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Name Calling: Thinking About (the Study of) Judaism in Late Antiquity

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Abstract

Jewish Late Antiquity is a notoriously difficult period to see clearly; not only is the evidence sparse and idiosyncratic but the stakes are high and our lenses are perennially clouded. After all, the first centuries of the Common Era are the cradle of both Christianity and classical Judaism. The significance of this era is of intense and decidedly proprietary interest to many contemporary scribes no less than it was to ancient polemicists and practitioners. The methodological and confessional biases that inform the history of this period are, if not different in kind, then perhaps distinguished in degree from those that inflect all historical endeavors. The dangers posed, while hardly new to the field, are nonetheless persistent: we still need to sort out the very language and terms with which we do our work.

Keywords

Natalie B. Dohrmann, Classical Judaism, Common Era, Jewish Late Antiquity, Formative Judaism

Disciplines

History of Religion | Jewish Studies | Other Religion | Religion

Name Calling: Thinking about (the Study of) Judaism in Late Antiquity

IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE of *JQR* we have made the review essay the primary medium for reflecting on a field in transition—the study of late antique Jews and Judaism. By pairing major scholars with major works (produced by other major scholars), we hope to step back and catch a glimpse of a dynamic moment—one full of shifting and shared problems and innovations—in the unfolding of this rich arena of scholarship. What we wanted to avoid was the standard single-book review, hoping instead to use books as provocations to broader inquiry. The result is a densely interconnected set of essays.

Jewish Late Antiquity is a notoriously difficult period to see clearly; not only is the evidence sparse and idiosyncratic but the stakes are high and our lenses are perennially clouded. After all, the first centuries of the Common Era are the cradle of both Christianity and classical Judaism. The significance of this era is of intense and decidedly proprietary interest to many contemporary scribes no less than it was to ancient polemicists and practitioners. The methodological and confessional biases that inform the history of this period are, if not different in kind, then perhaps distinguished in degree from those that inflect all historical endeavors. The dangers posed, while hardly new to the field, are nonetheless persistent: we still need to sort out the very language and terms with which we do our work.

It is less a time of refinement in the fields than of dramatic reconfiguration. The comfortable categories that have been used to talk about Judaism in the high and late Roman empire are being undermined. Several paradigms have shifted in this past decade or so—from ideas of rabbinic normativity and authority, to basic notions of periodicity. The conceptual landscape has altered to such a degree that nearly all the evidence can or should be revisited and reimagined. We are in a moment strikingly light on received wisdom. One vital aspect of this (re)appraisal has been the need to remember constantly that names create conceptual *contexts*—

labels inescapably analogize, prioritize, and situate evidence. Descriptors that were once deemed simple and transparent have been outed as loaded concepts with histories, earning them scare quotes and necessary reevaluation: “religion,” “Judaism,” “Christianity,” “orthodoxy,” “ethnicity,” “race,” “nationalism” (as in Martha Himmelfarb’s review of David Goodblatt and Shaye J. D. Cohen), even “Romanitas.” The vocabulary that describes ancient evidence will to a certain extent determine the company it keeps. The ease with which Judaism and Christianity can be talked about as sister or rival religions, for example, becomes complicated if we deny that Judaism is a religion at all. In other words, what can be compared and how is also under scrutiny. In fact, we might say that attention to the (generative and obfuscatory) language, labels, and analogies used to comprehend late antique Judaism is a major thread connecting the various pieces assembled in this special issue.

As Megan Hale Williams says:

From Ignatius of Antioch and the rabbis of the Mishnah, to Origen and the Jews of third-century Caesarea, to Jerome and the redactors of the *Yerushalmi*, . . . Jews and Christians occupied quite different positions in society, and thought in terms of different categories. These must neither be carelessly assimilated to one another, nor forced to fit into artificial typologies, however elegant.

Shorn of the old terminological (and accompanying conceptual) strictures, the evidence of late antique Judaism is set free, and we have the exciting, if daunting, opportunity to examine evidence anew—to question the analogical, comparative, and metaphorical logic that has (tacitly or explicitly) provided the generative syntax of so much that we know—or think we know.

To wit, “religion” as a category used for historical and phenomenological analysis comes under examination, as can be seen in both Daniel Boyarin’s and Megan Hale Williams’s pieces. Is there such a thing, they ponder, and if so, when, and for whom? Boyarin dismantles the usefulness of the label “Jewish Christianity,” a term that depends, he argues, on a more or less stable Judaism/Christianity binary, as a part of his argument that Judaism is only a “religion” to a Christian heresiologist. “Religion” is a modern academic category that preserves within it culturally specific debates originating in Jewish/Christian Late Antiquity. In other words, to presume “Judaism” names a “religion” in Late Antiquity (as Boyarin reminds us, with one early exception, only Christians even use the term “Judaism”/*Ioudaismos* before the modern period) is to al-

ready inhabit a polemic, and of necessity then to misread what he calls the “complex of loyalties and practices that mark off the people of Israel.” Just as it is absurd to call ancient Greeks or Romans who have homosexual sex “gay” (is Achilles gay?), so too it is false to comprehend ancient Judaism in a vocabulary that is as polemical as it is anachronistic.

What do we gain or lose by jettisoning “religion” when describing formative Judaism? Concomitantly, if one refrains from talking about Judaism via categories set by obsolescent discourses, what are the relevant categories? We find several alternatives. Seth Schwartz thinks hard about Martin Goodman’s comparative historical project in *Rome and Jerusalem* (2007). The empire is and must be a primary meaning-giving context—but since the Roman empire has fallen and Jewish-Christian relations persist, it is has been too easy for scholarship to ignore the world-dominating power of the age. Yet Christianity and early rabbinic Judaism are indeed properly both Roman entities. Each is at once *of Rome* and *subject to her*. To stress only one part of that relationship is false: either misleadingly celebratory or lachrymose. Core notions of Jewish history and identity such as race and nation have no valence outside the massive political and conceptual reality of the Roman empire. Schwartz calls Goodman book “magisterial,” but still asks how productive it is to apply categories of analysis suitable for a world empire to the Jewish population within it. In general, he prompts us to be deeply critical of the parameters of comparison. Is Jewish experience typical of a (pre-Christian) Roman provincial community? Is Jewish evidence useful to students of, say, Roman Gaul? Do Jerusalem and Rome manifest analogous “civilizations” and how would one go about showing this? Is a Jerusalem of fifty thousand comparable to a Rome of a million? Or as Schwartz says succinctly, “size matters.”

The question of empire and analogy arises differently in Ra’anan Boustán’s essay on Paula Fredriksen’s *Augustine and the Jews* (2008). Boustán and Fredriksen ask how one might talk productively and comparatively about disjunctive sorts of evidence—in this case the rhetorical “Jews” of Christian *contra Iudaeos* literature and the real Jews encountered in the Greco-Roman city. In a move that echoes Boyarin, Fredriksen effectively divorces late antique Jews from theological “Jews”—a move that counters the projection of the “Jews” produced in vituperative inner-Christian polemic into real life. Boustán in turn wants to pause on moments when the two intersect. He points to three eruptions of theologically inflected Christian violence against Jews in the late fourth and early fifth centuries in which real Jews feel the physical manifestations of “mere” rhetoric.

Boustán notes a shift in scholarly *tendenz*, from one stressing continuity

between Second Temple and rabbinic forms of Judaism to a new proclivity focusing on rupture, invention, and disjuncture that has particularly marked North American scholarly thinking about late antique Judaism. Ancient sources, no less than modern scholars, use names to mask agendas, and the potent appeals to tradition found in rabbinic Judaism, Christian hermeneutics, Second Sophistical rhetorical performance, or the Augustinian emperor cult might better be seen as smoke screens masking radical innovation.

Richard Kalmin and Galit Hasan-Rokem both read Peter Schäfer's *Jesus in the Talmud* (2007), in which literary sleuthing is paired with an important corrective concerning the standard Jewish notion of Christianity. The urge to refine context and labels is pronounced here as well. If Schäfer is right that anti-Christian polemic comes into flower primarily in the Babylonian rather than the Palestinian Talmud, then he reinforces the significant findings of other scholars such as Kalmin himself: We would be mistaken to ignore the proximate Christianity for those eastern sages for whom Jesus belongs not to the empire-striding Christians of the Theodosian Code but to the Syriac communities of Sasanian Babylon. We must then think (at least) twice before importing categories drawn from the heated world of Jewish Christian relations under Rome to a reading of the Babylonian rabbis' "Jesus." For Christianities are no less local than are ancient Judaisms. Another tendency in Schäfer prods Hasan-Rokem to ask if the proper context of the *Bavli* is rightly late antique at all? Perhaps it should be read as (proto-)medieval? Finally, she wonders if attention to historical context has the unintended consequence of obscuring the internal dynamic of exegesis—a more distinctly inner-Jewish idiom that she argues is less starkly shaped by Roman or Sasanian imperial pressures.

In his celebratory review of Joshua Levinson's *The Twice-Told Tale* (Hebrew, 2005), Jeffrey Rubenstein highlights the power and necessity of literary sophistication in historical projects dealing with Late Antiquity. Taking Hasan-Rokem's questions for Schäfer still further, Rubenstein—through Levinson's New Historical approach—shows that the complex gestures of the literary are, in their own particulars, indicators not only of rabbinic creativity but also of the broader horizon of rabbinic experience.

Beth Berkowitz's article is an example of the impact of this new historiographical awareness and literary sensitivity on our understanding of canonical texts. Her explication of an early tannaitic text complex in the Sifra to Leviticus 18.3 identifies conflicting rabbinic reactions to Roman imperialism. One position makes a strategic decision to frame the Roman empire metaphorically as the specific (and circumscribable) teachings of

a (philosophical) school; the other sees Roman danger in the more pervasive onslaught of a deeply threatening and pandemic culture. In so doing, the rabbis also project debates about their own self-perception: are they a school or a culture? Can the Roman city be “home” for the rabbis? How must one affiliate as a rabbi? In order to get to the Roman present, however, Berkowitz takes very seriously the self-avowed function of the text—exegesis. Scripture, in other words, is a context as critical to our understanding of late antique data as are Roman tax laws and the expanding authority of Christian bishops. Berkowitz stresses that rabbinic literature, even when revealing ideological fissures, is predominantly ideal and prescriptive. Roman evidence is much more diverse, and to compare descriptive Roman data with prescriptive rabbinic material results in a utopian scholarly reconstruction.

Someone reading this issue as a collection will find a dizzying array of vectors and threads connecting these topics, books, and critics. Indeed editing it was akin to entering a conversation with many of the authors engaging the others directly, crisscrossing similar terrain, and employing shared references. The porous quality of this conversation rests on its own theoretical foundation, as we see in Boyarin’s self-critique. As the poststructuralists tell us, we have much more to fear from stable categories than from instability. In their relentless attention to the names, labels, and comparative typologies used in both current and ancient literatures, the authors here are able to wrest control of certain discourses from existing conceptual categories. This freedom to receive ancient evidence anew has led to unexpected juxtapositions and insights—as this generation of catholically trained scholars continues its work we will continue to reap the fruits of this promise to dismantle and reinvent our understanding of Judaism and Late Antiquity.

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