Imperialisms in Jewish History, From Pre- to Postmodern

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The dynamics of imperial domination that, to a large extent, drove the development of Jewish society and culture throughout Antiquity and Late Antiquity (circa ninth century BCE to eighth century CE) have been an object of Jewish historical and theological speculation at least since the author of the book of Daniel structured the unruly political history of ancient Israel into an orderly, divinely-ordained, and teleological sequence of empires (Dan 2:31–45). Of course, Daniel's four-empire scheme required constant readjustment already in Antiquity, as Jews came under the successive sway of Roman, Christian-Roman, Sassanian, and Islamic hegemony. Still, most modern historians would assent to the book's basic insight that the ebb and flow of imperial politics constitute a perennial force in Jewish history.

Yet, in marked contrast to Daniel as well as much traditional Jewish historiography, recent histories of Jews and Judaism in the ancient world are as apt to emphasize the *dynamic* and *generative* dimensions of imperial conditions as their *repressive* or *destructive* effects. In these accounts, Jewish society emerges as a heterogeneous social system made up of quite a diverse set of actors each pursuing their goals within the always shifting parameters of imperial power. This portrait not only complicates the conventional image of the ancient Jew as a passive subject of empire, but also suggests that the boundaries and modalities of Jewish culture and piety were themselves constantly subject to rearticulation.

This essay explores how various new approaches to "empire" as an analytical category have reinvigorated the study of ancient Jewish society and culture—and how they might continue to do so. Both for pragmatic reasons and out of personal predilection, I will focus my comments on research into Jewish culture and society under Roman-Byzantine rule from the first to seventh century CE, a field that has recently seen much productive engagement with the theme of empire.

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Current study of Late Antiquity and its diverse religious movements, including early Judaism, owes much to scholars such as Peter Brown, whose work emphasizes the deep cultural continuities that persisted in the face of the massive political changes that transformed the classical world (*The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150–750* [1971]). The historiographic framework that these scholars have helped create over the past forty years self-consciously privileges the *longue durée* of social, cultural, and religious history over the political, military, and economic crises that drive traditional narratives of the "decline and fall" of the Roman Empire. But this expansive view of Roman society should not be thought simply to gloss over the material circumstances of empire that conditioned these more glacial cultural developments. Indeed, this interpretative framework stresses that the creation of a late antique common culture was uniquely predicated on the Romans' ability to manage, in concrete ways, the centrifugal forces of regional, social, linguistic, and religious diversity. Roman discourse of "universal" empire was always tempered by the very real constraints imposed by geography, topography, climate, material resources, and, perhaps above all, the need for complicity on the part of subject populations—or at least their representatives (Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* [2000]; Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* [1992]).

The dialectic between an emergent cultural hegemony and persistent local variation that is implicit in this historiographic framework has proven immensely productive for Jewish historians, who themselves have become increasingly interested in the ways that Jews participated fully in their world while still marking their difference (Peter Schäfer, "Introduction" to *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture* [1998]). Thus, in reaction to the perennial temptation to present the Jews as passive, though periodically defiant, victims of foreign domination, this new historiography has painted a more nuanced and variegated portrait of Jewish society in which Jewish dependency and Jewish autonomy coexist in tension. In these accounts, the Jew of Late Antiquity was simultaneously a colonized subject and an active agent deliberately maneuvering within an always fluid system of imperial control (David Biale, *Power and*

Powerlessness in Jewish History [1986], 10–33). Jewish society did not constitute a homogeneous social entity informed by a single collective identity. Even the rabbinic movement itself was a complex system with internal fractures and strains (Catherine Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* [1997]). Some Jews took an oppositional stance toward Rome; others, like the Patriarch and his circle, could—and did—participate in elite Roman society, though only briefly parlaying their social and economic capital into officially sanctioned leadership of the Jewish community (Martin Jacobs, *Die Institution des Jüdischen Patriarchen* [1995]).

In this portrait of a diverse Jewish society riven by internal competition, imperialism is no longer merely the background to or context of Jewish history, but its engine. The paradoxical dynamics of empire both challenged existing Jewish ways of life and constituted the very grounds of possibility for the emergence of novel social and ideological formations. For example, in Seth Schwartz's analysis both the Judean temple-state of the Persian period and the synagogue-based communities of Byzantine Palestine represent unforeseen and radically contingent accommodations to very particular imperial policies (*Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 BCE to 640 CE* [2001]). Thus, Judaism is not an essentially stable religio-cultural system that is variously "shaped" by its historical circumstances; rather, the very nature of Jewishness—the type of entity that it is—is constantly being renegotiated within the social and cultural logic of empire (Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness* [1999]).

The thorough-going anti-essentialism that informs this historiographic trend has perhaps had its most profound impact on the recent and quite radical reassessments of the formative histories of Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity (e.g., Adam H. Becker and Annette Y. Reed, eds., *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* [2003]; Charlotte Fonrobert, "The *Didascalia Apostolorum*: A Mishnah for the Disciples of Jesus," *JECS* 9 [2001], 483–509). In particular, Daniel Boyarin has traced in numerous studies the mutually constituting histories of Judaism and Christianity, showing how inextricably implicated the development of (rabbinic) Judaism is in the history of Western and Christian hegemony in all its various phases—from the Christianization of the Roman Empire to modern nationalism.

Composite capital from the synagogue at Capernaum (lower Galilee), 3rd to 5th century CE(?). The upper of the (normally) three tiers of acanthus leaves has been replaced by symbols of the Jerusalem Temple (menorah, shofar, and incense shovel). Photo credit: Andrea Berlin.

In his most recent work Boyarin has quite deliberately revised his approach to Jewish culture, which had largely been predicated on an essential Jewish alterity vis-à-vis Western culture (*Borderlines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* [2004]; *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* [1999]). Instead, his analysis is now grounded in the more ironic discursive mode of post-colonial theory. Here, imperialism, while entailing very real relations of power, does not produce pure oppositional cultures, one the authoritative discourse of the colonizer and one the merely reactive discourse of the colonized. Instead, the colonial encounter generates a common, if highly asymmetrical and always contested, cultural terrain within which both colonizer and colonized are constrained to speak and act (Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* [1994]). Thus, for example, Boyarin argues that the rabbis of Late Antiquity, in dynamic and strategic interaction with their Christian counterparts, fashioned their own exclusionary practices (e.g., anti-Christian polemic or regimes of gender differentiation) that were—and continue to be—instrumental in the production and maintenance of rabbinic Judaism as a social and ideational system.

The centrality of Jews and Judaism to the creation of a distinctive Roman-Christian discourse of empire has also emerged as a theme in recent research on early Christianity. Most notably, Andrew Jacobs has argued that, beginning in the fourth century, Christian travel to Palestine and the literature that grew up around Christian pilgrimage practices played an integral role in the reconfiguration of the Holy Land as a privileged site for the production of emergent forms of Christian imperial identity and power (*Remains of the Jews: The Holy Land and Christian Empire in Late Antiquity* [2004]). Jacobs' study naturally posits the existence of Jewish cultural products that simultaneously mimicked and

contested this hegemonic imperial discourse, although the task of tracing these voices lies outside the scope of his particular project. In this regard, Jacobs' work recalls David Biale's notion of "counter-history," which describes the ways that certain Jewish texts simultaneously drew from and inverted the dominant historical paradigm articulated by Christian writers and theologians ("Counter-History and Jewish Polemics against Christianity: The *Sefer Toldot Yeshu* and the *Sefer Zerubavel*," *JSS* n.s. 6 [1999], 130–45). This polemical strategy resists the dominant narrative of Christian Empire by appropriating elements of this discourse in order to fashion a resistant Jewish identity.

It should be noted, however, that much of this scholarship has focused on the Roman West, ultimately embedding the Christian–Jewish encounter at the heart of Jewish history. While considerably less is known about the administrative and legal history of the Sassanian Empire, Adam Becker has recently cautioned against imposing Western imperial developments upon it ("Beyond the Spatial and Temporal *Limes*: Questioning the 'Parting of the Ways' outside the Roman Empire," in *Ways That Never Parted*, 373–92). In his view, the Sassanian case, in which both Jews and Christians occupied "minority" positions, was radically different from the Roman-Christian West. Indeed, he suggests that the differences between Jewish–Christian relations in the two empires can be seen in the enduring regional differences in the eastern and western portions of the successor Islamic empire. Yaakov Elman's ambitious project of situating late antique "Babylonian" Jewry within its Sassanian context has already begun to provide important comparative material for assessing the variable impact of different imperial regimes on Jewish culture and society (see now his "Marriage and Marital Property in Rabbinic and Sassanian Law," in *Rabbinic Law in its Roman and Near Eastern Context*, ed. C. Hezser [2003], 227–76).

In closing, I would like briefly to propose two ways that the burgeoning interest in the role of empire in ancient Jewish history may contribute to the wider field of Jewish studies—and beyond. First, I believe that the sociocultural processes obtained in the multi-ethnic, multireligious, and multilingual empires of antiquity can provide a salutary corrective to the regnant approaches to Jewish identity and culture that take as their paradigm the modern nation-states of Western Europe and their overseas colonies. In fact, the premodern cases, with their vast, contiguous territorial and heterogeneous subject populations, bear provocative similarities to the Russian, Ottoman, and Hapsburg empires as well as to contemporary, though still nascent, postnationalist political arrangements (see Sarah Stein's contribution in this issue). When brought together with these examples, the Jewish experience in Antiquity may turn out to be more the rule than the exception.

Second and perhaps more importantly, I would suggest that the history of the Jews in the Greco-Roman world offers more than just provocative parallels, comparative material, and alternative models to students of Jewish culture. As Jonathan Boyarin reminds us in his contribution, the particular role that Jews and Judaism played in the historical formation of premodern Christian discourses of empire not only illuminates, but also adumbrates the specific dynamics of modern European imperialisms and their irrevocable global effects. Scholars both within Jewish studies and beyond its borders will benefit from ongoing consideration of the complex and often paradoxical ways that Jewish history and the history of Western empires have been and remain inextricably intertwined.

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