

Naomi Koltun-Fromm/Gwynn Kessler (eds.): *A Companion to Late Ancient Jews and Judaism. Third Century BCE to Seventh Century CE*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell 2020 (Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World). xxiv, 536 p., 37 ill., 4 maps. \$ 220.95/£ 170.95/€ 209.00. ISBN: 978-1-119-11362-1.

What may a scholar of Late Antiquity expect from a Companion on Late Ancient Jews and Judaism? I was trained in Rabbinic Studies and I have been teaching my students with Handbooks such as the *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum* series (CRINT 1987, 1997, 2006), or the *Cambridge History of Judaism* (CHJ, first three volumes 1984, 1989, 1999). With the *Companion to Late Ancient Jews and Judaism*, this reviewer notices the shift from a philological approach, discussing sources and genres, towards topical approaches to culture and daily reality *as reflected in the sources*. Also, the title hints at this shift, from approaching Jewish culture and religion as textual constructions, mostly of an elite nature, towards studying them as lived realities, including the folk and concomitant cultural hybrids and as reflected in textual and material culture. The book is divided into five sections: “Where Jews Live” (two essays), “Languages and Literatures” (seven essays), including three [!] on material culture, “Identities and Ethnicities” (eight essays), “Bodies and Genders” (six essays) and, finally, “Spaces” (six essays).¹ It opens with an introduction explaining the setup of the book, a bibliography is added to each essay separately, and the book contains a subject index as well as information about the authors. A source index is missing, however, as is a modern authors index, which diminishes its practical use a bit.

The essays cover new approaches and scholarly debates rather than introduce the freshman scholar to sources or non-textual data. Some readers hoping to find state-of-the-art discussion of and references to critical editions of texts, translations, as well as commentaries on, say, Rabbinic literature, may be disappointed. Others, however, engaged in conceptual approaches to canonical and non-canonical sources, will find remarkable insights here. Indeed, interdisciplinary studies, applying concepts of e.g. gender studies, post-colonial critique, material culture (space, objects, inscriptions), and studies of emotions and body, occupy the main ground in this Companion. Some of these categories may lack the epistemological stability of the philological

1 For the table of contents, readers are referred to the end of this review.

historical approach, given the rapid development of methods and approaches. However, they gain theoretical depth, analytical relief, and relevance instead. Moreover, this Companion presents not only well-established voices dominating the scholarly field but also young or upcoming scholars. The result is a mix of fresh, at times compelling, and high-level scholarly essays, as well as innovative or tentative contributions. An example of the first category is the essay on languages (Azzan Yadin-Israel), an example of the latter, in my estimation, is the essay on Disability Studies (Julia Watts Belser). The student and young scholar might find this mix rather appealing, since the less established or less crystalized approaches also reflect the new questions with which we may address data we thought we were familiar with, and the volume impels curiosity in showing emerging fields for the future scholar. This book is, in sum, an innovative and rich collection of extant scholarly expertise, showing how Jews performed divergent forms of Judaism in Late Antiquity.

What does the reader come across? Opening the first section, “Where Jews Live,” Ross Kraemer offers a helpful discussion of the textual and material data about Jews in the West. I was a bit surprised not to see Leonard Rutgers’ work on Rome and the Jewish catacombs² mentioned here, where it is quoted extensively in Cynthia Baker’s essay on material culture. Mika Ahuvia discusses towns and neighborhoods in Palestina and Babylonia, dwelling on the famous ‘secret’ mentioned in the synagogue mosaic of Ein Gedi, which, according to her, points to dates (I always thought it was on incense production).

The second section, “Languages and Literature,” opens with Azzan Yadin-Israel discussing the multi-linguistic landscape, adducing the concept of language ideology. Eva Mroczek and Michal Bar-Asher Siegal discuss, respectively, non-canonical late Biblical sources and Rabbinic literature, both more or less along established scholarly lines. Karen Stern offers a succinct but rich overview of material culture, bridging the realm of daily life with religious contexts. Cynthia Baker’s essay on “How Do Jews *Matter*?” offers a partly overlapping but stimulating discussion on material culture,

2 Leonard Victor Rutgers: *The Jews in Late Ancient Rome. Evidence of Cultural Interaction in the Roman Diaspora*. Leiden/New York/Cologne 1995 (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 126); Leonard Victor Rutgers: *Subterranean Rome. In Search of the Roots of Christianity in the Catacombs of the Eternal City*. Leuven 2000 (with an appendix on the Jewish catacombs of Rome).

focusing on the relation with non-Jewish cultures. Jason Mokhtarian's essay on material culture in Sasanian Mesopotamia is innovative in this regard since we have little material evidence that bears on textual traditions (the essay discusses coins, architecture, bowls, and seals) but the essay fruitfully engages with it, nonetheless. Naomi Koltun-Fromm, finally, discusses Roman and Christian sources and voices on Jews and Judaism, focusing in particular on the Christian Syriac tradition. This choice is surprising, given the location of her essay here and not in the next section, which is on "Identities and Ethnicities."

Yair Furstenberg opens this section following the transition from a Biblical Israelite to Jewish identity, addressing the scholarly debates on the terms 'Jew' and 'Judaism.' He argues this as a transition from a religious-ethnic entity toward Judaism as a disputed, politico-religious entity within sectarian politics. Jonathan Klawans shows how recent scholarship has nuanced the impact of the 70 CE Fall of the Temple and, adducing analogies from modern Jewish history, discusses the various stances towards Temple crises both before and after its demise. Sandy Haney neatly summarizes the academic discussion on the "Parting(s) of the Ways," which tends to locate the main religious split in the second Century CE, but she notices moments of distinguishing Christians from Judaism in Acts as well. The placement of her essay in this section reflects the editor's view on the New Testament as reflective of inner-Jewish developments and tensions. As Furstenberg argues in the previous section, 'Christians' initially do not appear as a new religion, but rather as an *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesia* references denotes any local community, including a synagogue) of Christ following communities and Christ worship in the margins of the Jewish world, with the nascent Rabbis after 70 CE forming an *ἐκκλησία* of Torah observation and Torah worship. The concomitant competitiveness is argued, recently, by Annette Yoshiko Reed for the pseudo-Clementines as well, which suggests a protracted historical process.³

Alyssa Gray takes us to a different social religious dimension of identity formation, now focusing on inner-religious social ethical dynamics. Her discussion of the attitudes towards the poor in Rabbinic circles compares Pal-

3 Cf. A. Yoshiko Reed: "Jewish Christianity" after the "Parting of the Ways". In: A. Yoshiko Reed: *Jewish-Christianity and the History of Judaism*. Collected Essays. Tübingen 2018 (Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum 171), pp. 15–56.

estinian and Babylonian contexts. Joshua Ezra Burns highlights the relations between Diaspora and Center in Rabbinic Judaism after 70 CE. Seeing social religious identity as resulting from ‘othering’ within the tradition is noticeable in the essay of Mira Beth Wasserman, who discusses the legal categories invented by the Rabbis, such as non-Jews, women, unlettered folk, etc. The essay of Natalie Dohrmann on Jewish Law is somewhat unexpected in this context but focuses on the social rhetoric of the genre more than on literary history. Finally, Aaron Hughes discusses the Jews during the advent of Islam and adds some fresh nuances to the issue of Jewish political power with the case of the Himyarite Kingdom.

The fourth section on “Bodies and Genders” mainly deals with social identity as distinguishing and categorizing bodily practices and emotions. Federico Dal Bo treats the issue of sexuality, spanning the period from the Hebrew Bible up to and including the Tannaitic era (beginning of the third Century CE). Elizabeth Shanks Alexander engages with ritual practices aiming at embodying the religious in her discussion of prayer and recitation. The chapter by Jane Kanarek discusses the bodily dimensions of piety and sin and mainly boils down to a discussion of Mishna tractate Arakhin. Gwynn Kessler discusses Rabbinic gender and focuses on the legal categories of *tumtum* (טומטום) and *androgynos* (אנדרוגינוס, a word derived from Greek) as escaping the binary of male and female. Julia Watts Belser addresses disability studies and probes their application to reading Biblical prophecy and Rabbinic narrative. Sara Ronis, finally, deals with gender and marginality in her analysis of Rabbinic stories of witchcraft and magic.

In the section dedicated to “Spaces,” Meredith Warren engages with domestic spaces, which, however, includes both public (e.g., latrines, working places, or shops) and private (houses and palaces) domains. Cana Werman concentrates on the educational system in her readings of textual evidence on the House of Study as a religious institute. Shira Lander offers an innovative chapter on Jewish philanthropy as a social practice at the intersection of Jewish ethnic identity and the public, non-Jewish, sphere. Sarit Kattan Gribetz discusses the relation between the sacredness of the Temple and the synagogue as reflected in coins and Rabbinic texts. The spatial dimensions of rabbinic liturgy and prayer, including both synagogue and domestic contexts, are central in the essay of Laura Lieber. Ritual practices related to agriculture are analyzed by John Mandsager, remarkably drawing much on the rather late and distanced Babylonian Talmud as well.

The five sections show an emphasis on daily life, on crossing boundaries of the elite and the folk, and on connecting material culture and textual data. In this light, I was surprised by the emphasis on Tannaitic sources, especially the Mishna, since it suggests a rising scholarly focus on Mishna studies but may suffer from a lack of comparison with later Palestinian sources or Babylonian traditions. Moreover, the recent surge of scholarly interest in late Rabbinic midrash, e.g. Tanhuma-Yelamdenu literature, might have added to the picture of Jews in Byzantine contexts.⁴ And what about the non-canonical sources? Discussion of the Qumran caves and sites and their relation to whatever community or communities covering them is limited. There is not any chapter devoted to mysticism (e.g. Hekhalot literature, or the Alphabet of Rabbi Akiva) or the sudden surge of apocalyptic sources in the seventh century such as *Sefer Zerubabel*. Finally, in terms of historiography, what is gained in-depth in topical analyses may have gone lost in terms of *longue durée*. This is remarkable given the period covering the history of Jews from the Persian era (537/536 BCE) up to 636 CE, the Arabic conquest of the Land of Israel, and up to the building of the Dome of the Rock (692 CE). This last event offers a convenient closure for the book, and one which the editors defend at the backdrop of cultural and economic continuities of the Byzantine-Islamic era. The pragmatism and the ‘fluidness’ of chronological boundaries is expressive of the lack of clear political, cultural, or religious criteria. Indeed, there is no political history of the Jews covering the book’s time frame. The three major wars (66–73, 115–117, and 132–136 CE) recur in a few essays, but it is mainly Klawans’ essay that deals extensively with the social religious implications of the first Jewish War. It seems that the editors have wanted to avoid any ‘grand narrative’ of the Jewish people, either living in the Land or the Diaspora. Here, the impact of the new historiography since Seth Schwartz’s *Imperialism and Jewish Society*⁵ as well as the impact of

4 On the history of research: R. Nikolsky/A. Atzmon (eds.): *Studies in the Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*. Leiden/Boston 2022 (The Brill Reference Library to Judaism 70), pp. 1–17. See also the essays in this volume dealing with the (Italian?) Byzantine context of this literature.

5 S. Schwartz: *Imperialism and Jewish Society. 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* Princeton, NJ/Oxford 2001 (*Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World*).

Daniel Boyarin's deconstructionist readings of Jewish 'religion' as merely a product of Imperial policy⁶ is notable.

One of the interesting features of this Companion is the way contributors reference each other. In this light, I was confused by some different datings presented in the charts and maps or essays. Following Werner Eck, the Bar Kokhba revolt ended not in 135 CE but in 136 CE.⁷ The editing of the Mishna is usually dated at 210 CE, but I also encountered 220 CE. Secondly, the geographical map of Galilean synagogue sites may be updated. I mention, as examples, Horvat Kur and Hirbeth Qana, but also the former city of Migdal. Here, the Bornblum Eretz Israel Synagogues website⁸, with a yearly refreshed bibliography of every excavated site, is helpful. In general, I noted the absence of references to the collection *Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods*, edited by David Fiensy and James Strange,⁹ given the many overlapping topics. Finally, as a suggestion to the attention paid to social categories, the emerging field of child studies in Jewish literature¹⁰ might be included in the next edition. This nitty-picking criticism, paradoxically, only shows my great admiration for the project, the high scholarly standards displayed in its essays and my pleasure in reading it. This is a Companion that both younger and senior scholars can fruitfully employ in their own study and research.

6 D. Boyarin: *Border lines: the Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*. Philadelphia, PA 2004, especially chapter 8. In D. Boyarin: *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion*. New Brunswick, NJ/Newark, NJ/London 2019 (*Key Words in Jewish Studies* 9), he extends this religion making process into 19th Century nationalism.

7 W. Eck: *The Bar Kokhba Revolt. The Roman Point of View*. In: *JRS* 89, 1999, pp. 76–89; W. Eck: *Hadrian, the Bar Kokhba Revolt, and the Epigraphic Transmission*. In: P. Schäfer (ed.): *The Bar Kokhba War Reconsidered. New Perspectives on the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome*. Tübingen 2003 (*Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum* 100), pp. 153–170, esp. p. 160.

8 See <https://synagogues.kinneret.ac.il/>.

9 D. A. Fiensy/J. R. Strange (eds.): *Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods*. 2 vols. Minneapolis 2014–2015.

10 E.g. H. Sivan: *Jewish Childhood in the Roman World*. Cambridge 2018.

Eric Ottenheim, Utrecht University
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Associate Professor in Jewish Studies and Biblical Studies
H.L.M.Ottenheim@uu.nl

www.plekos.de

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Contents

List of Figures	XI
List of Maps	XIII
Notes on Contributors	XV
Acknowledgements	XIX
Maps	XXI
1 Introduction	1
<i>Naomi Koltun-Fromm and Gwynn Kessler</i>	
PART I Where Jews Live	13
2 Where Jews Lived in the West	15
<i>Ross S. Kraemer</i>	
3 Jewish Towns and Neighborhoods in Roman Palestine and Persian Babylonia	33
<i>Mika Abuvia</i>	
PART II Languages and Literatures	53
4 Late Ancient Jewish Languages	55
<i>Azran Yadin-Israel</i>	
5 Literature on the Jews, Fourth Century BCE to Second Century CE	69
<i>Eva Mroczek</i>	
6 Rabbinic Literature	87
<i>Michal Bar-Asher Siegal</i>	
7 Material Culture of the Second Temple Period (pre-70 CE)	105
<i>Karen B. Stern</i>	
8 How Do Jews Matter? Exploring Late-Ancient Mediterranean Jews and Jewishness Through Material Culture	127
<i>Cynthia M. Baker</i>	
9 Material Culture of the Jews of Sasanian Mesopotamia	145
<i>Jason Sion Mokhtarian</i>	
10 Non-Jewish Sources for Late Ancient Jewish History	167
<i>Naomi Koltun-Fromm</i>	

PART III	Identities and Ethnicities	181
11	Contesting Identities: The Splitting Channels from Israelite to Jew <i>Yair Furstenberg</i>	183
12	Imagining Judaism after 70 CE <i>Jonathan Klawans</i>	201
13	Rabbis and the Poor in Palestinian Amoraic Literature and the Babylonian Talmud <i>Alyssa M. Gray</i>	217
14	Diaspora and Center <i>Joshua Ezra Burns</i>	229
15	Jews and Their Others (New Testament) <i>Sandy L. Haney</i>	245
16	Rabbis and Their Others <i>Mira Beth Wasserman</i>	259
17	What is Jewish Law? Jewish Legal Culture and Thought in Antiquity (Fifth Century BCE to Seventh Century CE) <i>Natalie B. Dobrman</i>	277
18	Arabian Judaism at the Advent of the Islam: A Forgotten Chapter in the History of Judaism <i>Aaron W. Hughes</i>	291
PART IV	Bodies and Genders	305
19	Sexualities and Il/licit Relationships in Late Ancient Jewish Literatures <i>Federico Dal Bo</i>	307
20	Embodied Scriptural Practice <i>Elizabeth Shanks Alexander</i>	323
21	Bodies That Matter: Piety and Sin <i>Jane L. Kanarek</i>	339
22	Rabbinic Gender: Beyond Male and Female <i>Gwynn Kessler</i>	353
23	Disability Studies in Jewish Culture in Late Antiquity: Gender, Body, and Violence Amidst Empire <i>Julia Watts Belser</i>	371
24	Gender, Sex, and Witchcraft in Late Ancient Judaism <i>Sara Ronis</i>	391

PART V	Spaces	405
25	Domestic Spaces <i>Meredith J. C. Warren</i>	407
26	“Do Not Say ‘I am Poor and Cannot Seek Out Knowledge’”: The House of Study and Education in the Second Temple Period <i>Cana Werman</i>	425
27	Locating Diaspora Jewish Philanthropy in the Ancient Mediterranean Public Arena <i>Shira L. Lander</i>	441
28	Sacred Spaces <i>Sarit Kattan Gribetz</i>	455
29	Jewish Prayer, Liturgy, and Ritual <i>Laura S. Lieber</i>	477
30	Agriculture and Industry <i>John Mandsager</i>	495
	Index	511