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Rethinking Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity

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Two intersecting scholarly trends make it an appropriate time to reconsider issues of race and ethnicity in Late Antiquity, specifically with regards to the Jews.¹ First, the demise of normative definitions of ancient Judaism has left us with a wider spectrum of ideas and behaviors that are considered Jewish. Gone are the days when either Josephus' neat template of sects or the rabbis' narrow gaze supplied the rubric for conceptualizing late antique Judaism. We are increasingly tempted to resort to the apocryphal definition attributed to Golda Meir: if you call someone a Jew and he does not throw a chair at you, then he is a Jew.

Secondly, an extremely rich re-examination of the notion of ethnic identity is available, provided in part by anthropologists but also by historians.² Particularly stimulating is Jonathan Hall's Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity, in which he argues that 'ethnic identity is socially constructed and subjectively perceived (1997:19).' Hall rejects the common assumption that ethnic identity depends on a simple set of characteristics such as common language, food habits, or religious beliefs, stating that 'While all of these attributes may act as important symbols of ethnic identity, they really only serve to bolster an identity that is ultimately constructed through written or spoken discourse (1997:2).'

This paper will examine three cases which illuminate how Jewish identity was constructed via written and spoken discourse: 1) the meaning of the term 'Ioudaios,' 2) the identity of the "minim" in rabbinic literature and 3) the widespread ascription of esoteric knowledge to the Jews. The first case emphasizes the importance of ancient discourse about *ethnos* in shaping Jewish identity. The second explains how rabbis adopted the strategy of appropriating to themselves the power to define insiders and outsiders and the third raises the complex problem of how stereotypes influence Jewish identity.

¹ I would like to thank Geoffrey Greatrex, Stephen Mitchell, David Olster, Daniel R. Schwartz and Andrew Lazarus.

² See Geary 1983, Herzfeld 1987 and the extensive bibliography in Hall 1997.

The Meaning of the term 'Ioudaioi'

Shaye Cohen, in one of the most important and subtle discussions about the Greek term 'Ioudaioi', usually translated as 'Jews', argues for three meanings for the term in ancient usage (1999:70).

- 1) a Judaeen (a function of birth and/or geography)
- 2) a Jew (a function of religion and culture)
- 3) a citizen or ally of the Judaeen state (a function of politics)

Only in the second case, and not before c. 100 B.C.E., should the term 'Ioudaios' be translated as 'Jew'; in the other two instances, according to Cohen, it is best translated as 'Judaeen.'³

While the term 'Ioudaios' came originally from the tribal name Judah, this usage had died out by the Roman period. The term referred instead, as Cohen notes, first and foremost to someone who belongs to the *ethnos* of the 'Ioudaioi.' Here he cites and follows the seminal work of Elias Bickerman (1988:124), who pointed out the ubiquitous references by both Jews and non-Jews to the Jews as an *ethnos*.⁴

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a full analysis of the ancient notion of *ethnos*, but it is important to review some of the points which appear in Greco-Roman discussions of *ethne*. Ancient conceptions of *ethnos* that go back to Herodotus included the claim of an *ethnos* to common ancestors and a common set of customs. In

³ The dating of the third meaning is somewhat unclear since Cohen uses examples from the early Hasmonean period but states that this meaning emerged only after 100 B.C.E.

⁴ See Cohen 1999, 72ff and 1990:205. References to the Jewish *ethnos* are found, among others, in Hecataeus of Abdera (Diod. Sic. 40.3), Cicero *Pro Flacco* 28.66-9, Varro (in Augustine *De Ci vDei* 4), I Maccabees 8:23, Philo and Josephus. While *ethnos* is the most common term for the 'Ioudaioi', we also find terms such as *genos* (people) and *laos* nation. The usages do not articulate for us clear distinctions in meanings, but the use of *genos* may attention to issues of birth and genealogy, leading to the tendency by many modern translators to adopt the translation 'people'.

the general discourse about ethnic identity, shared ancestry was linked to a people's customs, since it was usually an ancestor who had introduced the special customs of an *ethnos*. Following the customs of one's *ethnos* was perceived to be no more a question of choice than was choosing one's ancestors.⁵ As Cicero stated 'All men follow the custom of their land and law (Tusc. Disp. 1.45.108).' The customs of one *ethnos* were not the same as the customs of another, but each suited their own group *by definition*.⁶ The customs of other *ethne* might strike an outsider as barbaric (as was often the case in Greek and Roman eyes), but were still to be followed by the members that belonged to them.

Graeco-Roman readers had a rich appetite for foreign customs, and numerous writers from Herodotus to Strabo carefully described 'barbaric' customs. These foreign customs were usually viewed as odd, or even condemned as 'magic', but were thought to function as defining characteristics of particular groups.⁷ The customs were given by a superior, perhaps divine lawgiver, and thus had a status that commanded universal recognition.

It was widely believed in antiquity that many other people were attracted to the customs of the 'Ioudaioi.' Perhaps like the current appeal of Buddhism among New-Age Californians, the popularity of Jewish customs among Romans and those of other *ethne* was based on a search for "eastern" wisdom combined with sketchy knowledge about actual Jewish practices.

Attraction to the customs of a foreign *ethnos* was not viewed in the same way by every sphere of society. In the eyes of the Roman government, for example, it was not always acceptable for Romans to take up the ways of other *ethne*. If foreign individuals appeared to be trying to spread their customs, members of the offending *ethnos* might be punished.⁸ Ancient snobbery in some ancient social circles caused an outpouring of criticism which decried the foreign customs

⁵ Contrast this with modern notions of identity as affiliation (David Hollinger, 1995).

⁶ See for example Dio Halicarnasus Roman Antiquities 7.70.

⁷ There were of course some exceptions, such as human sacrifices, which were considered too extreme to be permitted under any circumstances.

⁸ Hence the periodic expulsions from Rome of various suspicious *ethne*.

which infected and debased Romans abroad and even Roman society itself.⁹

It is crucial to recognize that belonging to an *ethnos* was not primarily based on subscribing to a certain set of beliefs or religious principles. Since belonging to an *ethnos* was not defined in theological terms, it was impossible to be an apostate from an *ethnos*.¹⁰ There is also little evidence of a distinct discourse about identity in the diaspora, where Jews lived surrounded by members of various other *ethne*. That is, it was possible to refer to someone as part of an *ethnos* even if he was not living in the traditional homeland of that group.

If we look back now at Cohen's three definitions of a 'Ioudaios', we see that he is isolating and highlighting for us the various components of the term *ethnos*. To be Judaeen by virtue of birth or geographical origin was to share a basic element that was common to almost all definitions of ethnicity. Hall stresses that, along with attachment to a specific territory, a myth of common descent is central to establishing ethnic identity. This was a feature that distinguished ethnic from other types of social groups. Proof of descent more often than not acted as a defining criterion of ethnicity. The genealogical reality of such claims is irrelevant; what matters is that the claim for shared descent is consensually agreed (Hall 1997:25).

The question before us is whether the term 'Ioudaios' was in some cases *only* a mark of birth or geographical origin (Cohen 1999:94).¹¹ As it turns out, it is very hard to find instances in which 'Ioudaios' was primarily a birth/geographical marker with no other implications. For possible examples Cohen turns to manumitted slaves, whose ethnic descriptors might appear to imply little more than a

⁹ Snobbish attacks on customs and stereotypes of the Jewish *ethnos* are sometimes taken out of context and highlighted as anti-Semitism, a move which distorts both the social context of these remarks and their differences from later anti-Semitic attitudes.

¹⁰ See Cohen's brief note on this 1990:205.

¹¹ Thus Cohen writes 'Many of the texts recognize, of course, that the Judaeans have peculiar ancestral usages and a peculiar manner of worshipping God, but this recognition does not detract from the fact that Judaeans were perceived primarily as an ethnic-geographic group (1999:94).'

slave's geographical origin. He writes that 'If a manumitted slave is described as *Ioudaios* (or *Ioudaia*), it is because the slave is a Judaeon, not because the slave is Jewish..The descriptive phrase "by birth *Ioudaios*" clearly has nothing to do with "religion" (1999:98).'

However, there is no reason *prima facie* to exclude these slaves from belonging to the Jewish *ethnos* in a fuller sense, implying that they observed Jewish customs, were loyal to the Jewish God, and even shared a common Jewish ancestry. From the brief references to them we deduce little about the slave's habits in regard to Jewish customs and other social factors. This is frustratingly true of many other inscriptions and textual references to 'Ioudaioi'. The inscriptions offer no evidence that the slaves were thought to be a different kind of 'Ioudaioi' to others in their culture. Would the distinction Cohen is trying to make have made any sense to anyone in the contemporary society?

In Cohen's view, groups such as slaves, who were 'Ioudaioi' without religious connotations by virtue of birth alone, had no political identity. Cohen has created a straw man here in claiming that the 'Ioudaioi' of the diaspora did not have an empire-wide political structure (1999:76). No *ethne* at this period claimed an empire-wide political structure, and this is exactly as the Romans wanted it. The Judaeans were no anomaly in this respect. In fact the Jews did at times have their own ethnarch, the most substantial element of political autonomy allowed by the Romans.

According to Cohen's second definition a 'Ioudaios' was a Jew by virtue of religion or culture. Although for generations Judaism has been primarily envisaged as a religion, it is hard, as Cohen notes, to find clear evidence of such a definition of Judaism in antiquity. He pointed out in an earlier discussion that 'exactly which beliefs and which practices were essential to Jewish identity, were never clearly spelled out by the Jews of antiquity (Cohen 1990:206).'

Extant doctrinal conceptualizations of Judaism are practically non-existent before Philo. The discourses that shaped identity do not appear to have been cast in doctrinal terms, at least until the first century B.C.E. and the situation did not change overnight. Historical circumstances did not appear to demand from 'Ioudaioi' that they explicate a detailed theology as a means of explaining who they were.

This situation was to change with the more widespread use of philosophical language and debates about theological positions. As a result, the general term 'Ioudaios' was supplemented by more specific labels attached to specific 'schools'. This is illustrated by the discussion in the next section about the *minim*.

Thus the evidence of the meaning of 'Ioudaios' as defined by religion or culture is problematic. What is the content of the religious belief? Cohen appears to construct his own definition: a 'Jew' is someone who worships the God whose temple is in Jerusalem (Cohen 1999:78, 97). This supposition is found in many discussions of the Jewish *ethnos*,¹² but gives us a very thin definition of Judaism. We know, for example, that the Jew Moschos felt comfortable undergoing an incubation in the Temple of Amphiaraos, but we do not know how he felt about the temple in Jerusalem or any other of his theological beliefs.¹³

Cohen fleshes out his second definition by finding citations in the ancient sources which emphasize the way in which adherence to particular customs helped to define membership of in the Jewish *ethnos*. A good example is Josephus' account of the alliance of the royal house of Adiabene with the 'Ioudaioi' (Ant. 20.38-39). Since the royal house was not native to Judaea, Cohen argues that this is evidence for a religious definition of the term 'Ioudaios'. However, other than a reference to circumcision we do not learn the religious content of the royal family's new beliefs; we remain within the general boundaries of customs. We appear to be confronted with the familiar process of a group acquiring a new ethnicity by adopting the customs of a foreign *ethnos*.

The overall thrust of Cohen's argument is that acquiring the identity of a 'Ioudaios' on religious grounds occurs for the first time in Second Maccabees where 'ethnic-geographical identity seems to be irrelevant (Cohen 1999:91).' The text laments that 'People could neither keep

¹² See Bickerman 1988:124.

¹³ Lifshitz CIJ no.711b, Cohen 1999:97. Diaspora identity may have been much less temple-centered than is generally thought. According to Justin, there were Jews who thought that the prayers of diaspora Jews were more pleasing to their deity than the sacrifices in Jerusalem (Dialogue with Trypho 117). On this point see Schwartz 1996.

the Sabbath, nor observe the festivals of their ancestors, nor so much as confess themselves Jews (2 Macc.6:6).’ According to Cohen, with this new, religious-based definition of being a ‘Ioudaios’, where the stress is on the importance of following Jewish laws, it becomes possible for the first time to talk about conversion to Judaism.

The particular quote from Second Maccabees, however, does not necessitate a new formulation of identity. As noted above, crossing the boundaries between *ethne* was often described as adopting some customs and new ancestors.¹⁴ Here we are on the familiar ground of concepts of *ethnos*, where notions of conversion seem anachronistic.

The third meaning of ‘Ioudaios’ is as citizen or an associate of the Judaeen state, a function of a political relationship. A prime example is provided for Cohen by reports about the Hasmonaean ruler John Hyrcanus, who conquered and forcibly circumcised the neighboring Idumaeans, after which they were referred to as ‘Ioudaioi’.¹⁵ Josephus records:

Hyrcanus, after subduing all the Idumaeans, permitted them to remain in their country so long as they had themselves circumcised and were willing to observe the customs of the Jews (Ant. 13.257, cf. 318).

Ptolemy, an otherwise unknown biographer of Herod the Great, similarly states that the Idumaeans were known as ‘Ioudaioi’ since they were conquered by the ‘Ioudaioi’ and ‘forced to undergo circumcision.’¹⁶ His explanation suggests that increasing the size of the *ethnos* was part of the justification for the forced conversions. Strabo’s report simply states that the Idumaeans ‘shared in the same customs (of the Jews)’ (Geog. 16.2.34).¹⁷

¹⁴ Goodman notes that Romans and Greeks did not seem to be fully aware of the Jewish concept of proselyte (1989:43). Perhaps this was still a period of great fluidity in Jewish discourse as well.

¹⁵ The policy appears to have been continued by Aristobulus (Ant. 13.257-8,318, 15.254, cf. BJ 1.63). For discussion and bibliography see M. Smith 1978, 1996:263-319, A. Kasher 1988:46-76 and S. Cohen 1999:110-119.

¹⁶ Historia Herodis, in Ammonius De Adfinium Vocabulorum Differentia, No. 243=FGH II, B199, F1=Stern 1:146.

Forced circumcision is a somewhat disturbing notion and numerous modern scholars have attempted to discount, or moderate Josephus's report by stressing Strabo's report. These attempts to avoid the issue, however, are not convincing.¹⁸ The various ancient views are not mutually exclusive, but depend on the particular slant and interest of the author.¹⁹ Some Idumaeans, and Ituraeans,²⁰ adopted (or re-adopted)²¹ the custom of circumcision due to pressure by the conquerors and after that were referred to by a new name. Inhabitants of towns conquered by the Hasmonaeans might have been wary of what would happen to them if they had refused. At least one town (Pella) which refused circumcision was said to have been destroyed (Ant. 13.397). Other individuals may have adopted the practice willingly, since it meant alliance with the winning side.²² Perhaps the elites who married in with the Hasmonaeans were more willing

¹⁷ It is also impossible to tell from Strabo's reference to the Ituraean adoption of circumcision whether it was willing or unwilling (Ant. 13.319).

¹⁸ As, for example, Aryeh Kasher's reliance on later Jewish legal rulings as evidence that the Hasmonaeans could not have practiced forced circumcision (1988:50).

¹⁹ Josephus' story recounts the compulsory nature of some circumcisions in an off-hand manner; he does not seem particularly put off by the notion. Questions about the origin and identity of Herod probably caused Ptolemy's interest in the issue of the Idumaean affiliation with the Jews; he too does not seem particularly interested in the compulsive nature of the circumcisions. Many ancient writers did not hold the policy of forced circumcision against the Hasmonaeans since it was standard policy for foreign rulers to introduce their customs. On this point see Shatzman 1991-2.

²⁰ For the Ituraeans see Ant. 13.318.

²¹ For Arab practice of circumcision see among others Smith 1996: 272 n.53.

²² Morton Smith emphasizes the voluntary nature of some circumcisions as an explanation for the rapidity of the conquest (1996:269-275). Cohen 1999:110-119 also stresses the voluntary nature of the alliance, giving primacy to Strabo's account and suggesting that Josephus was embarrassed by the voluntary nature of the alliance and thus added the coercive element. He does not entirely discount some involuntary circumcisions (1999:117-188). Alliance with the conquering army no doubt offered its own rewards (Smith, 1978:7).

to adopt the new customs than others, to whom identification with a new *ethnos* had less obvious benefits. Some Idumaeans fled, some identified with the new rulers, some adopted circumcision willingly, others less so.²³

In Cohen's judgement the Idumaeans did not become real Ioudaioi. Instead 'they still retained their prior ethnicity and much of their prior religion and culture, but they joined the Judaeans and declared loyalty to the God of the Judaeans (Cohen 1999:105 cf. 118).'²⁴

The question must be asked: in whose eyes did they not become real 'Ioudaioi' like the others? Who is to say that other 'Ioudaioi' did not have odd combinations of customs and practices? The importance of the forced circumcision case is exactly that it shows us a moment when circumcising someone *was* deemed to make them part of the *ethnos*. According to Josephus at least some of the Idumaeans fully adopted their new *ethnos* (BJ 4.270-82). Those who resisted the change and/or rejected the opportunity thought that they still belonged to their old *ethnos*. Neither of these assumed ethnic identities is more substantial or more real than the other. This case is interesting because it does not fit the modern expectation that political alliances do not usually entail the adoption of the customs of the new ally, and that coercive action by outsiders does not produce a real conversion. Clearly, identity was differently conceived in this period.

This example shows how issues of identity came to prominence in the period of Hasmonaean expansion as a result of the new associations which it created. The creation of new 'Ioudaioi' gave everyone an opportunity to think about what being a 'Ioudaios' meant in the first place. As Hall remarks

'the remarkable persistence of ethnic groups is not maintained by permanent exclusion nor by preventing boundary crossing. One might even suggest that it is in the act of crossing boundaries that such demarcations are reaffirmed (1997:29).'

²³ For later return to Idumaeans practices see Josephus AJ 15.253.55.

²⁴ See also Cohen (1990:216).

The Hasmoneans established the importance of circumcision in Jewish identity, clarifying the position of 'outsiders' by taking a distinct stance on 'insiders.' The moment passed, and, as we will see below in our next example, doctrinal issues became more important.

One must have great sympathy for Cohen's hesitation to adopt the universal translation of 'Ioudaios' as 'Jew' in some cases, especially in the face of the constant anachronistic references of 'Jews' in discussions of Hebrew Scriptures. The danger of his approach, however, is that it leads to the disenfranchising of some individuals and not of others. In which cases should modern scholars most appropriately use the translation 'Jew'? By what criteria can we decide to allow the Jewish credentials of some, but disqualify those of other groups of ancient 'Ioudaioi,' if they do not seem to fit a particular definition of Judaism. Perhaps what is most important is that we remind ourselves that in antiquity to be 'Jewish' was not the same as in later periods. The use of the term was dependent on the modes of discourse, which created a sense of Jewish identity and established the definition of the Jewish *ethnos*.

The Mysterious Minim

Our second example of the discourse used to construct identity derives from the numerous rabbinic anecdotes about the *min*, a term which means kind or type. This term is used throughout rabbinic texts dating from the mid-third to the seventh century, taking us several centuries past the previous example and into a new language (Hebrew). In our first example we saw that for some insiders and many outsiders circumcision was sufficient to define which men were Jews.²⁵ However, circumcision was not sufficient in the identity debates which flourished in the late antique period.

Minim occur in numerous rabbinic anecdotes. They cast spells on rabbis, they argue about the interpretation of biblical passages, and are regarded as general nuisances.²⁶ They were criticized in the strongest terms. Their books

²⁵ See for example the story in Suetonius where circumcision determines who should pay the Jewish tax (Dom 12.2).

²⁶ For recent discussions of the term *min* and bibliographies see Simon 1986:179-201, Stern 1994:109 and Goodman 1996.

were denounced as magic; their children were stigmatized as bastards (T. Hullin 2.20).

Unpacking the mystery of the *minim* usually begins, and ends, with a search for the identity of the *min*. Modern scholars who have attempted to fix a specific identity for a *min* tend to reveal their own favorite heretics or marginal groups. Was he a non-rabbinic Jew,²⁷ a heretical rabbi,²⁸ a Christian,²⁹ a Jewish Christian,³⁰ a gnostic,³¹ an imperial official,³² or, (my favorite) a Bible-reading heathen?³³ The history of the scholarship on the *minim* is a catalogue of attempts to organize late antique individuals into groups, thus providing a conspectus of shifting modern opinions about what constituted a coherent late antique identity.

Despite these efforts, the term refuses to translate neatly into any modern conceptualization of a late antique group. Collecting all the references which denounce *minim* does not settle the issue, since the specific issues for which they are denounced vary widely from anecdote to anecdote. According to the rabbinic texts themselves there were twenty four kinds of *minim* at the time of the destruction of the Temple (jSanh. 10:6,29c).

Marcel Simon was among the first to abandon the effort and concluded '*Minim* designated simply any dissident body, whatever its particular characteristics, which rejected in any respect the thought or practice of Jewish orthodoxy' (1986:181-182).³⁴ Even this observation does not settle the

²⁷Reference is often made to the citation 'There are no *minim* among the nations' (b. Hullin 13b) for support that *minim* are Jews.

²⁸Segal 1977 connects *minim* with proto-Merkabah mystics.

²⁹While Herford (1903:97-341) lists over a hundred anecdotes where he thinks the *min* is a Christian, many of these could just as well have been Jews. Stern 1994:109 n. 165 notes that in only a few cases do the opponents appear to be Christians, for example bShab 116a-b and THul 2.24 which refer to the Gospels and Yeshua b.Pantira, usually understood to be a pseudonym for Jesus.

³⁰Herford 1903:97-341.

³¹Friedlander 1898.

³²Kimmelman 1981.

³³ Herford 1903:277.

³⁴ See the similar, more recent statements by Goodman (1996:507).

issue. Modern scholarship about early Christianity no longer regards the label heretic as simply descriptive. Similarly, we cannot accept the rabbinic anecdotes, with their simplistic distinctions between correct rabbinic theology and the deviance of *minim*, provide objective accounts of the real world.

As we saw in the case of the 'Ioudaioi' in the first section, Jewish identity rested on a wide spectrum of interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures based on different theological presumptions. Much Jewish sectarianism is the product of the articulation of more explicit theological doctrines (philosophies) beginning in the first century B.C.E. Alternate categorizations of 'Ioudaios' developed from the second-first centuries B.C.E. out of the discourse about the Jewish *ethnos*. As the Hebrew Scriptures underwent seemingly endless re-interpretation, according to the shifting historical contexts in which they were being studied, we observe a shift away from the general use of the term 'Ioudaios' towards particular designations such as Pharisee. In one early Christian text alone we find the claim that the following groups were rightly *not* considered Jews in the eyes of other Jews: Genistae, Meristae, Galilaeans, Hellenists, Pharisees, and Baptists (Justin Dialogue with Trypho 117). This is a fascinating view of a set of groups with boundaries based on theological and probably political distinctions, all of whose members might claim themselves to be 'Ioudaioi.'

The diverse and contentious group of individuals collectively referred to as the rabbis had the complex task of trying to distinguish their orthodoxy from these numerous heretical stances, and thereby limited the claim to be Jewish to themselves alone. Part of the value of the term *min* is that its use permitted the rabbis to construct, rather literally in this case, a general group of 'types.' In the rabbis' eyes, the *minim* were living examples of theology gone wrong. Significantly for our concerns, this motley group of individuals included both Jews and non-Jews. The dividing line is drawn between rabbis and *minim*, and not, as one might have expected, between Jews and Christians.

The ultimate value of the rabbis' construction of the *min* is even more complex. It not only helped distinguish between orthodox believers and heretics, but it also permitted the rabbis to attribute to others positions which occurred within their own theological circles. Some of the

positions attributed to the *minim*, such as belief in primordial matter instead of creation *ex nihilo*, and the belief that there was more than one power in heaven, are positions which are elsewhere attributed to specific rabbis (Janowitz 1997). By attributing these positions to the *minim*, the stances are marked as taboo and effectively exorcised from rabbinic circles.

From this example we learn that even when theological issues became more prominent in discussions of Jewish identity, the boundaries between friends and enemies did not always fall along denominational lines. Some rabbinic opinions on topics such as creation *ex nihilo* may be closer to those of some Christians than of other Jews. My emphasis here differs somewhat from the thoughtful recent article by Martin Goodman. For Goodman, the vague rabbinic use of the term *min* is evidence that rabbis were not interested in practical issues of heresy. The threat posed by the beliefs of the *minim* derived 'from a theoretical consideration of the impact on rabbinic thought of a category of Jews whose theology or behavior placed them outside the covenant between God and Israel (Goodman 1996:508).' However, the positions attributed to the *minim* are not always as inimical to those of certain rabbis as this statement implies. In specific cases rabbis labeled their opponents *minim* not on doctrinal grounds, but because they disagreed with them on political and social issues.

Jews as Esoteric Specialists

In the 1970s a highly successful advertising campaign for Rosen's rye bread claimed 'You don't have to be Jewish to love Rosen's rye bread.' The advertising campaign combined the slogan with a picture of an "ethnic" American, for example an American Indian. We immediately ask back why would anyone think one must be Jewish to eat Rosen's rye bread. Advertising agencies, like everyone else, attribute certain cultural characteristics, both positive and negative to Jews. In this case being Jewish is associated with eating a particular type of bread with a "Jewish" name.

If eating rye bread is a modern index of being Jewish, in Late Antiquity Jews were regarded especially by westerners as purveyors of esoteric 'eastern' wisdom. First the Hebrews, then Jews, appear on the Greek horizon as philosophers in Clearchus of Soli, Theophrastus, Megathenes

and many other writers.³⁵ As living representatives of 'alien wisdom', to use Momigliano's phrase, Jews gained a notoriety that had little to do with their internal traditions.

This stereotype had tremendous staying power. Non-Jews ascribed special knowledge and its concomitant power to Jews long after more encounters with Jews might have been expected to kill off the initial stereotype. Ritual texts from the mid-fourth century such as the Greek Magical Papyri are replete with Jewish features, including Jewish divine names and the names of Biblical figures. As Morton Smith explains

'All things considered I think it is most likely that the bulk of this material comes from pagan magicians who were trying to strengthen their spells by calling on the famous Jewish god and his supernatural associates, and occasionally referring to stories about his cult and his people. (1996:2,255).'

Zosimos, the late fourth-century compiler of alchemical traditions, preserved the writings of Maria the Jewess because he believed that Jewish women had possession of heavenly secrets revealed to them by the fallen angels.³⁶

These claims, some of which sound laughable, become part of Jewish identity. Jews *became* premier experts in esoterica. Anti-demon bowls made by Jews were wildly popular with non-Jewish clients as well as with Jewish.³⁷ Influenced by these external stereotypes, people from all walks of life turned to Jews for advice, and this no doubt was good for the sales of Jewish bowls. This social role was not selected by the Jews, but became part of their identity in any case.

We see these ideas emerging after the arrival of Jews onto the cosmopolitan scene and they flourished in the late antique period. Jews were to experience both sides of this stereotype; they would be lauded as healers and wise philosophers, denounced as quacks and magicians.³⁸ Jews were

³⁵ These are all available in Stern 1974-1984.

³⁶ Zosimos cited by Synkellos in Chronographia 13D-14A. Similar stories are found in numerous Jewish texts.

³⁷ See the collection edited and translated by Naveh and Shaked (1987).

³⁸ The association of Jews and magic runs from Posidonius to Pliny.

the objects of both suspicion and reverence due to these imputed powers. These stereotypes shape interactions between groups much more concretely than did abstract definitions of Judaism and they impact upon the history of Judaism up to the present day.³⁹ It is much too simple to categorize this development as evidence for anti-Semitism, or for the much-less studied philo-Semitism. To do so oversimplified the phenomenon and, more important for us, negates the impact that it made on the construction of Jewish identity.

Conclusions

In the first section we returned again and again to the issue of the ancient discourse about *ethnos*. Cohen is certainly correct to argue that it was the adaptation of Greco-Roman notions of identity that opened a new phase, or more correctly, a first phase, in the creation of Jewish ethnicity. Notions of *ethnos* were part of the discourse profoundly shaped the emergence of Jewish identity. It was not so much the clash between Judaism and Hellenism as the very nature of the *ethnos* which opened up the possibility of non-Jews becoming 'Ioudaioi' (Cohen 1999:105). Affiliating with an *ethnos* was not a complex undertaking, since ancient *ethne* had more permeable boundaries, than, for example, the tribal units familiar from Hebrew Scriptures.

In Second Maccabees, as part of an attempt to clarify the distinction between insiders and outsiders, the authors contrasted 'Ioudaioi' with those who belonged to another *ethnos*, that of the 'Hellenes'.⁴⁰ This simple dichotomy represents an internal, or in Hall's terms 'primordialist' view of ethnicity. Briefly put, the primordialists consider ethnicity (along with religion, race and territory) to be a basic and natural unit of history and humanity. Ethnicity is an extension of kinship and the normal social vehicle through which common goals might be pursued (1997:17).

The primordialists regard borrowing the customs of other kinship groups with suspicion, since it introduces a possible diluting or distorting influence on the pure *ethnos*. People who have not been born into the group are viewed as second class even after they join. Any form of

³⁹ A recent newspaper article reports that the last Jew in Kabul, Afghanistan, was charged with being a magician.

⁴⁰ See 2Macc 2:21, 8:1, 14:38, 2 Macc 4:13.

assimilation is considered a threat to a distinct, natural identity.

Most members of ethnic groups and modern scholars as well have an essentialist view of ethnic definition. So Herodotus defined barbarian as a contrasting term to aid the definition of what it meant to be Greek, and Juvenal similarly decried the contamination of his *ethnos* by foreign behaviors.⁴¹

The discursive strategy of distinguishing 'Hellenes' from 'Jews' has tremendous rhetorical power, useful for both ancients and moderns in the midst of great confusion about Jewish identity. It is nevertheless impossible to define what 'barbarians' or 'hellenes' really were, since the discourse about them is, of course, an artificial one.⁴² The reality of Jewish identity refuses to congeal neatly, even when it is placed in direct contrast to that of Hellenes. 'Being-from-Judaea' is not neatly to be distinguished from 'being-from among-Greek speakers'. A traditional Greek or Jewish ethnic identity which was defined from an internal point of view was often based on customs which have been inadvertently acquired at an earlier period from others.⁴³

As to the *minim*, these intriguing figures invite us to speculate about their identity. Rather than trying to replace the term *min* with a more recognizable label, we need to see the function of these figures. While we tend to think of theological doctrines as defining one religion against another, in many of the anecdotes about the *minim* the theological positions are much more confused. Given what we now recognize as the mixed theological stances of early Christianity and the various forms of Judaism, *some* Jews and *some* Christians might have been closer in agreement with each other than fellow members of their religious traditions. Telling anecdotes about theologically errant *minim* is a highly successful way of externalizing and organizing this confusion.

⁴¹ Hall 1997:45-47, Hartog 1988. Juvenal's denunciation of Jewish oracles Satire 6.546.

⁴² See Geary on the artificiality and subjectivity of ethnic boundaries (1983:21).

⁴³ Hall has a lengthy discussion of the shortcomings of the primordialist (essentialist) view (1997).

The rabbinic strategy has been so successful that modern scholars can not resist analyzing the terms of discourse as if *minim* had a single, distinct and coherent identity. The rabbinic claim that *minim* presented a theological threat has led scholars to look for theological deviance as the basis of their separate identity. Like the split between Judaeans and Hellenes, the rabbinic denunciation of *minim* is part of a rhetorical strategy and not a simple description of reality.

In the third example, the picture becomes even more fuzzy. In a wonderful article 'Who are the Lue?' the anthropologist Michael Moerman recounts the dilemma he had in answering the seemingly simply question of who was he studying. After considering this question at length he concludes, 'The Lue can not be identified--cannot in a sense be said to exist--in isolation (1965:1216).' Identifying criteria depend on the context: in different contexts the practice of Buddhism, eating glutinous rice in another, and a style of tattooing all appear to function as crucial ethnic markers.

As with Moerman's Lue, so with the Jews, self-selection, as revealed in the anecdote attributed to Golda Meir at the beginning of this article, is all. There has been endless debate about which texts and inscriptions from antiquity refer to Jews and which do not.⁴⁴ There is, of course, no possible way for scholars to make the issue clearer than it was in the late antique world, when issues of identity only arose at all in specific and limited circumstances.⁴⁵ Jewish identity was established in close connection with the other types of ethnic identity. These altered the range of options which opened up or were closed off of Judaism. At some point after his death Philo was labeled a Christian, since some of the themes he wrote about were identified with Christianity. As the context changed, the range of possible identities changed also. All attempts to reach a definitive solution are dependent on an artificial discourse that is inherently unable to bring total clarity to the problem. Even if we could be more certain about identifying who a 'Ioudaios' was, we would in

⁴⁴ See for example Ross Kraemer 1997.

⁴⁵ Patrick Geary points out as situations in which identity becomes a salient issue in the medieval ages: 1) with elites, 2) in military settings and 3) when the subject is 'out of place: geographically or religiously (1983:13).'

the end have no more precise notion of what the ethnic term means than the messy and fluid social constructs we find in the ancient sources, the *ethnos*, the *min* and wise men or magicians.

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