



THE
WORLD
OF THE NEW
TESTAMENT

CULTURAL,
SOCIAL, AND
HISTORICAL
CONTEXTS

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22

Synagogue and Sanhedrin

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Information concerning the two institutions of synagogue and Sanhedrin, both of which have important roles in the NT, comes from multiple sources, both literary and archaeological. In addition to the NT itself, we have Jewish sources in Greek, including Philo and Josephus; rabbinic literature, especially the Mishnah and the Talmud; the OT Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha; and numerous inscriptions. Rabbinic sources provide the most information on synagogues and the Sanhedrin, but they must be used cautiously. This is because rabbinic works probably portray the Second Temple Sanhedrin and synagogues the way later rabbis thought these two institutions should be, not as they actually were. Therefore, rabbinic texts are most helpful when they are corroborated by Second Temple sources. In addition to literary sources, evidence from inscriptions and buildings contribute to our knowledge of Second Temple synagogues. Ongoing scholarly debate about both of these institutions reflects in part differing assessments of the significance of what the pre-AD 70 sources do not tell us.

The Synagogue

The synagogue, as a place for Jews to gather especially on the Sabbath day, appears numerous times in the NT, Josephus, and Philo. Jesus both taught and performed mighty deeds in synagogues, such as his programmatic statement about the nature

of his ministry in terms of Isa. 61:1–2 in the synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4:16–30) and the casting out of a demon in a synagogue in Capernaum (Mark 1:21–27). According to the book of Acts, Paul sought out synagogues whenever he went to a new city or town to begin preaching the gospel (e.g., 13:14; 14:1; 17:1).

Terminology

The Greek term *synagōgē*, carried over into English as “synagogue,” refers to a gathering together and is used both for a place (e.g., Matt. 9:35) and for a gathering of people (James 2:2), which is the primary sense of the word in the Septuagint. The NT generally uses *synagōgē* in a literal way, but metaphorical uses also occur (e.g., Rev. 2:9; 3:9). *Proseuchē* was commonly used by Jews (e.g., Philo) for a building, a “prayer house,” to which Jews went for Sabbath activities and thus likely refers to a synagogue. It may have referred also to an informal gathering place for prayer. Acts 16:13 and 16 are the only references to a *proseuchē* as a place of prayer in the NT. Some commentators suggest that the *proseuchē* in Philippi was an informal place for prayer because there were fewer than ten Jewish males in Philippi, the minimum for a synagogue, but this deduction may depend too heavily on a later rabbinic tradition.

Some argue that most NT references to a *synagōgē* can be understood as referring to either a building or a gathering of Jews. Although this is technically correct in most cases, the main usage was probably when referring to a building (cf. Luke 7:5). For example, using similar wording, Mark 1:21 speaks of Jesus entering a *synagōgē* and 1:29 of Jesus entering a house. Jesus’ entering a *synagōgē* and encountering a man possessed by a demon in the *synagōgē* (Mark 1:23–28) makes more sense if *synagōgē* refers to a building.

Second Temple literature also appears to use *synagōgē* to refer to an assembly of Jews, which is generally in a building, but that building need not have been built specifically for religious purposes. Some scholars have asserted that there were no pre-AD 70 synagogue buildings, but both the literary and archaeological evidence strongly challenge this claim.

Origin

The origin of the synagogue as a place for Jews to gather for Sabbath activities is unclear. The synagogue may have originated after the return from the Babylonian exile or perhaps in Egypt as a way to promote the Jewish community. With the change to Hellenistic-style cities (beginning around 300 BC), which had no city gate (the usual place of meeting for commerce, legal matters, and public assemblies for Jews; cf. 2 Kings 7:1; Neh. 8:1), city-gate functions appear to have moved indoors to the synagogue. The references to a *proseuchē* in third-century BC inscriptions and papyri in Egypt are the earliest clear evidence for the existence of synagogues for Sabbath activities. For example, an inscription dated to 246–221 BC states, “On behalf of King Ptolemy, son of Ptolemy, and Queen Berenice, his wife, and his sister, and their children, the Jews of Crocodilopolis dedicated the prayer hall



Berthold Werner/Wikimedia Commons

22.1. Fourth-century AD synagogue at Capernaum, the center of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. This synagogue was built on top of a basalt foundation, which may have been the location (or near the location) of the synagogue where Jesus taught (Mark 1:21–28).

[*proseuchē*]” (Runesson, *Source Book*, 193, no. 150 = *CPJ* 3:1532a). Note that it is dedicated on behalf of the king and queen, not to them. Jews explicitly or implicitly dedicated a *proseuchē* “to God most high,” as in an inscription found at Attribis, dated in the range of the second to first century BC (Runesson, *Source Book*, 193, no. 151 = *CIJ* 2:1443). Although *proseuchē* refers to “prayer,” in several texts it is clear that it is used of a building for prayer, likely a synagogue. For example, Philo speaks of statues being placed in the *proseuchai* (the plural of *proseuchē*; *Flacc.* 41) and of the destruction of the *proseuchai* (*Flacc.* 45).

Functions

The synagogue served multiple purposes, such as Sabbath activities, social gatherings, legal proceedings, and political meetings in primarily Jewish cities and towns (cf. Josephus, *Ant* 2.235, 258, 259–61; *J.W.* 1.180, 277, 293; Philo, *Legat.* 156).

Although the formal synagogue liturgy described in rabbinic texts might not have been practiced in Second Temple synagogues, Sabbath activities included public prayer and the reading and study of the Torah, as stated by Josephus (*Ag. Ap.* 2.176), Philo (*Legat.* 156), and the NT (e.g., Acts 15:21). Luke-Acts show that the Prophets were read in synagogues in the first century AD (cf. Luke 4:17; Acts 13:15), a practice that is otherwise unknown outside the NT until after the destruction of the Jerusalem

temple in AD 70. Second Temple sources also make it clear that, after the Torah was read, someone would offer a sermon or interpretation of the biblical passage (cf. Philo, *Prob.* 80–84; *Legat.* 311; Luke 4:16–30; Acts 13:15–41 [specifically after the reading of the Law and the Prophets]). Synagogues had leaders, an *archisynagōgos* (cf. Mark 5:22, 35, 36, 38; Luke 13:14; Acts 13:5; 18:8, 17)—a term that appears primarily in the NT and inscriptions in the Second Temple period. This person probably officiated during religious meetings and may have been responsible for the building. At least one *archisynagōgos* oversaw the construction of a synagogue. The Theodotus inscription (found in Jerusalem and dated by L. Levine to the first century AD) reads, “Theodotus, son of Vettenus, a ruler of the synagogue [*archisynagōgos*], son of a ruler of the synagogue [*archisynagōgos*], and grandson of a ruler of the synagogue [*archisynagōgos*], built the synagogue for the reading of the Law and for teaching of the commandments” (Runesson, *Source Book*, 52, no. 26 = *CIJ* 2:1404).

What practices of Jewish worship were included in synagogues on the Sabbath, such as the communal singing of prayers (e.g., the Psalms), is a matter of considerable debate. For the most part, Second Temple literature does not speak of worship among those gathered on the Sabbath, but evidence from the DSS and from Pseudo-Philo indicates that there was worship on the Sabbath.

Archaeological Evidence

Several sites in Palestine and the Diaspora have been identified as synagogues from the Second Temple period, such as at Delos, Masada, Herodium, Kiryet Sefer, Gamla, and Modiin. Almost all the Palestinian synagogues excavated so far have similar architecture, including square benches arranged concentrically, plastered interior walls, and a central open space where a leader or a reader of Scripture could stand. Another common feature is a series of columns that interfere with seeing the central space (done perhaps in imitation of the Jerusalem temple, as visitors there were likely “left with the dominant visual experience of looking between columns to see the activity in any court” of the temple (Strange, “Ancient Texts,” 41). This is visible in the Masada synagogue (see photo).

These pre-AD 70 structures, and indeed most buildings identified as synagogues, exhibit a similar architectural plan. Pre-AD 70 synagogues existed in the Diaspora also but generally did not follow the same design as those in Galilee or Judea. Fourth- and fifth-century AD synagogues have features not found in pre-AD 70 synagogues, particularly ornate mosaic floors and wall decorations that contain pictures of biblical scenes (e.g., Beth Alpha) and the twelve signs of the Zodiac (e.g., Dura Europa). This has led some to deny the existence of pre-AD 70 synagogue buildings; for example, the building at Gamla has been identified by some as a private house. However, those sites identified as pre-AD 70 synagogues are quite different in design when compared with private houses. The evidence suggests that the synagogue was a place where Jews gathered at least on the Sabbath for worship in the Second Temple period.



Photograph by Mike Platner. Used with permission

22.2. A synagogue at Masada.

The Sanhedrin

In the literature of Second Temple Judaism, the term “sanhedrin” (*synedrion*) might refer to a governing body, such as a town council (cf. Matt. 5:22?; 10:17), to that council’s meeting place (cf. Luke 22:66?), or to the council meeting itself. In the NT, however, the term is used primarily with reference to the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem (e.g., Matt. 26:59), the ruling body for Jews in much of the Second Temple period. By far the most detailed descriptions of the Sanhedrin and how it functioned are in rabbinic literature, especially the *Sanhedrin* tractates in the Mishnah and Talmud. Josephus and the NT sometimes provide important information that differs from what later rabbinic materials assert. For example, Josephus and the NT speak of a single ruling council, whereas *m. Sanh.* 1.6 speaks of two with different jurisdictions. Acts shows the Sanhedrin as consisting of the high priest, Sadducees, and Pharisees (Acts 23:1–6), while *m. Sanh.* 4.3–4 indicates that the Sanhedrin consisted of sages and their disciples. Some scholars think the Mishnah provides a fairly accurate picture of how the Sanhedrin functioned in the first century AD (e.g., Mantel, *Sanhedrin*). Others deny all evidence that such an institution even existed (e.g., Goodman, *Ruling*, 113). Positions between these two extremes focus on the evidence in Josephus, the NT, and other Second Temple texts that portray a central Jewish judicial council, consisting primarily of Jerusalem aristocracy, at least during the time of the procurators (AD 6–66)

and probably through most of the Second Temple period, though its status and functions probably varied over time.

Terminology

“Sanhedrin” is from a Hebrew term that transliterates the Greek word *synedrion* (cf. *m. Soṭah* 9.11), and it often refers to the primary Jewish governing body in Jerusalem or to local councils or governing boards (cf. Matt. 10:17; Mark 13:9). Josephus refers to a council (Sanhedrin) led by the high priest that met in Jerusalem and was responsible for legal decisions. For example, Josephus writes that if a local council cannot decide a case, the matter should be referred to the high priest, the prophet, and the “council of elders” in the “holy city,” Jerusalem (*Ant.* 4.218). He uses the phrase “council of elders” in multiple ways but often equates this council with a supreme Jewish governing body that met in Jerusalem (Josephus, *Ant.* 13.166; *J.W.* 7.412). Although only rabbinic sources speak of the Great Sanhedrin, *Bet Din ha-Gadol* (literally “the great courthouse”), by the first century AD the term *synedrion* had become virtually synonymous with *the* Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, with final judicial authority in Jewish legal matters. Other terms refer to local councils or courts and to the Jerusalem Sanhedrin. *Gerousia* (“senate,” “council of elders”), a term not commonly used of ruling bodies in Hellenistic cities, is mentioned in 2 Macc. 4:43–47 as having been established by Jason in Jerusalem. Josephus (*Ant.* 12.138) uses the term *gerousia* to designate a council of elders in Jerusalem during the reign of Antiochus (223–187 BC). The only NT occurrence of this term is in Acts 5:21, where it is found together with *synedrion*. One way to translate the phrase in question would be to take *gerousia* as an explanation for Luke’s gentile readers of the Jewish term *synedrion*: “They called together the Sanhedrin, that is, the council of elders.” The term is common in the Apocrypha (e.g., *Jdt.* 4:8; 2 Macc. 11:27) and Josephus (e.g., *Ant.* 13.166). *Boulē* is also used for the council or senate in Jerusalem (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.11; cf. Luke 23:50: Joseph of Arimathea was “a member of the council [*bouleutēs*]”) and local courts. Luke also refers to the Sanhedrin as a “council of elders” (*presbyterion*; cf. Luke 22:66; Acts 22:5).

Origin

The origin of a ruling council of priests and other Jewish aristocrats is unknown. Part of the difficulty lies in knowing whether a Second Temple reference to a council refers to a local court or to the central Jewish court for legal matters in Jerusalem. It seems likely that the Sanhedrin as a Jewish supreme court did not exist before Hasmonean times and that before then, a number of local councils and courts existed. Herod the Great destroyed much of the power of the Sanhedrin, but under the subsequent rule of the Roman proconsuls, the council grew again in power, and the council was convened by the high priest as needed. Based on the evidence from Josephus and Acts, the Sanhedrin was

made up of the high priest, the chief priests, Sadducees, and Pharisees (Acts 5:21, 34). The rabbinic picture of a scribe-led Sanhedrin, in which points of biblical interpretation were debated (cf. *m. Hag. 2.2*), reflects later conditions when the Mishnah was written and almost certainly does not reflect the pre-AD 70 Sanhedrin. From AD 6 to 66, the Sanhedrin met with the permission of the Roman procurators, and according to Acts 22:30, Roman officials could also order the Sanhedrin to convene.

Nature and Functions

The Mishnah and the Talmud describe the “Great Sanhedrin”—including its size (seventy-one members), where it met (the House of Hewn Stone), and the types of issues it ruled on (esp. capital punishment), as opposed to lesser councils that it created (cf. *m. Sanh. 4.1*). Some scholars, depending on rabbinic texts to the fullest extent, have developed complex pictures of at least two Sanhedrins, one with seventy-one members and one with twenty-three members. However, attempts to reconcile Second Temple sources with later rabbinic literature have generally proved to be unsatisfactory (see Grabbe, *Judaic Religion*). The depictions of the Great Sanhedrin in rabbinic works appear to be “ideal” descriptions of how the Sanhedrin *ought* to have functioned and therefore provide limited information about the Sanhedrin in the world of the NT.

As a result, in the main Greek sources—Josephus, the NT, and the Apocrypha—we should not expect to find literary portrayals of a Jewish supreme court that closely match rabbinic descriptions. For example, contrary to the Mishnah (cf. *m. Hag. 2.2*; *m. 'Abot 1*), the reigning high priest presided over the Sanhedrin. Roman procurators would not normally have involved themselves in Jewish religious questions, as in the case of the whole Sanhedrin’s deciding whether Jesus had committed a crime against the temple or God (Matt. 26:59–66). According to Josephus, only the Sanhedrin could decide on capital punishment (but not carry it out, under Roman rule), and he records a communication with the Hasmonean king–high priest Hyrcanus in which Jews complained that Herod had killed someone without the Sanhedrin’s approval (*Ant. 14.167*). Procurators, such as Pontius Pilate or Felix, depended on Jewish courts or councils to handle many administrative matters, such as the collection of taxes.

See also “Jesus Research and Archaeology.”

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23

Jews in the Diaspora

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The whole land and sea are full of Jews.

Sib. Or. 3.271

*They have reached every town, and it is hard to find a place in
the world
whither this race has not penetrated and where it has not ob-
tained a hold.*

Strabo, as quoted in Josephus, Ant. 14.115

In the first century AD, the majority of Jews lived not in the land of their ancestral tribes but in the lands of the gentile nations. Their geographic distribution is often referred to in the Jewish Scriptures and other Second Temple literature as a “scattering,”¹ whence the Greek label *diaspora*, a “dispersal.” Many Jews were compelled to leave their homeland, exiled to resettle in the heartland of their conquerors. Many more chose to dwell in the Diaspora, whether because their parents

1. See, e.g., Lev. 26:33; Deut. 28:64; 30:3; Ps. 44:11; Jer. 9:16; 30:11; 31:10; Ezek. 22:15; 36:19; Tob. 13:3, 5; Sir. 48:15; Bar. 2:13; 3:8; James 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1.

and parents' parents had built a life in a foreign land or because the prospects for making a better life for themselves and their families prompted new emigration. The latter impulse received fresh impetus with Alexander's unification of the lands from Macedonia to Babylon and back around to Egypt, the expansion of international trade and the infrastructure required to sustain the same, and the growth of Greek as a language potentially connecting people from such diverse regions. In this context it is important to remember that "Diaspora" is not an exclusively Jewish phenomenon: "The Jewish diaspora . . . met a Greek dispersion everywhere, from Sardis to Elephantine. There were similarly an Aramaic and a Phoenician diaspora in Egypt and surely elsewhere" (Bickerman, *Jews*, 37). Although the largest populations of expatriate Jews were to be found in a handful of major Diaspora centers like Alexandria, Syrian Antioch, and Babylon, Jewish communities were formed in cities across the Mediterranean in almost every region and province (see Acts 2:9–11; Philo, *Legat.* 214, 281–83; *Flacc.* 45–46; Josephus, *J.W.* 7.43; *Ant.* 14.115).

The Formation of the Jewish Diaspora

The Jewish Diaspora appears to have been born when part of the northern tribes of Israel was deported to Assyria (721 BC) and a large number of Judean elites and others were deported to Babylon (597 and 587 BC). What began under compulsion persisted by choice. When the opportunity to return to their ancestral homeland presented itself under Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel (538 and 520 BC; see 2 Chron. 36:22–23; Ezra 1:1–4), many Jews elected to remain in Babylon and its environs. Babylon would remain a thriving Diaspora center, one that would exercise a strong influence over the practice of Judaism in the homeland itself (seen in the editing of the Torah in Babylon; the work of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Hillel; and the ascendancy of the Babylonian Talmud over the Jerusalem Talmud). There are signs that Jews exercised some level of self-governance under the auspices of the Babylonian and Persian rulers. Texts speak of "elders" or "elders of the exile" (Susanna; Jer. 29:1), while Neh. 11:24 refers to Petahiah, who "was at the king's hand in all matters concerning the people," a court official who oversaw the affairs of his people but reported to the king (Bickerman, *Jews*, 50).

A second major center of Jewish Diaspora was Egypt, particularly the seacoast metropolis of Alexandria. For the most part, the Egyptian Diaspora was formed voluntarily. The former "house of bondage" became a place of asylum for many refugees fleeing Judea in the time of Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Judea (see Jer. 43:1–13). Jewish soldiers and their families were an important part of a military colony established in Elephantine by the pharaoh in the sixth or fifth century BC, enjoying their own temple for the practice of their sacrificial cult. There is some evidence of syncretism among these Jews—for example, swearing oaths by the God of Israel alongside other gods or sending money to support the cults of other

gods. They also appear to have ignored some stipulations of the Torah, such as those regarding not lending at interest (though this was also true in Jerusalem; Bickerman, *Jews*, 44–45, 424).

Ptolemy I greatly added to the Jewish population of Egypt by bringing back tens of thousands of Jews as slaves and prisoners of war after the initial splitting of and skirmishing over Alexander's empire, though his successor, Ptolemy II, freed the majority of these (Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 269–73; *Let. Aris.* 12–14). Voluntary migration continued under their dynasty, with Egypt as a growing “land of opportunity,” whose potential was avidly developed by its Greek pharaohs. Migration from Palestine was also fueled by the Hellenization crisis and Maccabean revolt. It was during this period (around 160 BC) that Onias IV, son of the murdered high priest Onias III, came to Leontopolis with his party, which built a temple where the displaced Onias IV could exercise his birthright (Modrzejewski, *Jews*, 121–33; Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 275–81). Jewish military involvement in internecine conflicts between claimants to the Ptolemaic throne led to a brief period of repression under Ptolemy VIII Euergetes; together with their later support of Roman forces moving into Egypt, this may be an important factor in the development of anti-Judaism in Egypt, especially in Alexandria, where it erupted in violent pogroms in AD 38 and 66 (Josephus, *Ant.* 13.65, 284–87, 349; *Ag. Ap.* 2.49–55; Smallwood, *Jews*, 223–24; Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 281–82). The majority of Egypt's Jews lived in Alexandria, concentrated in two of Alexandria's five districts (Philo, *Flacc.* 55), though gentiles lived within those districts as well, and Jews lived throughout the other districts. Jews were found in every occupation, from military and government service to agriculture, trade, commerce, and crafts (Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 334–42).

A Jewish presence was established in Cyrenaica (modern-day Libya) when Ptolemy I sent a large number of Jews into Cyrene, probably as military personnel. Nonindigenous soldiers could better serve the king's interests where native patriotism might give rise to conflicts of interests on the part of local recruits (Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.44; Bickerman, *Jews*, 89–90; Smallwood, *Jews*, 120). By the time Strabo writes about this territory in the second century BC, the Jewish presence is strong enough for “Jews” to be named as a fourth group of inhabitants alongside “citizens, peasants, and resident aliens” (quoted in Josephus, *Ant.* 14.115). Military resettlement was also responsible for a significant migration of Jews into Asia Minor. After acquiring Lydia and Phrygia, Antiochus III resettled about two thousand Jewish families from Mesopotamia there to serve as a peace-keeping force on his behalf sometime between 210 and 205 BC, providing them with land grants and allowing the settlers to live by their ancestral laws (Josephus, *Ant.* 12.148–53; Bickerman, *Jews*, 92–93; Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 287). Continued, voluntary migration led to the expansion of Jewish communities in cities throughout those regions and beyond (Josephus, *Ant.* 12.125–28; 14.185–267; 16.6, 27–61, 160–78).

Jews settled in Syrian Antioch as early as the third century BC (Josephus, *Ant.* 12.119; *Ag. Ap.* 2.39), and the proximity of Syria to Judea encouraged migration throughout the region. As in Alexandria, anti-Jewish violence erupted on several occasions in Antioch as well (Josephus, *J.W.* 2.457–60, 477–79; 7.40–62). Less is known about the beginnings of Jewish migration to Greece, though Jewish communities were well established in many of its cities by the early Principate (Philo, *Legat.* 281–82; Acts 16:13; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4).

Although the origins of the important Jewish community in Rome remain unknown, Rome already had a noticeable Jewish presence by the second century BC. One of the earliest incidents on record is the (temporary) expulsion of Jews from Rome in 139 BC (Valerius Maximus, *Fact. dict. mem.* 1.3.3; Smallwood, *Jews*, 128–30), apparently prompted by the conversion of Romans to the Jewish way of life, something on which the Roman government would continue to frown throughout the Principate. Pompey's military actions in Judea in 63 BC and other early Roman actions in Palestine led to large numbers of Jews being deported to Rome as slaves, though many were apparently manumitted within a generation (Philo, *Legat.* 155; Josephus, *Ant.* 14.70–71, 79, 85, 119–20). By the time of Augustus, the community had grown to such an extent that eight thousand Jews could gather to show support for the request brought by an embassy to Augustus from Judea (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.300). The Jews were once again expelled from Rome by Tiberius in AD 19, probably due to the conversion of some members of the senatorial class, whose defection to un-Roman, eastern superstitions could not be countenanced (Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.85; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.65–84; Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 57.18.5). The action appears to have been part of a larger crackdown on foreign cults and superstitions in the capital.

The banishment was either partial or short lived, for Jews were again present in Rome in large numbers under Caligula and Claudius—and again targets of imperial judicial actions. Sources speak of actions taken against Jews in both AD 41 and 49 (see discussions in Smallwood, *Jews*, 210–16; Barclay, *Jews*, 303–6). The first action, in AD 41, probably involved the banning of Jews' meeting together in Rome after some unrecorded provocation. This ban must have been short term. The second, in AD 49, involved expelling some portion of the Roman Jewish population on account of disturbances within the Jewish community over someone named "Chrestus," by which Suetonius (*Claud.* 25.4; see Acts 18:2) most likely meant "Christos" (mistaking the Greek title for a Latin personal name). In this instance, it seems that Jewish Christian missionaries, who would have occasioned dissension within the Jewish community and at the same time sought to convert good Romans to an eastern superstition, were the catalyst for the trouble. The expulsion could not have been total (Claudius was too fair minded for that), or permanent, as even Priscilla and Aquila were back in Rome by AD 58 (Rom. 16:3). The lingering intolerance for conversion of noble Romans to an eastern superstition and foreign cult appears again toward the end of the first century AD in Domitian's execution or banishment of a few high-ranking Roman converts to Judaism (the charge against them—"atheism"—is telling; Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 67.14.1–3).



23.1. Locations of the highest concentrations of Jews in Roman provinces in the first century AD.

Diaspora Jews and the Homeland

Jews in the Diaspora remained connected with their ancestral homeland—and thus with one another and with their ethnic identity and distinctiveness—in several practical ways. All male Jews between the ages of twenty and fifty paid the required half-shekel tax in support of the sacrifices performed at the temple, often paying tithes as well (Philo, *Legat.* 156–57, 216, 291, 311–16; *Spec.* 1.77–78; Josephus, *Ant.* 16.162–72; 18.312–13). Far from regarding this as a burden, Diaspora Jews regarded it as a privilege and a duty to be guarded jealously.

Religious pilgrimage, particularly for the festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (also called “Booths”), brought “innumerable companies of people from a countless variety of cities, some by land and some by sea, from east and west, from the north and from the south” (Philo, *Spec.* 1.69–70;² see also Acts 2:9–11). Such pilgrimages were opportunities for Diaspora Jews not only to reconnect with their ancestral land but also to connect with each other, recognizing their common bond and belonging wherever they might live in the known world (Philo, *Spec.* 1.69–70; Josephus, *Ant.* 4.203–4; Barclay, *Jews*, 423).

There was ongoing contact of other kinds as well, both official and informal. The two letters prefixed to 2 Maccabees (1:1–2:18) represent official communiqués from Jerusalem to Egyptian Jews, asking them to observe the newly established festival of Hanukkah (thus affirming their connection with the fortunes of the

2. Translation from C. D. Yonge, *The Works of Philo Judaeus, the Contemporary of Josephus: Translated from the Greek* (4 vols.; London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854–55).

homeland). The historical fiction called 3 Maccabees affirms, in narrative form, that the Diaspora Jewish community shares in the fortunes of the temple as fully and as surely as the native Judean population in 2 Maccabees. The prologue to Ben Sira opens a window on how a private citizen could bring the fruits of a Jerusalem wisdom teacher's career to Alexandria and make it available to any interested reader there. The connectedness of Jews in the Diaspora and in Judea is evident in their mutual interventions—for example, the support shown by Roman Jews for an embassy from Judea, the force with which Judean soldiers in both the Maccabean and Roman periods acted on behalf of Jewish communities in cities in neighboring gentile territories, and the demonstrations and appeal made by Jews throughout the eastern empire in response to Caligula's attempt to erect a cult image in the Jerusalem temple. The last example also shows the symbolic significance of the temple for Jews throughout the eastern Mediterranean, even those who might never see it firsthand.

Texts written by Jews living in Palestine or its environs tend to speak of Diaspora, appropriately from their geographical and historical perspective, as a calamity, a consequence of disobedience to the covenant and of failure to recognize or follow the wisdom of the Torah (e.g., Bar. 2:13–14, 29; 3:8, 10; Tob. 14:4b). They often pray to God to remedy it speedily and “gather” the tribes from the four winds, restoring them to their homeland (Bar. 4:36–37; 5:5–6; Sir. 36:13, 16; Tob. 13:5; 14:5; *Pss. Sol.* 8.28; 11.1–4; 17.44; 4 *Ezra* 13.39–48; 2 *Bar.* 78.7). By contrast, there is little indication that Jews living in the Diaspora regarded their location outside the homeland as a sign of experiencing God's disfavor or covenantal “curse.” Josephus (*Ant.* 4.114–16) interprets the Diaspora as a sign of God's fulfillment of the promises given to Abraham that his descendants will be more numerous than the sands by the sea or the stars in the sky, such that one land will not be able to hold them. In addition to occupying the land promised to them, they “shall live on islands and every continent, numbering beyond the stars of heaven.” Philo speaks of the Diaspora as the positive result of the Jewish nation's colonization of the inhabited world—an interesting perspective from a member of a (perpetually) colonized people!

Jerusalem is the capital not of the single country of Judaea but of most other countries also, because of the colonies which it has sent out from time to time to the neighboring lands of Egypt, Phoenicia and Syria, . . . to the distant countries of Pamphylia, Cilicia, most of Asia as far as Bithynia and the remote corners of Pontus, and in the same way to Europe, to Thessaly, Boetia, Macedonia, Aetolia, Attica, Argos, Corinth, and most of the best parts of the Peloponnese. Not only are the continents full of Jewish colonies. So are the best known of the islands, Euboea, Cyprus and Crete. (Philo, *Legat.* 281–82)³

3. Translation from E. Mary Smallwood, *Philonis Alexandrini: Legatio ad Gaium* (Leiden: Brill, 1970).

Diaspora Jews continued to exhibit a high reverence for the homeland, internalized from the role of Jerusalem, Zion, and Judah in the sacred Scriptures. It was a kind of spiritual homeland for all Jews, who nevertheless remained at home in their local contexts. Jerusalem was still the Jews' "mother city" (*metropolis*), but the lands of their residence and their forebears' residence remained their "native lands" (*patrides*; Philo, *Flacc.* 45–46). They gave little indication of a longing to "return" to their mother city or of an ideological problem with living outside Israel, though some did appear to have relocated to Jerusalem. Acts 6:9, for example, attests to synagogues for repatriated Diaspora Jews in Jerusalem itself.

Despite their emotional and ideological connection with their homeland, Diaspora Jewish communities did not identify themselves with or support the cause of the revolutionaries in Judea and its environs during the First Jewish Revolt (AD 66–70). Nevertheless, the revolt gave a pretext for outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence in several major cities. Jewish residents of Caesarea Maritima were massacred by their neighbors in AD 66. This provoked reprisals by Jews in Palestine (already armed for war and ready for a fight) against Greek cities with Jewish communities in the coastlands and the Decapolis, which led, in turn, to counterreprisals against Jews throughout the cities of Syria (Josephus, *J.W.* 2.457–60; see also 2.559–61). In Syrian Antioch, an apostate Jew named Antiochus incited actions against the Jewish community there on the pretext of suspicion of planning arson (*J.W.* 7.46–62). In the aftermath of the war, refugee revolutionaries attempted to stir up anti-Roman actions in Alexandria and Cyrene, but the loyalty of the local Jewish authorities remained steadfastly with Rome (*J.W.* 7.409–19, 437–46).

In the wake of the Jewish Revolt and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, Vespasian instituted the *fiscus iudaicus* (Josephus, *J.W.* 7.218; Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 66.7.2). The temple tax, now expanded to include both men and women throughout the empire and extended from ages 20–50 to ages 3–62 (and perhaps beyond for men), was still to be collected but sent to Rome for the rebuilding and the maintenance of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus (and no doubt to make up for the immense military spending involved in the suppression of the Jewish Revolt of AD 66–70; see Smallwood, *Jews*, 373–74; Barclay, *Jews*, 76–78). This was a bitter reminder of the fate of the homeland, as well as an ideological affront, forcing Jews to participate in the subvention of an idolatrous cult of a Roman god.

Local Organization and Legal Status of Diaspora Jews

An important institution within Judea and its surrounding regions, the synagogue (*synagōgē*), sometimes called a "place of prayer" (*proseuchē*; e.g., 3 Macc. 7:20; Philo, *Flacc.* 41, 45; *Legat.* 132; Josephus, *Ant.* 14.258; Acts 16:13), was essential for Diaspora Judaism. Multiple synagogues are attested in Alexandria (Philo, *Legat.* 132), in Middle Egypt, in Cyrene, Asia Minor, Greece, Rome, and elsewhere (see, e.g., Acts 9:2, 20; 13:5, 14; 14:1, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8). Although there are

local differences among excavated synagogues, one generally finds some common elements: a prominent place for the storing of the Torah scrolls, a lectern for reading, and benches for attendees, as well as a "fellowship hall" for community functions. The synagogue served many purposes (Barclay, *Jews*, 414–18). It was the center for the Jewish community's regular study of the Torah, prayer, and worship each Sabbath (Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.175; Philo, *Mos.* 2.215–16; *Spec.* 2.62–64). Jews also gathered there to celebrate the regular festivals of the Jewish liturgical calendar (in conscious distinction from the calendar of festivals observed by their neighbors in honor of their gods). It often served regulatory and administrative purposes as well, such as the settling of disputes internal to the Jewish community, the maintenance of records, and the safekeeping of the gathered temple tax and tithes. It also served as a kind of "community center" for social activities. Many of the distinctive features of Jewish life, as well as other community-binding activities, were practiced there. Each synagogue was under the direction (whether honorific or actual) of a synagogue leader (*archisynagōgos*), a title held by men and women (along with "mother of the synagogue," "elder," and the like). It is unclear whether the men and women who held such titles actually functioned as leaders in worship or were honored with such titles as benefactors of the Jewish community, but no differentiation is made between men and women in this regard (hence, what is deemed true of the one gender should be deemed true of the other; Rajak, "Jewish Community," 22–24). There is also no direct evidence that women and men were segregated in synagogues and certainly no evidence of seating women in the rear, behind a barrier.⁴

Larger Jewish communities in the Diaspora appear to have been organized as bodies of resident aliens with right of abode. The word *politeuma* is sometimes used to describe this political body, but it appears not to have been the technical term in the ancient world that modern scholars have sometimes assumed. The term is used in regard to Alexandrian Jews (see *Let. Aris.* 310) and in regard to Cyrenian Jews in two inscriptions (*CIG* 5361, 5362; Smallwood, *Jews*, 141). Jews enjoyed a certain amount of legal protection and tenure, as it were, in their city of residence, though it seems that Jews never *collectively* had the rights of Greek citizenship. Josephus's narratives on this topic have been found to be exaggerated or based on imprecise reports of imperial concessions (see *Ant.* 12.119; 12.125–26; *Ag. Ap.* 2.37–39; Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 318–25). Individuals, of course, could obtain citizenship (see Philo, *Legat.* 155–57; Acts 21:39). Nevertheless, it does appear that Jews were allowed to form a kind of intermediate-level political organization with certain authority for self-regulation, though always under the ultimate jurisdiction of the Greek or Roman authorities in the city. Contemporary sources speak of a number of official positions or bodies with Diaspora communities regulating community life, representing the interests of the Jewish community to the Greek and Roman authorities, and the like. In some

4. P. R. Trebilco and C. A. Evans, "Diaspora Judaism," *DNTB* 281–96 (287).

instances, these included an *ethnarch*, more often a council of elders (*gerousia*) with a leader (*gerousiarch*) or leaders (*archons*).

The Jews' practice of their ancestral laws and customs was generally tolerated and, in some periods and places, formally protected. Julius Caesar, for example, gave the Jews particular—and empire-wide—privileges that Augustus would later confirm (Philo, *Legat.* 311–16; Josephus, *Ant.* 14.241–46; 14.256–64; 16.162–65). These included the right to follow their ancestral laws where diet and Sabbath were concerned. Observing diet meant the ability to create their own markets; Sabbath observance meant exemption from conscription into military service (since a soldier could not decide whether to bear arms every seventh day) and from a summons to appear before a court on the Sabbath. They were also allowed to collect money for the support of the Jerusalem temple and transfer these considerable funds from their own provinces to Judea. Opportunistic governors and cities, loath to see such capital leaving their jurisdiction, sometimes tried to interfere with this particular right, but the Jews generally won in any appeal to Rome (Josephus, *Ant.* 16.27–60; 16.162–73). Of course, they were given the right to build synagogues and elect community officials. The Judean and Egyptian Jews' military support for Caesar in the civil war against Pompey (the violator of the temple in 63 BC!) was no doubt a factor in gaining such notable privileges (Smallwood, *Jews*, 135).

In some cities, the leaders of Jewish communities did seek to gain citizenship for the Jewish community as a whole. The Jewish quest to be enrolled as citizens of Alexandria became an important issue in the wake of Augustus's introduction of the *laographia* in Egypt (24 BC), a tax imposed on inhabitants of Egypt from which Greek citizens were exempt. Aside from the financial burden, the Jews were struck by the social stigma of being, for the first time, clearly and explicitly classed with the indigenous and often un-Hellenized (even illiterate) Egyptian peasants rather than with the Greek and Graecized citizens of the major cities, with whom they felt themselves to have much more in common in terms of social and cultural levels (Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 311–12; Smallwood, *Jews*, 231–32). The Greek citizens, however, not to mention the indigenous Egyptians, were already resentful of a body of resident aliens enjoying so many privileges and exemptions—in effect, being allowed, even encouraged, by Rome to persevere in their “atheistic” and antisocial manner of life in the midst of the Greek city. Apion's complaint (quoted in Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.65) is not entirely without merit: “Why, if they are citizens, don't they worship the same gods as the Alexandrians?” Citizenship implied the highest degree of solidarity with the city and one's fellow citizens, but the Jews' general abhorrence of the city's gods and of table fellowship with their fellow citizens (and their gods) was incompatible with such solidarity. The Jews' desire to receive additional privileges without the accompanying obligations of being fully a part of the civic life fueled the fires of this resentment.

After decades, the issue gave rise, on the one hand, to complex litigation before the emperors Caligula and Claudius (Philo's *On the Embassy to Gaius* provides a firsthand account) and, on the other hand, to violent anti-Jewish pogroms throughout

the city of Alexandria. These resulted in the demolition or desecration of synagogues throughout the city, the herding of Jewish residents into a single quarter as a ghetto (and consequent looting of the dispossessed), the public abuse and lynching of at least several dozen Jewish men and women, and the attempt to pass a measure declaring the Jews to be aliens *without* right of abode (Philo, *Flacc.* 25–57; *Legat.* 120–35). Claudius's decision confirmed the Jews' historic privileges and status as aliens with right of abode, but he also later responded to new outbreaks in Alexandria by speaking of the Jews as living “in a city not their own” and made a clear and sharp distinction between them and “Alexandrians,” that is, Greek citizens of Alexandria (Josephus, *Ant.* 19.286–91; *CPJ* 2:153 [discussed in Smallwood, *Jews*, 247–50]).

Responses to Hellenization among Diaspora Jews

Alexander extended not only a political but also a cultural empire. Greek became the language that would allow people throughout the eastern Mediterranean and the Levant to interact with one another and was also the language of politics and international commerce. Greek culture became the body of knowledge, etiquette, and ideology shared by the “educated” or “civilized,” regardless of an individual's original ethnicity. There were, therefore, powerful incentives—some quite practical, some more ideological—to “Hellenize,” at least to a certain extent, throughout the territory ruled by Alexander and his successors (Judea not least of all).

We may speak of “Hellenization” as a process that took place in a number of arenas of life and experience (see Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 344–57; Barclay, *Jews*, 88–91). The first and most basic area of Hellenization was the acquisition of knowledge of, even facility in, the Greek language. This was prerequisite to all meaningful interaction between indigenous or transplanted people groups and the Greek elites or colonists in their midst. The degree to which large numbers of Jews in the Diaspora embraced the Greek language to the neglect and eventual loss of their native languages (Hebrew and Aramaic) is most dramatically seen in the production of Greek translations of the Jewish Scriptures (generally all referred to together under the rubric “Septuagint” [LXX]) as early as the mid-third century BC. The *Letter of Aristeas* is an early expression of the legend of the Septuagint's emergence. The act of translation brought the Jewish Scriptures more directly into conversation with the philosophies and ethics of the Greek world by rendering them in the same language and representing their key concepts with words that now resonated with Greek conversations about piety and virtue. If, on the one hand, the translation could be severely criticized by later rabbis for its departures from the exact meaning of the Hebrew, it was nevertheless essential as a way to keep the Scriptures accessible to many Diaspora Jews (and now their Greek-speaking neighbors as well).

Another area of Hellenization involved personal names. Those who wished to “blend in” more easily or make themselves more accessible to Greek persons or Greek speakers might take on Greek names or give Greek names to their children,

thus representing themselves as a part of the more international, Hellenized population, much as, for example, Chinese or Indian residents in America will often adopt Western names or at least simplify their own. Learning the Greek language opened up the possibility of reading Greek literature, attending Greek drama and recitals of poetry, listening to philosophers promoting their ethics and ideals in the public spaces, and even receiving a Greek education (including literature, rhetoric, philosophy, religion, and other curricular subjects). Hellenization occurred not only in the arena of cultural knowledge but also with regard to cultural practice (e.g., dress, forms of entertainment, arrangement of homes, practices of dining); participation in the civic, social, and religious life of the Greek city; and even becoming politically enfranchised as a Greek citizen.

An individual might be Hellenized in each of these areas to extremely different degrees. A high level of fluency in Greek did not by itself imply a high degree of Hellenization in other areas. It is also important to discern carefully the use to which particular Jews and Jewish communities put their knowledge of, and embeddedness within, Greek language and culture. John Barclay has developed a helpful list of “scales” on which to measure Hellenization and its ideological and social effects with appropriate discernment and care (Barclay, *Jews*, 92–102). The first scale measures assimilation, asking to what degree Jews were integrated into gentile society and in what contexts (and to what degree the marks of differentiation between Jews and their neighbors remained visible). The second scale is acculturation, asking about the degree to which particular Jews acquired facility in, and familiarity with, Greek language and culture (e.g., that body of knowledge and set of values to which the educated Greek would have had access). The third scale measures accommodation, asking primarily about the use to which Jews put their acculturation (or lack thereof). Did they foster antagonism against Greco-Roman society and culture, foster understanding while retaining Jewish distinctiveness, or seek to hide or erase their Jewish distinctiveness? In other words, did the particular Jew or Jews under investigation build bridges or walls? Some Jews attaining a high degree of facility in Greek and Greek culture and a high degree of integration into Greek society ultimately chose to abandon the distinctive beliefs and practices of their Jewish heritage in favor of a fully Graecized identity. One illustrious example is Tiberius Julius Alexander, ironically the nephew of the staunchly loyal Jew Philo of Alexandria. Alexander traded in his Jewish observances for a notable career as procurator of Judea and governor of Alexandria (Barclay, *Jews*, 105–6; Modrzejewski, *Jews*, 185–90). He showed no favoritism toward his fellow co-religionists when he served on Vespasian’s staff during the First Jewish Revolt (Josephus, *J.W.* 5.45–46, 205). Similarly, a Jew named Antiochus apostatized, attained significant influence in his city of Antioch, and became a potent enemy against his own people there (see *J.W.* 7.46–53). The response to apostates is consistently negative in Diaspora Jewish literature. The author of 3 Maccabees indulges in fantasies of their execution by pious Jews, while the Wisdom of Solomon vividly portrays the tension between the more powerful apostates and the less powerful “righteous” (Wis. 1:16–2:24).

Many Jews, however, remained faithful to their ancestral way of life *and* were fully engaged in the lives of the cities in which they lived (to the extent that the Torah permitted) *as* Jews.

Advanced facility in Greek language, literature, philosophy, and rhetoric by no means implied any degree of relaxation of commitment to Jewish identity and heritage or to the particulars of Torah observance and the Jewish way of life. The writer of *Pseudo-Ezekiel* used his facility in Greek literary style to retell the Hebrew epic—the exodus story—in the form of a Greek tragedy, celebrating the foundational narrative of the Jewish people in the most noble style of the Greeks. Philo of Alexandria and the author of 4 Maccabees, both highly Hellenized writers, were also fully committed to living out the distinctive way of life prescribed by Torah as their duty and privilege before God. Philo was more thoroughly Hellenized than Paul in most areas, but his devotion to the practice of the Torah was never questioned, as was Paul's (Barclay, *Jews*, 91). These and similar writers (like the author of the *Letter of Aristean*) used their acculturation to re-present Judaism as, essentially, a kind of ethical philosophy comparable to those promoted among the learned Greeks.

Philo interpreted the narratives and laws of Genesis and Exodus as instruction concerning the soul's journey from slavery to the passions to perfection in virtue. The author of 4 Maccabees sought to strengthen adherence to the ancestral Jewish way of life by explaining how it was in no way inferior to the practice of the gentiles and was, in fact, the way to attain the highest ideals prized even by them. The Torah was the God-given discipline that empowered the mind to rule over the passions (4 Macc. 1:15–17; 2:21–23) and that trained the adherent in justice, courage, temperance, and prudence, the cardinal virtues of Greek ethical philosophy (5:22–24). These writers desired to interpret even the most culturally distinctive elements (like circumcision and the dietary laws) in terms of the philosophical lessons such elements encode or the moral training they nurture. Some Jews, indeed, undertook such an enterprise to find a way to remain connected with the “essence” of their Jewish heritage while leaving behind its distinctive—and socially problematic and limiting—practices. In the case of Philo and 4 Maccabees, however, the purpose was not to facilitate departures from the ancestral law. Philo strongly disapproved of those who thought they could fulfill the “spirit” while neglecting the “letter” of these commandments (*Migr.* 89–93). Instead, Philo sought to encourage other Jews who were themselves familiar with Greek culture and ideals about the value of their own ancestral practice. He urged them to continue in practices that maintained distinctive Jewish identity and also equipped them with rationales for those practices that “worked” within an increasingly Greek mind-set.

Identity, Boundaries, and Ethnic Tension in the Diaspora

Jews were connected by an ethnic bond—the fact that their lineage could be traced, theoretically at least, to one family (the sons of Jacob) and to one native land.

Nevertheless, Jewish identity was not solely an ethnic matter: it involved a way of life (a set of customs) that could be left behind (e.g., by Tiberius Alexander) or taken up (e.g., by a gentile convert like Izates, the king of Adiabene [Barclay, *Jews*, 403]). Although belonging to a particular “race” or “nation” or “tribe” was part of the definition of a “Jew” held by both Jews and non-Jews alike, even more central to this working definition was the practice of a particular set of “ancestral customs” or “ancestral laws” (Barclay, *Jews*, 405–10). For those Jews who wanted to preserve their identity as part of the Jewish people, a number of practices emerged as centrally important. Indeed, the effectiveness of these practices for creating boundaries and differentiation between Jew and non-Jew allowed Jews to acculturate to the Greek environment to a high degree without fear of losing their distinctiveness as members of the historic people of the one God. The most central of these practices were avoidance of idolatry, observance of the dietary laws of Torah, observance of the Sabbath, and circumcision. That these were effective markers of identity and group boundaries is attested by the fact that, if gentiles knew anything about Jews at all, they knew that Jews followed at least these practices.

Rejection of idolatrous expressions of worship and of worship directed toward any god but the God of Israel was of central importance to living in line with the Jews’ ancestral tradition. It also became a principal sign of the difference and distinctiveness of the Jew in the midst of a polytheistic, gentile world. Avoiding all rites directed toward another god also meant that Jews would associate with their gentile neighbors only in certain contexts and up to a certain point. This practice drew strong social boundaries that clearly marked Jews and non-Jews as different social bodies, with no danger of the latter swallowing up the former. The author of the *Letter of Aristeas* understood, in fact, that the more particular laws of the Torah were given specifically to help reinforce the boundaries and limit close association between the groups. Because the Jews *alone* had come to the knowledge of the one, living God and were surrounded by people whose religious knowledge was tainted by polytheism and iconic religion, “our lawgiver . . . fenced us about with impregnable palisades and with walls of iron, to the end that we should mingle in no way with any of the other nations, remaining pure in body and in spirit, emancipated from vain opinions, revering the one and mighty God above the whole of creation” (*Let. Aris.* 139).⁵

The dietary laws were especially well suited to prevent the close association between Jews and people of other nations that would lead eventually to the corruption of the Jews’ pure religion. These laws did not merely prohibit the consumption of the meat of certain animals (like pigs, rabbit, crabs, and so forth) or the consumption of meat improperly prepared (like beef or lamb in which the blood of the animal has been allowed to sit and congeal). These laws also encouraged the

5. Translation from Moses Hadas, *Aristeas to Philocrates (Letter of Aristeas)* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 157.

Jews to create their own markets, keeping their food separate from the gentiles' from production through consumption. In addition, these laws were a constant reminder that the Jews have been set apart by God from all other peoples: when they distinguished between clean and unclean food, they mirrored God's action of distinguishing between Israel, as God's own nation (thus "clean" for God), and the unclean nations (so Lev. 20:22–26; deSilva, *Honor*, 269–71). The law also prohibited, however, the consumption of food that had been connected with the worship of other gods. Almost all meat in Greco-Roman society came from a pagan sacrifice, but libations and grain offerings made to other gods consecrated all the wine and bread in a house as well (Bickerman, *Jews*, 248–49). Eating with gentile neighbors who would not forsake their own expressions of piety for the sake of their Jewish guests would be difficult, if not impossible, for the conscientious Jew. These difficulties help us understand why some Jews would opt to leave behind their ancestral traditions in order to better connect with their neighbors and city. Tessa Rajak writes, "It is not inevitable that special dietary laws compel people to eat away from others. . . . All sorts of arrangements are feasible, where there is a social reason to make them" ("Jewish Community," 18). However true this may be in principle, the fact remains that most Greek and Latin writers commenting on the Jews in their midst (see below) bear witness to the latter's tendency to abstain from mingling at a common table. As a natural corollary, Jews tended not to marry non-Jews unless they became full converts, as in the story of *Joseph and Aseneth*, or unless the Jews became practical apostates.

Circumcision literally marked the Jewish male as a Jew. Although this sign of Jewishness would not be immediately visible in most contexts, it appears to have been prominent in Jewish self-awareness (witness the number of times the practice is mentioned, especially as a defining characteristic that distinguished Jews from non-Jews, in the HB, Apocrypha, and NT) as well as in gentile awareness of what distinguished a Jew from others. Sabbath observance was a far more visible and obvious sign. Jews gathered for worship together and observed holidays from business in rhythms completely different from the religious and holiday calendar of the people around them in their city. They rested on other people's business days; they stayed home when other people's establishments (and lawcourts and armies) were open for business.

It was evidently not easy for Jews to hold on to their convictions of monolatry (monotheism) while living in the midst of gentiles expressing their pious and heartfelt devotion to their gods. A good number of surviving texts bear witness to their authors' perception of the need to insulate their fellow Jews from the striking impression that gentile rites and liturgies made on the Jews living in their midst. The Letter of Jeremiah, for example, seeks to drill into its readers' minds that the nations' gods "are not gods; so do not fear them" (Let. Jer. 16, 23; similarly 29, 40, 44, 52, 56, 65, 69) by dwelling on the lifelessness and helplessness of the idols themselves. The tale of Daniel and Bel ridicules gentile religion on the same grounds. Wisdom of Solomon 13:1–15:17 employs both anti-idolatry polemics

from the Jewish Scriptures and Greek explanations for the invention of idolatrous cults (and thus the perversion of rational religion) to stress the emptiness of the religious activity surrounding the Diaspora Jew.

This criticism extended to the practitioners of idolatry, whom Jewish authors accused of being empty headed, depraved in their thinking, and mired in every personal and social vice imaginable on account of their devotion to false gods and consequent ignorance of the law of the one God (see Wis. 14:12–14, 22–27; 3 Macc. 4:16; 5:12; 6:4–5, 9, 11). Diaspora Jews “needed the passions of contempt and hatred for the religion of their neighbors to protect their faith from the daily allure of paganism,” and from neighbors who would have welcomed them into their temples (Bickerman, *Jews*, 256). Despite warnings about being sensitive to their neighbors’ religious sentiments, seen dramatically in the LXX translation of Exod. 22:28 (where “You will not speak ill of God [Hebrew *’ēlōhîm*]” becomes “You will not speak ill of gods [Greek *theoi*]”),⁶ such contempt for their neighbors’ cherished religious beliefs could not have gone unnoticed by outsiders.

That Diaspora Jews were largely able to maintain their identity and distinctiveness, and that distinctively Jewish practices were central to the task, is confirmed by reactions to Jews by their gentile neighbors. From outside, the Jews’ avoidance of their neighbors’ temples and rites, and no doubt the Jews’ attitude toward their neighbors’ gods, put them in the category of “atheists,” those who disbelieve in the gods’ existence. This was further understood as a sign of the Jews’ injustice toward the gods on whom the life of the city depended. Gentiles were aware that the Jews’ beliefs had social implications. In the words of Apollonius Molon (as cited in Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.258 LCL), “The Jews do not accept people who have other views about God.” Atheism, in his eyes, bred misanthropy (or at least xenophobia) on the Jews’ part (see also Diodorus Siculus, *Lib. Hist.* 34–35). Jews were seen as extremely loyal to one another but not to the non-Jewish residents in the same cities. In avoiding all idolatrous settings, Jews cut themselves off from a major means of establishing fellowship and feelings of solidarity with their neighbors. It was “an act of unsociability that might have been condoned, on the grounds that the Jews were merely following the ways of their ancestors, but it was surely never understood” (Bickerman, *Jews*, 251).

The effectiveness of the dietary laws of Torah in reinforcing social cohesion among Jews and differentiation from gentiles was clear to the Jews’ neighbors (Diodorus Siculus, *Lib. Hist.* 34.1.1–4; 40.3–4; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.1–2; Philostratus, *Vit. Apol.* 33; 3 Macc. 3:3–7). In response to this, the Jews’ dietary laws became an object of ridicule and criticism (Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.137; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.4.2–3; Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.160; 14.98–104; Plutarch, *Table Talk* 5.1 [*Mor.* 669E–F]). Their observance of the Sabbath was censured as a mark of laziness (Tacitus, *Hist.*

6. In the HB, the Hebrew word *’ēlōhîm*, though plural in form, is used to refer to the one God of the Jews. The LXX reads it here as an actual plural and so translates it by the Greek plural form for “gods.”

5.4.3; Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.105–6; Plutarch, *Superstition* 8 [*Mor.* 169C]). The practice of circumcision was denounced as a barbaric mutilation (Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.137; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.2; Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.104). Some Greeks, like Poseidonius, could admire Moses as a high-minded theologian and lawgiver, but they held that his pure religion degenerated into superstition as his followers added circumcision, dietary regulations, and Sabbath observance (Strabo, *Geogr.* 16.760–61). Such comments in Greek and Latin literature show just how clear and important precisely *these* boundary markers were to creating and sustaining the identity of the people in their midst that refused to assimilate. These prejudices, focused on the markers of Jewish distinctiveness, also served as the ever-glowing embers from which anti-Jewish riots were always ready to flare up.

But gentiles could also be attracted to this distinctive way of living practiced by the Jews in their midst. Varro, the first-century BC Roman philosopher, approved of the Jews' rejection of iconic representations of divinity, criticizing his own people for abandoning the original, pure, Roman practice of not representing deity in physical form (quoted in Augustine, *Civ.* 4.31). Gentiles could also be attracted to the rigorous discipline of the Torah, the high-minded ethical principles therein taught and practiced by its adherents, and the social bond between Jews. Many gentiles showed their approval, and perhaps to some extent their adherence, by supporting local synagogues. An inscription in Aphrodisias lists fifty-some "fearers of God" (*theosebeis*), whether indicating formal adherents or gentile benefactors of the Jewish community.⁷ Sometimes a gentile would take up the whole yoke of the law and accept circumcision. Jews were not active evangelists, but they did not turn away gentile inquirers.

Jewish hostility against their neighbors finally matched decades of gentile violence perpetrated against Diaspora Jews in the "Diaspora revolts" of AD 115–117 (see Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 4.2.1–4; Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 48.32.1–2). Uprisings began in Cyrene and then flared up in Egypt as Jews attacked their Greek neighbors. Pagan temples appear to have been a favorite target for arson. The insurgents initially got the upper hand, but the emperor Trajan sent Marcius Turbo, a skilled general, with a sufficiently large army to suppress the rebellion. The effort took over a year, during which time the assault on Greek neighbors turned into an all-out revolt against Rome. The war took on messianic dimensions in Cyrene and Egypt and may have involved a plan to liberate Judea from Roman domination. Revolt eventually spread to the island of Cyprus. Tens of thousands of Jewish lives were lost, and gentile casualties also ran high, particularly in the early stages of the uprisings. Jewish communities in Egypt and North Africa appear never to have recovered their former prominence. Jews were forbidden even to land on Cyprus for at least a century.

In the wake of Trajan's conquest of Mesopotamia, Jews in that region also rebelled against the newly imposed Roman rule. This appears, however, to have

7. Trebilco and Evans, "Diaspora Judaism," 286.

been a part of a larger, regional resistance to Roman imperialism. After Trajan's death, Hadrian abandoned attempts to hold Mesopotamia within the Roman Empire, and the Diaspora revolts with their demands on the Roman military's time, energy, and resources may well have contributed to the failure of that attempt at expansion (Smallwood, *Jews*, 421).

See also "Synagogue and Sanhedrin."

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