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A COMPANION TO

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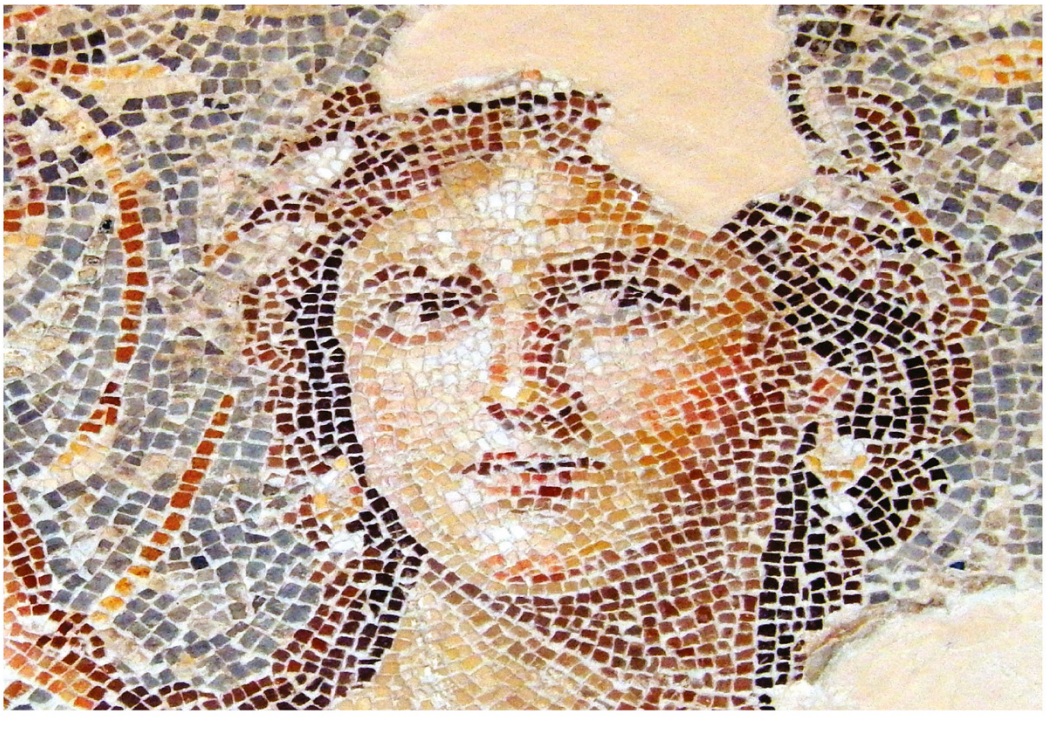
THIRD CENTURY BCE TO SEVENTH CENTURY CE

EDITED BY NAOMI KOLTUN-FROMM AND GWYNN KESSLER



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A COMPANION TO LATE ANCIENT JEWS AND JUDAISM

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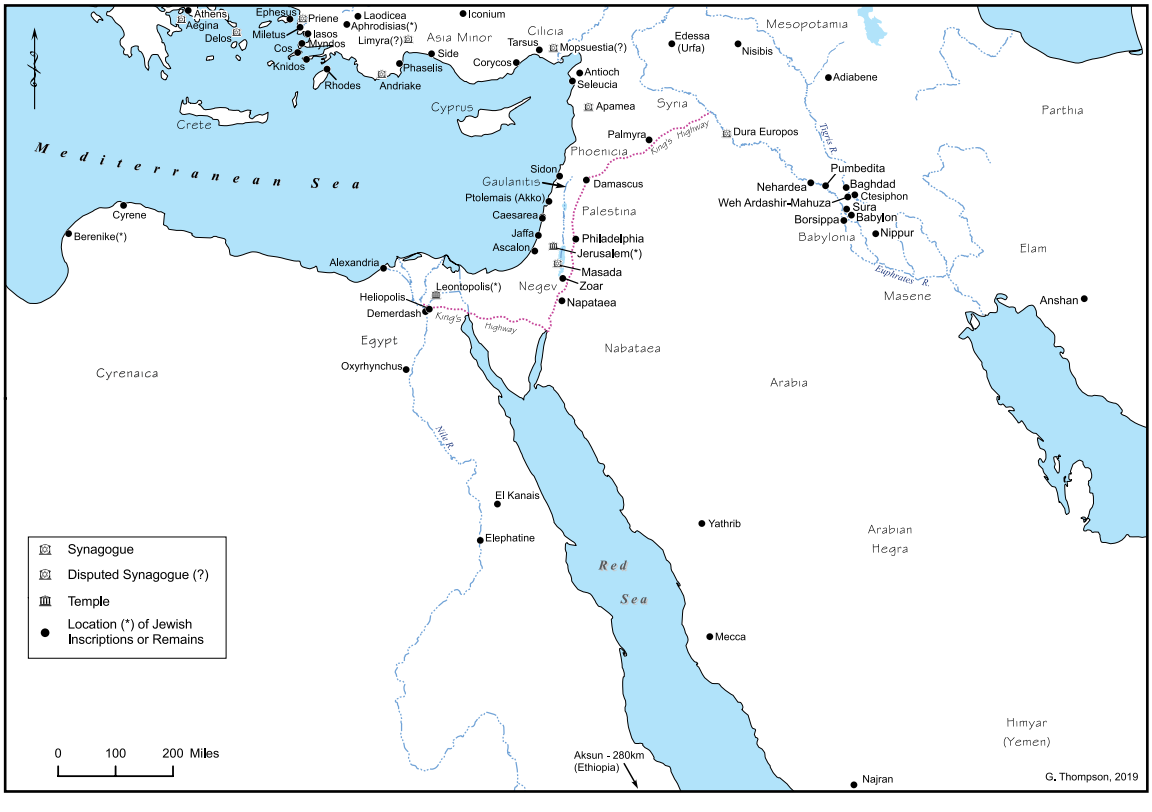
Maps

1. Jewish settlement in the western Mediterranean c. third century BCE to seventh century CE

2. Jewish settlement in the eastern Mediterranean and western Asia c. third century BCE to seventh century CE



3. Jewish settlement in the Middle East c. third century BCE to seventh century CE

4. Jewish settlement in Judaea/Palaestina and surrounding territories c. third century BCE to seventh century CE

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Naomi Koltun-Fromm and Gwynn Kessler

Opening Section

Several years ago, a Blackwell section editor contacted us and asked would we be interested in editing a Companion Volume on Greco-Roman Jewish history? Our immediate reaction was: Why? Do we really need another volume on Greco-Roman Jews? We eventually countered back with an offer to write, or co-edit, a different sort of volume, one we thought we did not yet have: a volume focused on Jews and Judaism in all of Late Antiquity that tried to re-chart the usual geographic and chronological borders established by modern scholarly norms. Our hope in this endeavor was to provide a wider angled view of Jews and Judaism over a larger swath of time and geographic expanse. If there is anything we have learned over the last two decades of situating ourselves within Late Antiquity, rather than Rabbinic, Babylonian, Second Temple, Hellenistic, or Greco-Roman Jewish culture and history, it is to see ourselves as scholars of a broader subject area in its multiplicity and diversity as well as in its commonalities and similarities over a larger geographic and chronological landscape. Moreover, this scholarly re-situating has laid bare the importance of approaches that zero in and those that zoom out and that bring together "telescopic" and "wide-angle" lenses. Together, these approaches allow us to better see both the particularities of any given time and place as well as the moving dynamics of many different communities of Jews and Judaism within the multiple contexts of place, majority culture, and history, without reducing Jews or Judaism to singular, static categories. Situating this volume and its scholarship within Late Antiquity allows us to rethink how we study and categorize things Jewish over this 1000-year period across ancient geopolitical boundaries that we have in the past used as guides to subdivide our studies. Hence, we have tried as

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much as possible not to predetermine essays by historical or geographic or chronological categories such as "Second Temple," "Greco-Roman," or "rabbinic."

Thus, we chose to focus our lens rather wide: Jews/Judaeans and Judaisms from the third century BCE through the seventh century CE, chronologically, and across most of the geographic places where Jews or Judaeans were known to have lived in this period, encompassing the western most reaches of the Mediterranean to Mesopotamia, North Africa, Ethiopia, and Arabia. Moreover, we decided to seek out thematic essays that could in and of themselves discuss and analyze questions, issues, texts, and materials from across these same boundaries. That said, we are most often trained as scholars within more restricted boundaries and do not feel we have the skills or knowledge to be more expansive. Hence a volume of this sort is only a first step in that direction for many of us. To try to see and describe the bigger picture is in no way to minimize the necessary work that is more narrowly focused, because without the fine-tuned detailed work on every single tile, the larger mosaic cannot be pieced together. Nevertheless, this volume hopes to illuminate the larger mosaic of where Jews/Judaeans lived, thrived, and created meaning across the late ancient Mediterranean world.

In a volume that seeks to cover such a vast geographical and chronological terrain and scope, certain terminology that is commonly used should be explained—"Late Antiquity," for starters. In Western focused scholarship, Late Antiquity has been used as an amorphous bridge time, somewhere between Classical Antiquity and the Medieval period; in other words, it is a period remarkable only as the transformative moment from the former to the latter. Over the last few decades, however, Late Antiquity has transformed into its own field of study and time period. However, when does it begin and when does it end? The answer to that question often depends on the where and who as much as on the when. For our purposes we chose the end of the 300s BCE as a starting point, for it was the time of rising Hellenization, both culturally and politically, that confronts and challenges the peoples living in and claiming ethnic commonality with Judaea around the Mediterranean basin and creates a moment of interesting synergy, resistance, and reformulation among these peoples—themselves never a clear unity. However, we do not pinpoint a particular date, such as the reign of Alexander the Great (d. 323 BCE) or the rise of the Seleucid Empire (c. 312 BCE), in order to allow for more fluidity among our scholarly essays.

Determining the end of Late Antiquity also remains a moving target. In the West, scholars often point to the sack of Rome specifically, in 410 CE, or more generally to the breakup of the western Roman empire, as the end of Antiquity, if not Late Antiquity. However, in the East, the Byzantine and Persian Empires continued apace into the seventh century. Jewish peoples lived in all these empires in all these time periods. Some modern scholarship tends to use the rise of Islam as an easy break-off point, the last gasp of Late Antiquity before the Middle Ages. Yet, this very liminal moment is also coming into sharper focus now as many scholars try to bridge even that divide, particularly between Late Antiquity and early Islam in order to see not a break as much as a continuity between the two, over (and under) that arbitrarily assigned scholarly divide of the Arab conquest. Nevertheless, we had to end somewhere; thus we chose to stretch into the seventh century, if not incorporating it as fully as we might have desired. However, the idea of fuzzy borders remains integral to this project. We wish to push beyond and over the normative

geographic, political, and chronological scholarly field boundaries as we study these people and communities that we have come to know as "Jews" and "Jewish," as well as their ways of making meaning, living in this world and expressing themselves, which we have come to call "Judaism."

Another term that must be explored is the very term "Jew," the common name, in English, for the people here under study. Much has been written in recent years on when this term came into use, and what other terminology we scholars should use to demarcate the various "Jewish" communities we study, especially since they themselves did not commonly use this term (see Chapter 11). We have asked our scholars to be reflexive and critical about the terminology they choose to use and to provide at least some brief explanation as to why. There remains no scholarly consensus on best practices here; thus in this volume we will find Israelites and Judaeans, Hebrews and the people of Israel, as much as Jews, or even, at times, Christians under the umbrella term "Late Antique Jew."

Similarly, the same questions permeate the anachronistic term "Judaism." There was no one monolithic thing (Faith? Religion? Cult? Culture?) that we can call Judaism that applies to all manifestations of Jewish practice, text, or materials across this geographical and chronological period. Thus, many of this volume's essayists refer to "Judaisms," or various manifestations of Judaism. It is not our purpose to sum up an essence of Late Antique Judaism, nor to profile the late antique Jew, nor to lay out a one-dimensional relationship between "Jew" and "Judaism" in this period. Rather, by design we insist on the multiple and various manifestations of Jews, Jewish community, and expressions of Judaism, as well as Jewishness, some of which will eventually be called "gnosticism" or "Christianity" or even "Islam." It is precisely by paying attention, and querying, the nomenclature of the specific text or material evidence in front of us that we can extract new meaning, not by superimposing our own assumptions. That the rabbis rarely refer to themselves as Jews/*yehudim*, but rather prefer Israel/*bene yisrael*, should catch our attention. That Paul never refers to himself or his intended audiences as Christians should also arrest our prior assumptions. That the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls never refer to themselves as Essenes should raise issues about why we favor Philo or Josephus' terminology over the language of the texts themselves. Yet, in attempting to bring together a volume of this sort, for convenience sake, or lack of better all-encompassing terminology, we refer to our subjects as "Jews" and "Judaism," even in the volume's title and this introduction. Nevertheless, we hope to highlight the varieties, in name, deed, and material remains, with each and every essay.

Our approach was not to outline a political, social, or religious history of Jews or Judaism in Late Antiquity, but rather to provide a view into that larger subject through thematized essays that are more beholden to other scholarly endeavors in cultural, ethnic, or area studies. The themes we chose are close to our own interests as two subjective scholars, and do not in any way cover the field; they only demonstrate the possibilities and richness. One volume could never do the larger subject justice. We have instead tried to gather new, innovative scholarship that we hope will provoke further conversation and interest among scholars and student-readers alike. To that end we purposefully sought out younger scholars working in newer fields and approaches or other scholars revisiting older material through newer academic inquiries. Moreover, as individual and autonomous scholars, we recognize that we do not necessarily agree with each other on all things. How

we read or interpret the material or texts at hand depends on many factors, including training, inclination, and inspiration. Thus, we hope to provoke further conversation among ourselves as well! Diversity of scholarly opinion can only spur us further to create and uncover more knowledge in this ever-expanding field.

While we do not present this volume as a full political, social, or religious history of Jews or Judaism in Late Antiquity, we recognize that it would remain interesting and useful to some readers to have an outline of major events in this time period. An outline with major events is appended to this introduction. In addition, we append a list of further references that includes both generalist titles and other publications by all of our contributors. However, note that each essay has its own bibliography included.

We have made a conscious effort to incorporate a broad range of methods, drawing from social history (where did Jews live, what kind of houses did they live in, with whom did they interact, and how might such interactions be classified), material history and culture (what beyond texts did Jews leave behind for us to study and what do we learn from these material artefacts), and intellectual history or literary studies (how do late ancient Jewish texts conceive of categories such as sacred space, gender, the body, and otherness). Some scholars primarily study material culture or textual evidence because that is what interests them, but sometimes the choice is made by the available sources, or lack thereof. Ross Kraemer, Cynthia Baker, Karen Stern, Jason Mokhtarian, and Aaron Hughes write social histories based primarily on material finds, while Mira Wasserman, Julia Watts Belser, and Sandy Haney, among others, dig into textual and literary analysis for their intellectual histories. However, a number of our essayists, among them Shira Lander and Sarit Kattan Gribetz, demonstrate the richness of working with both the textual and material where possible. All of these essays highlight how our scholarship, no matter our questions, remains tied to, and is often limited by, the evidence at hand. Thus, we acknowledge, for instance, that our "Bodies and Genders" section is heavily dependent on textual sources, and rabbinic literature in particular, in part because that is where some very interesting work is happening, bringing these texts into conversation with larger cultural inquiries. However, in situating these essays within a volume that also raises questions about the cultural context and material remains in which these and other texts are embedded, we expand our knowledge about Jews and Judaism in the latter half of this period. Furthermore, a focus on gender(s) and bodies reminds us that Jewish textual sources display a profound, abiding interest in material bodies; as Jane Kanarek's title to her essay signals, these sources are often the foreground for "bodies that *matter*." By reframing our field as "late ancient," we hope this volume demonstrates in some small way the breadth of Jewish experience in this period that can be excavated (and re-excavated with new tools) from *all* of the sources. When we loosen our scholarly ties to more bounded, older categories, such as "rabbinic," and "Second Temple," or even "textual" and "material," new stories are told, new social histories written, and new terrain uncovered and charted.

Finally, a word about our cover image. The mosaic we chose for our cover presents the face of a woman and comes from the floor of a building structure in Sepphoris (the Dionysis Villa). While we fondly refer to her as Our Lady of Sepphoris (and she is also known as the Mona Lisa of the Galilee), she is otherwise unknown nor identified. The building structure in which this image was found was most likely the home of a wealthy family in this Galilean town. In Late Antiquity, Sepphoris was a bustling city, home to