and they themselves will be molested in all places where the Crucified one is reigning."[107] The allusion to priests in Arabia is all the more meaningful in light of a discovery made in 1970 in a mosque some ten miles east of the Yemenite capital of San'a. There, on a portion of a column, Dr. Walter Miller discovered a list of the 24 priestly orders (*mishmarot*), similar to the lists that existed in Palestinian synagogues at the time.[108]

The nature of the Jewish leadership in Tiberias is far from clear. One medieval source claims that a descendant from a different branch of the House of David appeared in the city approximately 100 years after the end of the patriarchate. A ninth-century Babylonian chronicle (*Seder Olam Zuta*, apparently produced to support the claim to Davidic lineage of the exilarchs in Babylonia) describes a Jewish uprising against the Persian Sassanian monarchy approximately during the years 495-502 C.E. The leader of the insurrection, the exilarch Mar Zutra, was ultimately executed by the Persians, but his son Mar Zutra managed to flee to Palestine, where he was appointed *resh pirka* (head of the academy [?]) and/ or *resh sanhedrin* (head of the Sanhedrin) in Tiberias.[109] It is not clear whether these titles refer to two distinct offices and thus designate stages in Mar Zutra's Palestinian career,[110] or whether they are synonymous phrases. In either case, the source seems to

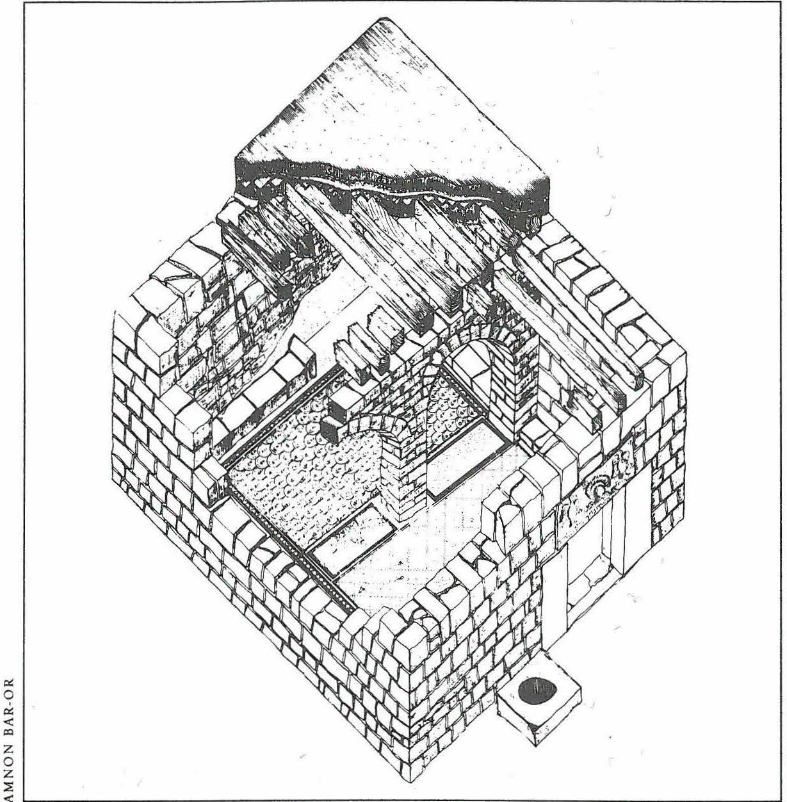
suggest that Tiberias in the early sixth century did not suffer a void in the leadership structure of the Jewish community.

The fact that the community continued to be led, or at least taught, on a regular basis, primarily in the synagogue, by a circle of spiritual leaders is evident from a law introduced by the emperor Justinian in 553. Preserved in the Greek *Novellae*,[111] the law deals ostensibly with the language to be used by Jews in the synagogue, specifically when reading the Scriptures. In effect the law permitted the Jews to use Hebrew, Greek or any other language, although when reading the Bible in Greek they were encouraged to use the Septuagint version, but were also permitted the Greek translation of Aquila. Regarding the oral Jewish tradition, the law took a harsher tone, however: "What they call *deuterosis*, on the other hand, we prohibit entirely, for it is not included among the holy books."[112] Scholars are divided as to the precise meaning of the outlawed material. Some translate it as "Mishnah."[113] But what connection is there between the Mishnah and synagogue activity? I believe that *deuterosis* is a general term for oral tradition, which indeed is *deuterosis*, that is, secondary to the written Bible. The intention here seems quite obvious: it is the corpus of rabbinic tradition in its entirety, legal as well as homiletical, that could never be accepted by the Church; "It was not handed down from above by the prophets, but it is an invention of men in their chatter, exclusively of earthly origin and having in it nothing of the divine."[114] This is but a thinly veiled attack on the leadership of the Palestinian sages and their representatives, who were still, it appears, a potent force on the Jewish scene even in the middle of the sixth century.

The literary achievement in Palestine: Talmud and Midrash

The sages of Palestine in the post-Mishnaic period were not only an influential spiritual factor in their own day, they also left behind an impressive literary heritage.

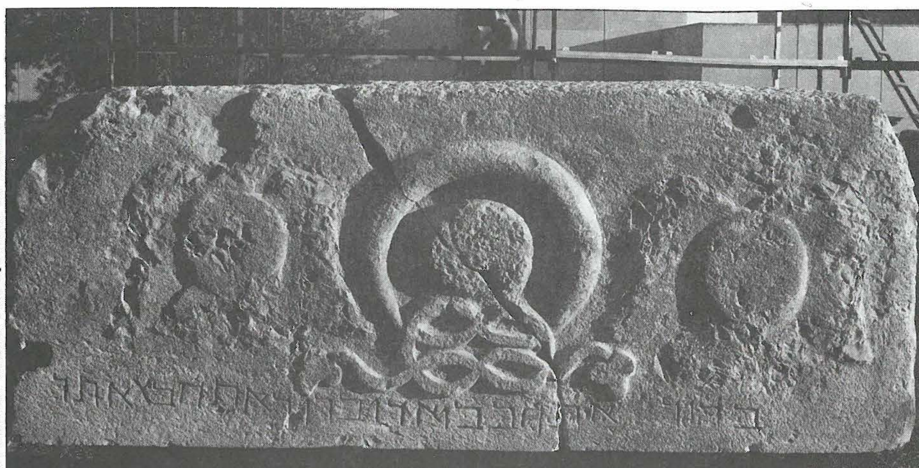
Elements of continuity as well as innovation are to be found in the works of the Palestinian *amoraim*. But a word of caution and qualification must precede any discussion of this corpus, or corpora, of rabbinic literature. We commonly refer to the sages of the third and fourth centuries (and in Babylonia the fifth century as well) as *amoraim*, and to the talmudic works they produced as amoraic literature. This is, however, correct only in the sense that the books we are about to examine contain the statements, ideas and homiletics of those rabbis. The final redaction of almost all of these works came later, sometimes decades or even a century or two after the amoraic period. In some cases–including books that provided much of the source material for this chapter–they underwent a final redaction process hundreds of years after the deaths



AMNON BAR-OR

THE HOUSE OF STUDY—BETH MIDRASH—AT MEROTH IN NORTHERN ISRAEL. This small house by the synagogue at Meroth was probably set aside for adult study of the Mishnah, the earliest collection of rabbinic laws. Stone benches lined the walls and mosaics depicting pomegranates and date clusters as well as specifically religious symbols (shofar on either side of a Torah ark, and a wolf and lamb illustrating Isaiah 65:25) covered the floors. Above the entrance was an inscribed stone lintel about 6 feet long. Originally built in the late fourth or early fifth century, the synagogue was destroyed by an earthquake and rebuilt in the seventh century. The House of Study may date from the seventh century rebuilding.

of the people whose deeds they recount. This is a result of the unique process of transmission and preservation of rabbinic material, which in many cases was not put into writing in a formal sense until the early Middle Ages.[115] Thus, for instance, we speak of books such as *Genesis Rabbah* or *Leviticus Rabbah* as amoraic *midrashim*, but this is only true in regard to the persons whose statements are quoted therein. In these two cases the final literary redaction probably did not take place until more than a century or two following the talmudic period, i.e., in the fifth to seventh cen-



COURTESY ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY

BETH MIDRASH. This stone lintel is inscribed in Hebrew, "Blessed shall you be in going in and blessed shall you be in going out" (Deuteronomy 28:6). A large Roman-style wreath with a knot of ivy tendrils was once flanked by two eagles, probably destroyed by iconoclasts in the eighth century C.E. The lintel from Meroth is similar to the only material evidence specifically mentioning a *beth midrash*, a lintel found in Dabbura in the Golan that is inscribed, "This is the *beth-midrash* of Rabbi Eliezer Ha-Kappar [a rabbi frequently cited in the Mishnah]."

turies.[116] Other *midrashim* make obvious references to the period after the Islamic conquests. *Numbers Rabbah*, for example, was probably not finally edited until the 12th century! So we must be careful how we use this material.

The amoraic literature of Palestine differs markedly from the literature of the earlier, Mishnaic period. While the Talmudim of both Palestine and Babylonia are in a sense discussions and elaborations of the Mishnah text, and in that sense are a direct continuation of earlier rabbinic endeavors, the nature of these deliberations as recorded is totally different from the presentation of the Mishnah. The corpus of law in the Mishnah emerged at some time following its redaction as the definitive code of Jewish law, to be studied in fine detail. But its structure is that of a legal code, organized topically and systematically, and with very little nonlegal material or digression from the main theme of each tractate. Not so the Talmudim. While constantly building on the Mishnah, the Talmudim nevertheless provide the student with a much more fluid and elaborate context. The highly associative or suggestive nature of talmudic discussion enables it not only to digress, but also to introduce into supposedly legal discussions lengthy nonhalakhic material: legend, folklore and popular wisdom. In a

sense, one feels far more "in the real academy" when studying Talmud as opposed to Mishnah. The doubts and misgivings of named rabbis appear alongside absolute *halakhah*. Sometimes we are witness to lengthy deliberations that precede the final formulation of a legal statement.

Differences between Palestinian and Babylonian Talmudim

Within this framework scholars have searched for signs peculiar to the Palestinian Talmud, as opposed to that of Babylonia.[117] It is assumed, to begin, that a major chronological difference exists. Whereas the last generation of Babylonian *amoraim* referred to in the Babylonian Talmud belong to the late fifth century (the last Babylonian sage, Ravina, died in 500 C.E.), the names and events mentioned in the Palestinian Talmud suggest a work whose development ceased approximately 100 years earlier.[118]

But beyond this difference is one of style as well. The discussion of the same Mishnah passage is almost always more concise in the Palestinian Talmud, which frequently does not contain a detailed analysis of each and every word in the Mishnah, as is common in the Babylonian Talmud. Thus the Babylonian Talmud frequently suggests an emendation of the Mishnah text, or at least of our understanding of that text.[119] The question is whether these discrepancies between the Talmudim are attributable to varying styles and systems of study, or, on the other hand, to the historical contexts in which the two works underwent the final stages of their respective redactions. Some scholars would attribute the brevity, and sometimes even abruptness, of the Palestinian Talmud to the difficult political situation that pressed upon the Jews of Palestine during the Byzantine period.[120] While this might not be the only solution, it is clear that the different conditions under which the two works were composed played a major part not only in the language (Palestinian Aramaic with a major dose of Greek in the Palestinian Talmud; Babylonian Aramaic and numerous Persian loanwords in the Babylonian Talmud) but in diverging attitudes toward a number of the main issues of the day.

One enlightening example relates to the attitude of the two Talmudim to the Gentile governments under whose rule the local Jewish communities found themselves. The underlying perception of many Palestinian sages, already evident in the Mishnah[121] and later even more so in the Palestinian Talmud, is that Roman rule of Palestine is not only evil but in fact illegitimate, at least within the boundaries of Eretz Israel—thus encouraging, for instance, anyone who might wish to refrain from paying taxes to do so by any means at their disposal. The accepted attitude in the Babylonian Talmud, on the other hand, is that "the law of the kingdom is law" (*dina de-malkhuta dina*), with all the concomitant requirements to

remain a law-abiding citizen.[122]

In addition, the manner in which the Mishnah was studied in the two Jewish centers may also have determined the differences between the finished products. Neither of the Talmudim contain discussions attached to all six orders of the Mishnah. This may be a consequence of different curricula in the academies of the two centers.[123] Indeed, not all portions of each of the Talmudim emanate from a single center in each land. Saul Lieberman has attempted to prove that certain tractates of the Palestinian Talmud were redacted in Caesarea rather than in Tiberias, where the bulk of the work seems to have been edited.[124]

The aggadic midrashim

As noted above, in Palestine a second genre of rabbinic literature emerged alongside the Talmud, that is, the amoraic *midrashim*. These works are frequently referred to as aggadic *midrashim* because the literary components of these books address themselves primarily to the vast and varied world of Jewish thought, morality and biblical exegesis, rather than legal material. When all is said and done the only really acceptable definition for *aggadah* is anything (and everything) that is not *halakhah*.

The aggadic material in the *midrashim* finds its genesis in a number of contexts. Discussions relating to the patriarchs and the ancient heroes of the nation could easily have developed out of constant rabbinic involvement in biblical exegesis. This, we have already seen, might have played a social role in the synagogue, as well as a purely academic one in the academies of the third and fourth centuries in Palestine. Even when the rabbis dealt with post-biblical persons or events, up to and including the events of their own generation, this was not done out of any critical need or intellectual desire to preserve "history" as we conceive of it. Rather, the past played a role only if it could be used to support some moral or ethical motive whose relevance was above time or place. Rabbinic history, then, is subservient to a higher goal, and we must never lose sight of this when using rabbinic *aggadah* for the purpose of deriving historical realities.[125] Thus, for example, the sages were not all that interested in ascertaining *what* happened during the Bar-Kokhba war (or any other major catastrophe), in the manner of a Dio Cassius, but rather they wanted to discover what improper behavior on the part of the Jewish people had led to the calamity. In the words of the Palestinian sages themselves:

> "If you wish to know Him who decreed and [as a result] the world was created, study *aggadah*. For through this [*aggadah*] you know Him . . . and attach yourself to His ways."[126]

Two distinct types of aggadic *midrash* survived. One would ap-

pear to be the product of the academy. It is learned, and–most important–follows the Scriptures, word for word. We can regard these *midrashim* as commentaries on the Bible; indeed, they are frequently referred to as exegetical *midrashim*. One of the most prominent of these is *Genesis Rabbah*, which, together with *Lamentations Rabbah*, is possibly the best example of a *midrash* redacted not long after the end of the amoraic period.

The second genre, while obviously having undergone a literary redaction, nevertheless impresses us as being closer to the sermons that might have been delivered in synagogues on any given Sabbath or holiday.[127] Rather than explaining each biblical verse, these works focus on a major issue or theme, usually linked in the opening of the discussion to a scriptural passage. This passage is then linked, during the course of the discussion, with many other passages from all over the Bible, interspersing these references with stories and parables, many from everyday life. Slowly, the *midrash* weaves a case on any given issue, until finally returning, in a most acrobatic fashion at times, to the scriptural passage with which the discussion opened. Such *midrashim* are often referred to as homiletical *midrashim*. One of the best and earliest examples of this genre is *Leviticus Rabbah*. Some of the most beautiful specimens of rabbinic teaching can be found in these *midrashim* and, if nothing else, they make it abundantly clear why the emperor Justinian would consider the propounders of this kind of *deuterosis* to be the truly influential teachers of the Jewish community.

Halakhic and liturgical literature

The post-talmudic era (fifth to seventh centuries) in Byzantine Palestine does not mark a regression in the literary output of the country's spiritual leaders. Rather, we begin to encounter new literary genres in two specific categories of spiritual endeavor: *halakhah* and liturgy.

Discoveries in the Cairo Genizah now make it apparent that the late Byzantine period saw the emergence of a unique type of halakhic literature: collections of halakhic rules on particular issues of religious law, such as the laws of ritual slaughtering, blessings, formulas for documents and the like.[128] Compilations of halakhic decisions apparently became quite popular during the late Byzantine period. Known as books of *ma'asim*, these compilations supply us with a unique collection of sources on daily life in late Byzantine Palestine, touching on a variety of economic, social and religious issues.[129]

Alongside these halakhic works, the Byzantine period appears to represent the first major historical context for the appearance of the unique liturgical poems known as *piyyutim* (singular, *piyyut*). The first renowned *paytanim* (authors of *piyyutim*), such as Yosi b.

Yosi and Yannai, made their appearance at this time. *Piyyutim*, which accompanied the regular prayers in the synagogue, frequently address the issues and hopes of the time. They are a unique expression not only of a renewed yearning for redemption, but also of a return on a popular level to the use of the Hebrew language throughout the Land of Israel.

Late Byzantine rule in Palestine; the Persian invasion and Arab conquest of the Holy Land

The first four decades of the seventh century—more precisely 614-638 C.E.—were tumultuous years in the history of Palestine. In that brief span the rule over the land changed hands at least three times, messianic hopes were raised, cruelly dashed, raised once again—and similarly crushed a second time. In this short time, two monotheistic religions—Judaism and Christianity—and a fledgling third religion—Islam—all focused their spiritual and political attentions on this small territory. In Palestine, the two great empires of the Near East clashed once again, the culmination of 400 years of strife between Rome and Sassanian Persia. Each enjoyed astounding victories and suffered terrible defeats. The ultimate consequence of these clashes was the complete exhaustion of both sides, opening the way for relatively easy conquests by a third party, conquests that determined the dominant character of this part of the world for the next 1,300 years.

Over the centuries, the confrontation between Rome and Persia had amounted to something of a standoff. Persia ruled as far west as the Euphrates, Rome got as far as the Near East. The unfortunate buffer states—Armenia, Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine—served as battlefields when one side or the other tried to gain advantage. By the late sixth century a *modus vivendi* had emerged between the two empires. Correspondence between the emperor Mauricius (582-602 C.E.) and the Persian king Chosroes II (590-628) points to their shared interest in achieving stabilization, if only as a means of freeing their respective armies to fight on other fronts. An "eternal" pact was signed between the two, which almost reflects their self-perception as the bearers of a shared role to preserve peace. Interestingly, this idea found its way into Jewish sources as well, such as the midrashic statement that "God did not divide the world among two nations and two kingdoms, except for the purpose of watching over Israel."[130]

The pact itself remained in effect for about ten years. The situation became destabilized, however, when the Roman army rebelled, placing one of its own, a man named Phocas, at the helm. Phocas proceeded to engineer the death of the emperor Mauricius (602 C.E.). This in turn freed the Persian king Chosroes to go to war against Byzantium. In the spring of 604 the Persian king took the border city of Edessa. A year later (605) the Persian army defeated

a Byzantine force in Mesopotamia. The following year (606) the Persian forces conquered Byzantine Armenia. By 607 Roman fortresses along the Euphrates began to collapse, and Persian raids reached territory in Syria, Phoenicia and even Palestine. This pressure led to the assassination of Phocas (on October 5, 610). He was succeeded by Heraclius, the son of the Roman governor of Africa. At first, Heraclius fared no better at stopping the Persian forces. Antioch and then all of Syria fell. With the fall of Damascus in 613, the road to Jerusalem was open.

It is not hard to imagine how these events were interpreted by the Jews of Palestine. For years, and indeed for centuries, Jewish eyes always turned eastward when they considered how the Holy Land might be wrested from Rome. In the second century one noted Palestinian sage, Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai, was recorded as saying: "If you see a Persian horse tied to graves in Eretz Israel, wait for the feet of the King, the Messiah."[131] A contemporary, Rabbi Judah b. Illai, stated outright: "Rome is destined to fall to Persia."[132] And now, Jews were apparently taking a more than passive interest in the events. According to some reports, Jews aided the Persian advance near Antioch, and even served as soldiers in the Persian army.[133]

To what extent the Jews of Palestine were actually willing to aid the Persians is not entirely clear. But at least in Christian eyes there was no doubt as to where the Jews stood: Sabeos, the Armenian historian of the late seventh century, stated,

> "All of Palestine surrendered willingly to the Persian king; in particular the remnants of the Hebrew nation rose up against the Christians and out of national zeal perpetrated great crimes and evil deeds against the Aryan community. They united with, and acted in total conjunction with, the Persians."[134]

According to another source, attributed to a Jewish convert named Jacob (c. 640 C.E.), the leader of the Jews of Tiberias had prophesied that in eight years the Messiah would appear and restore the kingdom of Israel.[135] Such messianic expectations are also reflected in a unique new literary genre commonly referred to as *midreshei ge'ullah*, that is, *midrashim* of redemption.[136] That the kingdom of Persia was to usher in the messianic age, made it even easier for Jews to identify this age with the return to Zion following the Babylonian Exile 12 centuries earlier. That the current Persian king's name, Chosroes, was similar to Cyrus obviously didn't hurt either.

The rise and fall of Jewish fortunes under the Persians

It was this ferment that greeted the Persians as they entered Palestine. In the early summer of 614 the Persians entered Jerusalem and for three days conducted a mass slaughter of the local population. This was followed by a respite, during which those in hiding were encouraged by the captors to come out. Here our sources are divided as to what befell Christian captives, and in particular what role was played by the local Jewish population. Some have claimed that the Jews were proclaimed rulers of the city, invested with full powers of government. This of course played into the hands of those who then blamed the Jews for the systematic destruction of all the churches in the city. Pent-up hostility between the two religious communities so impressed our sources that it is difficult to form any clear picture of what actually happened. One anonymous source has the Jews informing the Persians of an enormous treasure of gold and silver under the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The aim was clear in the eyes of the reporter: A Jewish attempt to have the church destroyed.

At the same time Jewish sources, e.g., one of the *midreshei ge'ullah* known as *Sefer Zerubavel*, describe a process of Jewish Temple restoration: sacrifices, building a tabernacle on the Temple Mount, prayers at the gate of the Temple Mount and the like.[137] But that same source goes on to describe what appears to have been a change of heart by the Persians. It is possible that after their initial successes in Palestine, the Persians realized that the Jewish population in the land, as well as in Jerusalem, was by now a small minority, and decided to come to terms with the far more powerful Christian community. As a result the Jews appear to have lost any control they may have initially enjoyed in Jerusalem, and Sabeos now quotes Modestus, the leader of the local Christian community:

> "They [the Jews] that dared to fight and destroy this true site, the mercy of God led to their banishment from His holy city. Those who hoped to become its citizens heard themselves banished . . . they were not deemed worthy to see . . . the holy grave . . . nor the gloriously renewed Golgotha. For others witnessed the return of their glory. . . ."[138]

Jewish sources allude to a messianic figure named Nehemiah ben Hushiel (or ben Joseph) who appears to have resisted this change in Persian policy, but, we are told, the king of Persia "went up against Nehemiah and all Israel . . . and he pierced Nehemiah through and they exiled Israel into the desert and there was woe in Israel like never before."[139]

Whatever messianic hopes the Jews had as a result of the Persian conquest were soon dashed. Indeed, they realized that among

the three powers converging on Palestine and Jerusalem, only the Persians were devoid of any religious motivation. Thus, the Persians were the only force likely to grant the Jews autonomous existence in their land. As Michael Avi-Yonah analyzed it:

> "The deception, which the Jews suffered in their alliance with the Persians, marks therefore the real end of the political history of Judaism in Palestine."[140]

The defeat of the Persians

Persian fortunes, however, also began to suffer. The Byzantine empire under Heraclius launched a major counterattack. By 627 this offensive reached almost to Nineveh, where the Persians were again defeated. Their capital, Ktesiphon, soon came under attack. Chosroes was then deposed and murdered; his son died before he could strike a deal with the besiegers. Finally the Persian general Shar-baraz made a deal with Heraclius: Heraclius would recognize Shar-baraz as the Persian monarch in exchange for a Persian retreat from Mesopotamia, Egypt, Syria and Palestine; in addition, the remains of the Holy Cross–which the Persian army had seized–would be restored. On March 21, 629, Heraclius entered Jerusalem in a splendid procession; the return of the cross was regarded as a miracle.

It was the last great moment of glory in Byzantine Jerusalem. Within five years (634 C.E.) the Arabs attacked Gaza. Four years later Jerusalem was in Arab hands; the city surrendered in the spring of 638.

The appearance of yet a third force on the horizon could only have rekindled desperate Jewish hopes. Testimony to this is obviously reflected in the following *midrash*:

> "The year when the King Messiah will be revealed, all the nations of the world will be at strife with one another. The King of Persia will arouse the King of Arabia. And the King of Arabia will go to Edom [Rome] to take counsel with them. And the King of Persia will again lay the whole world waste. And all the nations of the world will clamor and be frightened . . . and Israel will clamor and be frightened and say 'to where shall we go and to where shall we turn.' And He says to them: My sons, do not fear . . . the time of your redemption has arrived."[141]

The events of this time found equally dramatic expression in *piyyutim*. One of the most beautiful and touching of these liturgical poems, written to be recited on the 9th of Av (commemorating the destruction of both the First and Second Temples), was apparently read during the year that the Arabs concluded their conquest of the Holy Land:

"On that day when the Messiah, the scion of David comes to a people pressed
these signs will be seen in the world. . . .
And the King of the West and the King of the East each other will pulverize. . . .
And the King of the West will establish his soldiers in the Land. . . .
And from the land of Yoktan [Arabia] a King shall appear and his camps in the land will be strengthened. . . ."

The poet goes on to describe how Israel will first be cleansed of its sins and then, realizing it is on the verge of the messianic era, gather in Jerusalem where the messiah will proclaim himself:

"And the Priests on their orders will stand;
And the Levites on their platforms will be raised;
And He will declare: I have returned to Jerusalem in mercy."[142]

Beyond the Euphrates: The Jews of Babylonia

The sages of the Babylonian Talmud list the successive births and deaths of prominent rabbis:

"When Rabbi Akiva died, Rabbi [Judah the Patriarch] was born, when Rabbi died Rav Judah [b. Yehezkel] was born. . . . This teaches that a righteous man does not depart from the world until [another] righteous man like himself is created, as it is written: 'The sun riseth, the sun goeth down' [Ecclesiastes 1:5]."[143]

One can only wonder whether in the backs of their minds the Babylonian sages did not interpret this theme as part of the larger history of Israel as well. For as the Jews of Palestine began their slow decline, the Jewish community of Babylonia was about to embark on its own great chapter in Jewish history, beginning in the third century C.E. down to the end of the geonic* period, in the 11th century (see p. 63f.).

Jews had reached Babylon even before the destruction of the First Temple. Their numbers substantially increased after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. and the ensuing Exile. But in one of those inexplicable twists of history, we lose track of the Babylonian community almost immediately, save for bits and pieces of isolated information in the later books of the Bible, and scraps of archaelogical evidence.[144] In the late sixth century B.C.E., a minority of Jews returned from the Babylonian Exile under the benevolent rule of the Persian monarch Cyrus the

* The *geonim* (singular, *gaon*) were the heads of the Babylonian rabbinic academies. *Gaon* is probably a shortened form of *rosh yeshivat gaon Ya'akov* with the final two words taken from Psalm 47:4–"the *pride* of Jacob."

Great. But until the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., we need to be, and are, constantly reminded that Jews are still in Babylonia, indeed in numbers "so great that no one knows their precise number."[145] But the fact remains that for approximately 1,000 years the Jews of Babylonia were isolated from the mainstream of Jewish history—or at least from that history for which we have any substantial documentation. This paucity of documentation includes literary sources, such as the writings of Josephus, as well as archaeological evidence, especially when we compare the relative wealth of Jewish inscriptions from the Hellenistic-Roman world with that of the East.

Yet, we know the Jews of Babylonia were numerous and powerful, for Jews in the Hellenistic-Roman world repeatedly take into consideration the powerful potential support of their brethren in Babylonia before embarking on any major uprising, usually against the Romans.[146]

Every now and then a Babylonian Jew pierced the wall of silence and made his way onto the stage of Jewish history, in Palestine or elsewhere in the Greco-Roman world. The best-known example is Hillel the Babylonian, who made his way to Jerusalem, probably during the reign of Herod, and ultimately became the founding father of a school of rabbinic teaching (see pp. 11-12). But these are exceptions; the truth is that until after the Bar-Kokhba revolt (132-135 C.E.) the Jewish community in Babylonia made almost no impression on the life or the leaders of Palestinian Jewry.

When a sage in Babylonia attempted to intercalate the Jewish calendar following the devastation in Palestine of the Bar-Kokhba uprising, this was considered almost tantamount to heresy; the threat to Palestinian hegemony was thwarted.[147]

All this began to change in the third century C.E. Ultimately the rabbis of Babylonia themselves cited, in retrospect, the return of one of their own, Rav (Abba), to Babylonia in 219 C.E.,[148] as the beginning of a new era in the relative status of the two great Jewish communities: "We have made ourselves [or, consider ourselves] in Babylonia like Eretz Israel—from when Rav went down to Babylonia."[149] While this may seem to telescope a long drawn-out process into one identifiable event, the fact is that the date designated in that statement indeed points accurately to the early third century, when Babylonia's star began to rise.

Why was Babylonian Jewry unique? To begin, this was not only one of the largest concentrations of Jews in the world, but the one major community that did not find itself within the framework of the Hellenistic and Roman world. As such, it was impervious to the impact of the assimilatory nature of Hellenistic culture, and instead thrived in a much more feudalistic environment, wherein

the wide variety of ethnic communities were granted a major degree not only of political self-rule but of cultural autonomy as well.

As we enter the third century, we find that the Jews of Babylonia have at their head an exilarch (*resh galuta*, "head of the Diaspora") with claims to Davidic lineage. To be sure, there is absolutely no mention of this position before the late second or early third century, and it was only in medieval times that apologists would find it necessary to invent genealogical tables to prove the Jewish leader's pedigree.[150] But the exilarchate was undoubtedly a potent force throughout the talmudic period in Babylonia–the period which began as the Sassanian dynasty assumed the local throne from their predecessors, the Arsacids in 224 C.E. In the face of the centralizing tendencies of the new monarchy, which probably threatened (or was feared to threaten) the autonomous framework of Jewish life,[151] the exilarchate represented the Jewish community before the authorities. At the same time it regulated much of the economic and social life of the Jews of Babylonia.[152] Their success was probably a major factor in the continued thriving of the Jewish community on the banks of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers.

But the exilarchate did not rule the Babylonian Jewish community single-handedly. Alongside the exilarch a new framework of leadership–the rabbis of Babylonia–emerged.

Much has been written about the stages of development of rabbinic leadership, as well as the degree to which the Jewish "man in the street" was actually affected by rabbinic influence. Clearly rabbinic academies (*yeshivot*) did not spring up overnight in third-century Babylonia;[153] such institutions usually undergo protracted periods of development before assuming roles of recognized communal leadership. A marked difference, however, characterizes the emergence of Babylonian rabbinic leadership, as compared to Palestinian leadership. The Palestinian patriarchs began their history as "rabbis," that is, central figures within the religious circles that disseminated religious teaching; but gradually they accreted political power. In Babylonia, the exilarch ruled, exercising political power within the community by virtue of his Davidic lineage. The Babylonian rabbis confined their concerns to moral and religious responsibilities, ever careful not to overstep their position and thereby offend the exilarch.[154]

If the rabbis of Babylonia were prudent in their relations with the exilarch, they were even more cautious in defining and publicly stating their attitude toward the government. As we have already noted, it is in Babylonia that we encounter the well-formulated principle that "the law of the government is law." Even when the revitalized Zoroastrian religious establishment took extreme steps to ensure that the major tenets of its religion not be debased,[155]

these steps were not construed by the local Jewish community as persecutions. In fact, the Zoroastrian-Sassanian religious establishment avoided any sort of forced missionary activity that might impinge on Jewish behavior.[156]

In the fourth century it was the local Christian community whose loyalties were suspect. For that community was thought to automatically ally itself with the Roman-Christian empire. The Jews were clearly beyond such suspicion; it was assumed that they hated Rome—the destroyer of the Jewish Temple. Indeed, as we have seen, the rabbis of Babylonia even suggested that in the future Persia would defeat Rome. After all, Persia not only defeated the destroyers of the First Temple (Babylonia) but allowed the building of the Second Temple under Cyrus. Because Rome destroyed the Second Temple, "Is it not reasonable that Rome fall to Persia?"[157]

Athough not all Babylonian Jews were enamored with the new Sassanian regime (for example, Rav), the *modus vivendi* that emerged was the decisive factor in the subsequent success of Babylonian Jewry. Here, not surprisingly, we can observe a kind of reversal of roles between the Jewish community and the Christian Church. The bishop of Mar Mattai (near Mosul) in the first half of the fourth century, told his Christian flock not to heed the scoffing of the apparently more secure Jewish community:

> "The impure say that this church has no God . . . for if it had a God why doesn't He fight their battle . . . and even the Jews scoff at us and lord it over our people."[158]

The bishop knew of Jews who had succeeded in converting Christians; he delivered sermons against this danger.

While the conversion to Judaism does not seem to have been a major issue in Jewish Babylonia, it is true that there was little fear of Christianity among the local Jewish community. The rabbis of Babylonia evinced little insecurity regarding the viability of their community. In time, this self-assurance of the Babylonian Jewish community affected relations between Babylonian Jewry and Jewish Palestine. The Babylonian Jews came to regard themselves as the "purest" of the Jewish communities in terms of their pedigree, even when compared with Palestine.[159] By the late third century rabbinic authorities in Babylonia advised their disciples against "going up" to Palestine.[160] For many Jews—at the time and subsequently—Babylonia served as the prototype of the successful Diaspora, a place where one ought to remain until the ultimate redemption and deliverance. This obviously did not sit well with the Jewish leaders in Palestine. But Babylonian local patriotism continued to thrive. By the post-talmudic era we encounter

Babylonian apologists who suggest that their land is the real land of Torah, rather than Palestine.[161]

Babylonian Jewry thus shaped Jewish life and religious behavior at a definitive stage in the development of Judaism. The Babylonian Talmud ultimately attained overriding authority, in striking contrast to its Palestinian counterpart. For centuries it remained the central and most universally studied religious text among those Jews who devoted their lives to the study of "Torah." Moreover, the Babylonian *geonim* succeeded in spreading Babylonian tradition and legal decisions throughout much of the Jewish Diaspora. All this was true notwithstanding the central role filled by the Land of Israel in Jewish thought, as well as in so many other spheres of Jewish religious behavior.