

The  
Talmud Yerushalmi  
and Graeco-Roman  
Culture  
III

Edited by  
PETER SCHÄFER

*Texts and Studies in  
Ancient Judaism*

93

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum

Edited by  
Martin Hengel and Peter Schäfer

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## Table of Contents

PETER SCHÄFER	
Preface .....	IX

### *I Rabbis and History*

GIDEON BOHAK	
The Hellenization of Biblical History in Rabbinic Literature .....	3
RICHARD KALMIN	
Jewish Sources of the Second Temple Period in Rabbinic Compilations of Late Antiquity .....	17
SETH SCHWARTZ	
Rabbinization in the Sixth Century .....	55

### *II Rabbinic Institutions and Identity*

CHRISTINE HAYES	
Genealogy, Illegitimacy, and Personal Status: The Yerushalmi in Comparative Perspective .....	73
CATHERINE HEZSER	
The Social Status of Slaves in the Talmud Yerushalmi and in Graeco-Roman Society .....	91
ANDREAS LEHNARDT	
The Samaritans (Kutim) in the Talmud Yerushalmi: Constructs of “Rabbinic Mind” or Reflections of Social Reality? .....	139
HAYIM LAPIN	
Institutionalization, Amoraim, and Yerushalmi <i>Šebi‘it</i> .....	161

*III Women and Gender*

TAL ILAN

“Stolen Water is Sweet”: Women and their Stories  
between Bavli and Yerushalmi . . . . . 185

MICHAEL L. SATLOW

Fictional Women: A Study in Stereotypes . . . . . 225

*IV Yerushalmi and Bavli*

SHAMMA FRIEDMAN

The Further Adventures of Rav Kahana: Between Babylonia and  
Palestine . . . . . 247

DANIEL BOYARIN

Shattering the Logos – or, The Talmuds and  
the Genealogy of Indeterminacy . . . . . 273

*V Texts and Contexts*

JEFFREY L. RUBENSTEIN

Some Structural Patterns of Yerushalmi *Sugyot* . . . . . 303

STEVEN D. FRAADE

Priests, Kings, and Patriarchs: Yerushalmi Sanhedrin  
in its Exegetical and Cultural Settings . . . . . 315

PETER SCHÄFER

Jews and Gentiles in Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah . . . . . 335

*VI The “Religion” of the Rabbis*

DAVID KRAEMER

Concerning the Theological Assumptions of the Yerushalmi . . . . . 355

MARTHA HIMMELFARB

The Mother of the Messiah in the Talmud Yerushalmi and  
Sefer Zerubbabel . . . . . 369

HANS-JÜRGEN BECKER

The Magic of the Name and Palestinian Rabbinic Literature . . . . . 391

*VII Rabbinic Responses to Graeco-Roman Culture*

YARON Z. ELIAV

Viewing the Sculptural Environment: Shaping the Second  
Commandment ..... 411

FRITZ GRAF

Roman Festivals in Syria Palaestina ..... 435

Index of Sources ..... 453

Index of Modern Authors ..... 474

Index of Names and Subjects ..... 480



## Preface

The present volume is the third collection of articles devoted to *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*. The two previous volumes, published in 1998<sup>1</sup> and 1999,<sup>2</sup> originated from the Leibniz project on the Talmud Yerushalmi carried out at the Institut für Judaistik of the Freie Universität Berlin. From the very beginning of the project (1994) it was clear that the broad range of topics implied in the major theme of this enterprise could only be adequately treated if the Berlin team were supported by a group of specialists from different countries deeply involved in the multi-layered problems of the relationship of the Yerushalmi to its Graeco-Roman surroundings. Thus, in October 1996 a first conference was held in Berlin, and the papers delivered there, together with the project results, were published in the first two volumes.

As a consequence of these initial events, the hope for a continuation of this project was voiced by many. Therefore a second conference was planned, this time in November 2000 at Princeton University, organized by the Ronald O. Perelman Institute of Jewish Studies and the Department of Religion.

The Princeton conference on the Talmud Yerushalmi coincided with the final step in yet another project on the Talmud Yerushalmi at the Berlin Institut für Judaistik, which began the bold task to prepare the first scholarly edition of the Yerushalmi more than 10 years ago. It was just around the time of the 2000 conference that the last two volumes of this Yerushalmi edition were completed.<sup>3</sup> There is no doubt that without this philological groundwork the second project on the Yerushalmi and its relationship to the Graeco-Roman world could not have been carried out.

The Princeton conference was arranged around the following seven major topics, according to which this volume is divided as well:

I: “Rabbis and History”; II: “Rabbinic Institutions and Identity”; III: “Women and Gender”; IV: “Yerushalmi and Bavli”; V: “Texts and Contexts”; VI: “The

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<sup>1</sup> P. Schäfer (ed.), *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*, vol. I, Tübingen 1998 [TSAJ 67].

<sup>2</sup> P. Schäfer and C. Hezser (eds.), *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*, vol. II, Tübingen 1999 [TSAJ 79].

<sup>3</sup> *Synopse zum Talmud Yerushalmi*, eds. Peter Schäfer and H.-J. Becker, in collaboration with G. Reeg, A. Engel, K. Ipta, K. Jansen, M. Lehmann, U. Lohmann, G. Necker, M. Urban and G. Wildensee: vol. II/1–4, Ordnung Mo’ed: Shabbat, ‘Eruvin, Pesahim und Yoma, Tübingen 2001 [TSAJ 82] and vol. II/5–12, Ordnung Mo’ed: Sheqalim, Sukka, Rosh ha-Shana, Besa, Ta’anit, Megilla, Hagiga und Mo’ed Qatan, Tübingen 2001 [TSAJ 83].

'Religion' of the Rabbis"; VII: "Rabbinic Responses to Graeco-Roman Culture."

Part I ("Rabbis and History") opens with the "Hellenization of Biblical History in Rabbinic Literature" by Gideon Bohak. The author here analyses and questions the extent to which the rabbis in Late-Antique Palestine incorporated the information taken from their own Hellenistic surroundings into their rewritten biblical accounts. His analysis is based on three examples: (1) the adaptation of the founding legend of Rome, (2) the exegetical "operation" in which the difficult meaning of a biblical word is explained by the similar sound of a Greek expression, and (3) the Hellenization of biblical history by transporting back the rabbinic perception of the Graeco-Roman world into the biblical story. All these cases clearly illustrate the encounter of the rabbinic with the Graeco-Roman world, as is exemplified by the rabbis' endeavors to adopt the cultural tools of the non-Jewish environment for their own moral-didactic purposes. Thus Bohak concludes: "The rabbinic Hellenization of biblical history can teach us very little about the Hebrew Bible or about Jewish history in the First Temple period, but it has much to teach us about rabbinic Hellenism."

The next article, Richard Kalmin's "Jewish Sources of the Second Temple Period in Rabbinic Compilations of Late Antiquity," treats the question of the historiography of the rabbinic tradition from a somewhat different perspective. Kalmin points out that this issue must be seen in a differentiated way, commensurate with the variety of rabbinic writings. He compares a half a dozen stories in the Palestinian literary tradition with their parallels in its Babylonian counterpart, as represented by the Talmud Bavli. His analysis of the parallel traditions clearly indicates that the Palestinian literary tradition is much more open to the world surrounding the rabbis, reflecting their personal involvement with non-rabbis, with whom they interacted in different contexts: conversing with them on the street, marrying into their families, and accepting invitations to their dinner parties. In contrast, an analysis of the same textual traditions in the Bavli reveals that the rabbis in Babylonia were less integrated into the surrounding society.

Part I closes with Seth Schwartz's treatment ("Rabbinization in the Sixth Century") of the fundamental, yet somewhat provocative question: "Is there such a thing as rabbinic Judaism?" Indeed, recent scholarship has shown that the influence of the rabbis in the Jewish society of Late Antiquity has often been overestimated, and even the archaeological evidence from this period seems to "demonstrate the rabbis' marginality, or at most the compartmental character of their influence." Therefore, according to Schwartz, the Talmud Yerushalmi itself has to be seen in the framework of a "general weakening of Greco-Roman cultural norms in favor of religious systems interested in denying or subordinating the body."

Part II assembles under the heading "Rabbinic Institutions and Identity" the following essays:

In “Genealogy, Illegitimacy, and Personal Status,” Christine Hayes demonstrates that the development of Jewish law in Late Antiquity must be seen to some extent as a response to the development of Roman law. Concentrating on the rabbinic laws of intermarriage, the author analyses first and foremost the personal status of a Jewish woman who cohabits with a gentile or slave, as well as the personal status of the offspring of a Jewish woman and a gentile. General and specific similarities between Roman and Jewish laws with respect to personal status cannot be ignored, especially in the case of the innovative rabbinic rules regarding the personal status of non-aristocratic Jewish women cohabiting with slaves and gentiles, which are paralleled in post-52-C.E. Roman laws. Therefore the rabbis should not be viewed as if they were living in an “intellectual ghetto”; on the contrary, it is not unlikely to suppose that, as Hayes concludes, “the parallels between specific aspects of Roman and Jewish laws of intermarriage and personal status described here owe something to the interaction of these two great legal systems in Syria-Palestine.”

The contribution by Catherine Hezser analyses “The Social Status of Slaves in the Talmud Yerushalmi and in Graeco-Roman Society” from a similar point of view. The first part of the article surveys the historical development of slavery in Roman Palestine. This is followed by an analysis of the question of denationalization and blurred ethnic boundaries in Roman as well in Jewish society: in both communities the slaves were deprived of both their ethnic and their religious identity. Concerning the hierarchical rankings and distinctions in the ancient societies, Hezser states that the rabbis distinguished both women and slaves from male Israelites, assigning to the former groups a lower place in Jewish religion and society often in the same ways as Graeco-Roman society. Despite the negative stereotypes about slaves in Graeco-Roman literature (e.g., as thieving, dangerous, morally depraved), we also find the counterexample of the slave who is trustworthy, well-educated, and loyal (even to the supreme sacrifice: dying for one’s master). In the Jewish tradition this positive attitude is best reflected in the stories about R. Gamliel and his slave Tabi. All these striking parallels in ancient Jewish and Roman societies with regard to the status of slaves reinforce the author’s working hypothesis that “slavery was an everyday phenomenon in Palestine at the time when the Yerushalmi was edited as well as in earlier tannaitic and amoraic time.”

In the next article, Andreas Lehnardt addresses similar social questions by considering a completely different group within ancient Jewish society, namely, the Samaritans. In “The Samaritans (Kutim) in the Talmud Yerushalmi,” Lehnardt focuses on the following topics relating to the rabbinic tradition on the Samaritans: (1) their status, (2) their role in rabbinic narratives, (3) their use of the Divine Name, (4) dream interpretation, (5) fasting for rain, and (6) the exegetical differences of opinion between them and the rabbis. The overall impression gained from analyzing these topics is that the historical value of the

rabbinic tradition on the Samaritans should not be overestimated; for the most part the rabbis left us legends or literary fictions: “none of the analyzed stories seem to be accurate reports of past events.” Nevertheless some historical truth can be found in the traditions regarding the pronunciation of the Divine Name, the Samaritans’ knowledge of dream interpretation, the importance they attached to fasting for rain and their objections to honorific titles. All this proves that contacts between rabbis and Samaritans must have continued in amoraic and well into post-talmudic times, even though the extent of such contacts must await further investigation.

Part II closes with the article “Institutionalization, Amoraim, and Yerushalmi *Šebi‘it*” by Hayim Lapin. His contribution is based on the use of modern statistical methods applied to the Talmud tractate *Šebi‘it*. The author grounds his statistical analysis of the distribution of traditions by generations of rabbis in the tractate *Šebi‘it* on the conviction that “we have nothing like the original words of rabbis in attributed statements, or unmotivated historical ‘reportage’ in rabbinic narratives, and that ... we have reason to question even the results of gross clustering by generation.” Therefore, the author concludes, “it is difficult to get beyond this characterization of Yerushalmi *Šebi‘it* to the history of the consolidation among amoraim of the rabbinic movement in Palestine.” But what good is the statistical analysis if no historical reality is implied in the rabbinic distribution of traditions? The statistical analysis of the attributed statements, with all the significantly diverse profiles in the different chapters, surely does not reveal the “historical reality” but rather the history of the Yerushalmi redaction and the literary trends within the Talmud tradition, which must be taken seriously. In this regard the question of rabbinic institutionalization leads to the suggestion “that a developing sense of amoraic ‘tradition’ may be built into the processes through which the material of the Yerushalmi has come down to us.”

Part III is devoted to the theme of “Women and Gender.” It opens with Tal Ilan’s “‘Stolen Water is Sweet’: Women and their Stories between Bavli and Yerushalmi.” The article is based on a careful analysis of seven parallel traditions in Yerushalmi and Bavli. In the course of this analysis, Ilan shows that the positive attitudes towards women in the Palestinian tradition are transformed into thoroughly negative ones in the Bavli. Likewise, in cases, the importance of women protagonists in the Yerushalmi is mitigated in the Bavli. The Bavli generally appears to reflect the rabbis’ efforts to mend the – as they saw it – “untidy world” of the Yerushalmi, so that in the Bavli, more so than in the Yerushalmi, women are under the tutelage of men. This raises the possibility that women were perceived more positively in Palestine, the land of the Yerushalmi redactors, than in Babylonia. But, as the author points out, care is needed here to avoid jumping to conclusions. When we compare the Yerushalmi with earlier Palestinian traditions, a similar trend reveals itself. Thus, it must be

stressed that the differences between the Yerushalmi and the Bavli on this score are first and foremost of a literary nature, rather than a simple reflection of social reality.

The importance of focusing on the literary function of women in the Yerushalmi is also demonstrated by Michael L. Satlow's "Fictional Women: A Study in Stereotypes." Satlow starts with the assumption "that Palestinian rabbinic stereotypes have little to do with real women, but much to do with men, and how rabbinic men defined themselves as *men*." Five primary female stereotypes are analyzed by the author (magic, licentiousness, social problems, domestic roles, and unusual pietistic practices) – and all are noted to be consistent with the images of women in the Graeco-Roman world surrounding the rabbis. Thus Satlow shows that, like the parallels in Roman and Greek literature, "the rabbinic stereotypes of women reveal rabbinic understanding of, and anxieties about their own masculinity" and thereby help the rabbis to define themselves as men.

The subject of Part IV is "Yerushalmi and Bavli." The first article by Shamma Friedman, "The Further Adventures of Rav Kahana: Between Babylonia and Palestine," tries to delve behind the "polished literary textual narrative" in the Bavli, which can be analyzed as a closed, independent unit. The process of its literary reworking is illustrated by the story of Rav Kahana and his ascent to Palestine, which provides the scholar with the rare opportunity to trace the literary processes shaping the late Babylonian aggadic tradition. According to Friedman's analysis, the Rav Kahana story in Bavli Baba Qamma reflects three different stages, each with a Palestinian literary kernel. He carefully investigates how these kernels were enriched with motifs and phraseology found elsewhere in the Bavli. The result is "an elegant pseudo-historical hagiography" of Rav Kahana.

The second contribution to Part IV is Daniel Boyarin's "Shattering the Logos – or, The Talmuds and the Genealogy of Indeterminacy." Here, Boyarin emphasizes that the "diachronic difference between the two Talmuds can be identified as part of a significant epistemic shift between the earlier and the later stages of rabbinic thought." He strongly opposes stereotypes according to which rabbinic Judaism is seen as "undogmatic" and Christianity as "dogmatic and hierarchical" – stereotypes that he associates with the final form of the twin myths of Yavneh and Nicaea. In his view, "interdeterminacy" should not be regarded as a cornerstone of rabbinic thought, but as a late phenomenon within rabbinic literature, rooted "in the redaction of the midrashic texts and in narrative and theoretical formulation virtually exclusively in the Babylonian Talmud."

Part V, "Texts and Contexts," opens with Jeffrey L. Rubenstein's "Some Structural Patterns of Yerushalmi *Sugyot*," which builds a link between this section and the previous one. After analyzing the structure of the complex tripartite and the elegant bipartite *sugyot* in several Yerushalmi tractates, Rubenstein

proposes that the Yerushalmi redactors were more active than scholars have so far supposed; nevertheless, he admits that the overall impression of an extensive, active and comprehensive editing process of the Bavli in contrast to that of the Yerushalmi cannot be denied.

The starting point of Steven D. Fraade's contribution, "Priests, Kings, and Patriarchs: Yerushalmi Sanhedrin in its Exegetical and Cultural Settings," is the conviction that rhetoric and history do not just intersect in late antique rabbinic culture's hermeneutics, but they also intertwine. Fraade asks "what rhetorical function ... (rabbinical) interpretations of the norms of kingship had in a Jewish world, historically at least, devoid of kings." Again and again it can be noted that in Mishnah Sanhedrin 2 the king is in many respects more elevated than the High Priest. In modern scholarship, it has been pointed out that the striking privileging of the king over the High Priest is typically explained as a response to the historical circumstances of the Second Temple period. Fraade, however, rejects the "historical kernel" in these traditions on the kings, suggesting that they should be seen as "post-monarchic (rabbinic) leadership figures." In the Tosephta and in Sifre Deuteronomy, kingly status is associated with rabbinic leadership and appointees. When compared with these traditions, and especially with the much longer Bavli section on the same mishnaic chapter, the Yerushalmi is "striking for the degree to which it extends the rules for the king, and especially considerations for his honor, to the rabbinic patriarch as well as to rabbinic judicial and academic appointments." In conclusion, Fraade proposes that the attitude towards kings in the Yerushalmi might be profitably examined in the context of the Graeco-Roman discourse on *peri basileias*, thus pointing to a new direction for research on this topic.

The final contribution in this section is Peter Schäfer's "Jews and Gentiles in Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah." Throughout this volume, a special emphasis has been attached to methodological questions, thereby correcting some earlier and more narrow-minded comparisons between the Yerushalmi and the Graeco-Roman world. In this article, Schäfer attempts to illuminate how the Jews of Palestine interacted with the pagan world around them, asking whether it is possible – beyond the mere mention of particular Roman practices, festivals, and customs – to discern in the rabbinic tradition a discourse with the pagan world or, as he puts it, "what precisely ... did they (the rabbis) see, hear, and smell" with respect to their pagan neighbors? The tractate Avodah Zarah in the Talmud Yerushalmi seems to be a "gold-mine" for answers to these questions and, for this reason, has been much cherished in recent scholarship. The author considers the tractate's evidence for the most concrete examples of pagan customs and pagan worship: (1) "Libation of Wine", (2) "Festivals of the Gentiles", (3) "Bestiality and Fornication", and (4) "Idols" and shows that – despite some knowledge of pagan practices and Roman festivals – by no means does the Yerushalmi enter a "discourse" with the pagan world. On the contrary: the

rabbis of the Talmud are interested in polemics “against the Roman arrogance of power” and in emphasizing “that Israel will survive even Rome.” Hence Schäfer concludes that, rather than providing information about how Jews and Romans lived together in Palestine, “the constituents of the rabbinic dialogue are the Bible and the Oral Torah as derived from its written counterpart, and much less the culture they were part of.”

Part VI, on “The ‘Religion’ of the Rabbis,” begins with David Kraemer’s article: “Concerning the Theological Assumptions of the Yerushalmi.” In comparisons of the two Talmudim with one another, the Yerushalmi has often been described as an incomplete or imperfect Bavli. To this, Kraemer asks ironically: “What if the Yerushalmi is not a crime of omission but a mitzvah of commission?” He explains his understanding of “commission” as the specific theological claim of the Yerushalmi rabbis that “God remains the commanding partner, whose command continues, for the most part, to speak for itself,” whereas “the human partner contributes nothing.”

In the next contribution, Martha Himmelfarb deals with “The Mother of the Messiah in the Talmud Yerushalmi and *Sefer Zerubbabel*.” She notes that the story of the mother of the messiah in Yerushalmi Berakhot 2 has received surprisingly little attention from scholars. Those who have considered this story have tried to read it as a parody of the infancy narratives in the gospels. This interpretation is rejected by Himmelfarb, who suggests instead “that the story in the Yerushalmi represents a rabbinic response to a popular Jewish story about the messiah.” However, Christian influence is very likely in the reappearance of the mother of the messiah in the later apocalypse *Sefer Zerubbabel*, which can be regarded as “the Jewish answer to the new role the Virgin Mary had come to play in the Byzantine empire.” Here, we find two contrasting characterizations of messiahs’ mothers – an attractive symbol on the one hand and a repulsive counter-figure on the other – thereby suggesting that the author of this text simultaneously reacted against and integrated Christian traditions about Mary.

Hans-Jürgen Becker’s contribution picks up on a new trend in Jewish Studies, namely, an interest in Jewish magic, pursued in connection with the early mystical tradition of the Hekhalot literature as well as with magical writings like *Sefer ha-Razim* and the magical fragments from the Cairo Genizah. In his article “The Magic of the Name and Palestinian Rabbinic Literature,” he notes the importance of divine names within the magical tradition and thus undertakes an analysis of rabbinic traditions on the divine name. The author seeks to propound the thesis that “the editors of the Yerushalmi (in contrast to the Bavli) show no interest, neither apologetic nor polemical, in the magical use of the divine name,” which leads him to conclude that an early Palestinian origin of Hekhalot and Jewish magical literature is highly questionable.

Part VII, the last section of this volume, concerns “Rabbinic Responses to Graeco-Roman Culture.” The first article is Yaron Z. Eliav’s “Viewing the

Sculptural Environment: Shaping the Second Commandment.” Modern scholars have widely accepted Saul Lieberman’s statement that “the learned and pious rabbis did their utmost to prevent the people from becoming thoroughly Hellenized,” albeit in somewhat modified forms. But what results could we expect if we started with “daily life experience”? This is the question that Eliav’s article addresses, by using the test-case of the rabbinic interaction with the “sculptural environment” of Roman Palestine. He asserts that “from the standpoint of their daily contact with the statues of Roman cities, it seems that the sages did not have a single, fixed position but a complex, wide range of ideas that were based on the accepted ways of looking at statues in those days.” In his view, this means that the rabbis must be seen as a “minority group within the Roman world that forged its own way of life out of a profound awareness of the environment in which it was living.”

The final article in the volume, Fritz Graf’s “Roman Festivals in Syria Palestine,” argues for a subtly differentiated evaluation of the sources. The author demonstrates that, to a certain extent, Mishnah Avodah Zarah 1 is well aware of Roman festival practices and can even serve as “a source text for Roman religion in an Eastern province.” In contrast to the Mishnah, the Yerushalmi does not reflect the changes and innovations in the Roman festival calendar that took place during the amoraic period, such as the empire-wide proclamation of the *Natalis Urbis* and the birthday of Constantinople or the Christian ban of the *Saturnalia* and the resulting ascent of the *Brumalia*. Hence, Graf boldly concludes that “the Palestinian rabbis must have become isolated during the fourth and fifth centuries.”

From the spectrum of articles collected in this third volume of *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*, it is clear that this subject is by no means exhausted.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, it still seems to be a vibrant and fruitful enterprise offering new topics for further discussions. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that this volume includes quite diverse perspectives on the issue – even as it attests (and hopefully promotes) an ongoing dialogue on this important topic, involving scholars working in different areas of ancient Judaism. Although a new consensus has not been reached, it is possible to note (albeit cautiously) a general agreement in present scholarship with regard to one important point: the rabbinic world reflected in the Talmud Yerushalmi seems to be marked by a more distanced attitude toward its Graeco-Roman cultural environment than had been the case during the tannaitic period. Moreover, it is imperative to view and interpret this reserved stance in the context of the transformations taking place in the Roman Empire, especially after Christianity was established as the so-called state religion.

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<sup>4</sup> See also Y. Eliav’s plea at the end of his review of vols. 1 and 2 in *JAOS* 122, 2002, pp. 132–135.

Finally, to conclude on a personal note, I would like to express my gratitude to those who made the publication of this volume possible. My thanks go to all the contributors, to Dr. Klaus Herrmann for overseeing the printing process, to Thomas Ziem for preparing the Index, to Johanna Hoornweg for correcting the English of some articles, and, last but not least, to the publisher, who again has done a marvelous job. We have become used to the exceedingly high standards of the Mohr-Siebeck publishing house, but these professional standards cannot and should not be taken for granted. I am sure that not only the authors of this volume but the broader community of scholars of late antique Judaism join me in thanking Georg Siebeck for what he has done for the field and in congratulating him upon the *Doctor honoris causa* bestowed upon him from the University of Tübingen.

Princeton and Berlin, November 2002

Peter Schäfer



## I Rabbis and History



# The Hellenization of Biblical History in Rabbinic Literature

by

Gideon Bohak

While the Hellenization of biblical history in the writings of the Judeo-Greek historians has been the subject of intensive scholarly scrutiny, the continuation and transformation of that process in rabbinic literature seems to have received very little attention.<sup>1</sup> Much has been made of the fact that the rabbis have no real interest in historiography, feel no need to study the past “as it really was,” and display no fear of “anachronisms” in their retelling of biblical stories or their interpretation of biblical verses. It seems, however, that this rabbinic tendency for the anachronistic recasting of the biblical past has not sufficiently been utilized by modern scholars as a source for the study of the rabbis’ familiarity with Graeco-Roman culture, and even their attitudes toward it. In this paper I therefore wish to claim that in the study of Judaism and Hellenism in their encounter in late-antique Palestine, one should devote much attention to the ways by which the Palestinian rabbis incorporated data taken from their own world in their orally-rewritten Bibles. As should be clear to anyone familiar with the rabbinic materials, I make no claim that the following examples exhaust all the aspects of this issue, and I certainly have no intention of covering the whole range of issues connected with Jewish Hellenism or with the rabbinic uses of biblical history. Moreover, I deliberately leave out of this paper a related issue – the rabbinic Hellenization of the history of the Second Temple period – as this issue raises problems different from those discussed here.<sup>2</sup> I also leave aside the question of the rabbis’ general conception of history, and of

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<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I use the following abbreviations: Ginzberg = L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 7 vols., 1909–1938; GLAJJ = M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, 3 vols., Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1976–84; Heinemann = I. Heinemann, *The Ways of the Aggadah (Darkhei Ha-Aggadah)*, Jerusalem: Magnes, 1950 (Heb.); Schürer = E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, rev. by G. Vermes, F. Millar, M. Black, and M. Goodman, 3 vols., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973–87.

<sup>2</sup> Note, for example, that the rabbinic descriptions of Second Temple Jerusalem as a Hellenistic city (e.g., m Bikk. 3:3–4; m Avot 5:5, etc.), may stem either from accurate recollections of pre-destruction Jerusalem as it really was, or from the rabbis’ reshaping and

the Jews' role within it – a subject that has amply been treated by others, and that is only tangential to the present inquiry.<sup>3</sup> All I wish to do here is to point to some of the means by which Palestinian rabbis used Hellenistic materials in their reshaping of the biblical accounts, and to the implications of such phenomena for the study of rabbinic Hellenism. I shall do so by examining three specific examples, by mentioning others, and by noting which types of examples are common in the rabbinic corpus, and which are only *hapax phaenomena*.

### A Synchronizing “Ladder” as a Moral Tool

The first example I wish to analyze is the synchronization of Rome's early history with biblical history. The text appears in several different places in the rabbinic corpus, and I focus here on the fullest extant version of this tradition, as found in the Palestinian Talmud:

R. Levi said, On the day when Solomon married the daughter of Pharaoh Necho, the King of Egypt, Michael went down and stuck a reed in the sea, and pulled up a heap of mud which became a great thicket, and this is the great city of Rome; on the day when Jeroboam set up two golden calves, Remus and Romulus<sup>4</sup> came and built two huts in Rome; on the day when Elijah disappeared, a king was appointed in Rome – “And there was no king in Edom, a deputy was king” (1 Ki. 22:48).<sup>5</sup>

For obvious reasons, this intriguing passage, and the other rabbinic echoes of the legends of Rome's ancient history, received much scholarly attention.<sup>6</sup> And yet, it seems that one significant aspect of this specific passage has not sufficiently been highlighted, namely, that at its core lies a typical Hellenistic synchronization. Among all the nations of the Near East, from Egypt to Phoeni-

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Hellenization of such recollections. When the biblical heroes are Hellenized, the first option is non-existent.

<sup>3</sup> For the rabbis' conception of history, see esp. N.N. Glatzer, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichtslehre der Tannaiten*, Berlin: Lambert Schneider, 1933 and Peter Schäfer, “Zur Geschichtsauffassung des rabbinischen Judentums,” *JSJ* 6 (1975), pp. 167–188 (repr. in id., *Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie des Rabbinischen Judentums*, [AGAJU 15], Leiden: Brill, 1978, pp. 23–45, with addenda on pp. 12–16).

<sup>4</sup> Note that the Hebrew spelling of these names (רֹמּוּס וְרֹמּוּלֵט) does not represent the Latin names *Remus* and *Romulus*, but their standard Greek transcriptions, Ῥῶμος and Ῥωμύλος, as noted by Samuel Krauss, *Monumenta Talmudica*, vol. 5 (*Geschichte*), part 1, Vienna and Leipzig: Benjamin Harz, 1914 (repr. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> pt AZ 1:2 (39c). For parallels to this passage, see below, n. 18.

<sup>6</sup> See Samuel Krauss, *Persia and Rome in the Talmud and Midrashim*, Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1948 (Heb.), pp. 14–19; Wilhelm Bacher, *Die Agada der palästinensischen Amoräer*, 3 vols., Strassburg, 1896, vol. 2, pp. 325–326; Ginzberg, vol. 6, pp. 279–280, and esp. Louis H. Feldman, “Abba Kolon and the Founding of Rome,” *JQR* 81 (1990–91), pp. 449–482 (repr. in id., *Studies in Hellenistic Judaism*, [AGAJU 30], Leiden: Brill, 1996, pp. 411–437), with a detailed survey of earlier scholarship.

cia and from the Babylonians to the Jews, extensive efforts were made in the Hellenistic period to set the ancient histories of the native peoples side-by-side with those of the region's Greek and Roman rulers.<sup>7</sup> The Judeo-Greek writers, from Demetrius to Josephus, provide many examples of this process, which was continued by Sextus Julius Africanus, and culminated in the *Chronicon* of Eusebius.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, the Jews had no need of Greek influence to create such synchronisms, for the Hebrew Bible itself already notes that "Hebron had been built seven years before Egyptian Zoan," and provides elaborate synchronizations between the reigns of the kings of Judea and those of Israel.<sup>9</sup> But the synchronizations developed by the Judeo-Greek writers are far more systematic and sophisticated than those found in earlier Jewish sources, and there is little doubt that while their seeds lay in the Hebrew Bible, their blossoming was due to Hellenistic influences, and to the needs of Hellenized Jews in the face of a seemingly-superior Greek culture.<sup>10</sup>

So much for the Judeo-Greek materials. When we return to the rabbinic passage, we note that it too demonstrates an interest in the conquerors' history, and in synchronizing that history with one's own. While a modern scholar cannot accept R. Levi's synchronism as very accurate, it must be admitted that the relative sequence of events – the "creation" of the physical site of Rome, the arrival of Remus and Romulus, and the rise of the first king of Rome – fits well within the context of the Romans' own legends of their city's ancient history.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, this set of synchronisms surely is far more complex than the isolated synchronisms found elsewhere in rabbinic literature.<sup>12</sup> We may also note that

<sup>7</sup> For the wider context, see, Elias J. Bickerman, "Origines Gentium," *Classical Philology* 47 (1952), pp. 65–81, esp. pp. 72–75; *id.*, "The Jewish Historian Demetrius" in J. Neusner (ed.), *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, Leiden: Brill, 1975, vol. 3, pp. 72–84 (repr. in Bickerman, *Studies in Jewish and Christian History*, [AGAJU 9], Leiden: Brill, vol. 2, 1980, pp. 347–358); Adler, *Time Immemorial* (following note), pp. 20–30.

<sup>8</sup> Demetrius fr. 6 Holladay; Eupolemus fr. 5 Holladay; Justus of Tiberias fr. 2–3 Holladay; Josephus, *CAp.* 1.126 etc. For the Christian chroniclers, see H. Gelzer, *Sextus Julius Africanus und die byzantinische Chronographie*, 2 vols., Leipzig, 1898; W. Adler, *Time Immemorial: Archaic History and Its Sources in Christian Chronography from Julius Africanus to George Syncellus*, Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1989.

<sup>9</sup> Hebron: Num. 13:22 (for the Hellenistic transformations of this synchronism, see Josephus, *Ant.* 1.170; *War* 4.530); Kings of Judaea and Israel: 1 Ki. 15:1 etc.

<sup>10</sup> See Ben-Zion Wacholder, "Biblical Chronology in the Hellenistic World Chronicles," *HTR* 61 (1968), pp. 451–481, esp. pp. 463–477; *id.*, *Eupolemus: A Study of Judaeo-Greek Literature*, Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1974, pp. 110–124.

<sup>11</sup> Note, however, that a few decades earlier, Sextus Julius Africanus dated the birth of Remus and Romulus to the reign of Ahaz, two centuries later than the date postulated by R. Levi; see Gelzer, *Africanus* (above, n. 8), vol. 1, pp. 169–173.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., *Seder Olam Rabba* chap. 28: "On the day when Nebuchadnezzar entered the Temple, in the days of Jehoiakhin, his great enemy (נבוכדנצר) was born, and that is Darius; on the day when Jehu was anointed (as king) in Ramot Gilead, his enemy Hazeal was anointed (as king)."

this specific synchronization reflects a central theme of Judeo-Greek historiography, namely, the Jews' great antiquity.<sup>13</sup> It may also reflect a recurrent theme of the anti-Roman sentiments among Rome's subject peoples, that of Rome's relative youth vis-à-vis many of the cities and nations that it had conquered.<sup>14</sup> In the synchronisms offered by Rabbi Levi, the Romans' youthfulness in comparison with the Jews is especially manifest, for at the time when the Jews possessed their greatest empire ever, Rome was just emerging from the sea.<sup>15</sup>

As noted at the outset of this paper, it has often been claimed that the rabbis had no interest in the past "as it really was," made no use of the tools of Hellenistic historiography, and showed no interest in the works even of the Judeo-Greek historians.<sup>16</sup> What we have here, then, is an apparent exception to that sweeping generalization, for we do find here a Palestinian rabbi of the late third century CE making use of one major tool of Hellenistic historiography, and walking in the footsteps, as it were, of the Judeo-Greek historians. Moreover, it is important to note that unlike many of the examples we shall examine or mention below, in which the rabbis' apparent interest in ancient history in fact is no more than an exercise in biblical exegesis, R. Levi's statement is not exegetical. The third rung of this synchronizing "ladder" certainly is exegetical, as it is explicitly based on the statement of 1 Kings 22:48, where Edom has no king, and implicitly on a comparison of that verse with 2 Kings 3:9, where Edom already has one.<sup>17</sup> The first two rungs, on the other hand, offer no scriptural proof texts, and seem not to be based on any kind of biblical exegesis; in that sense, they are purely historiographical. Moreover, the passage as a whole was embedded by the editor, along with other stories about Rome and its history, in a discussion of the Roman holidays of *Saturnalia* and *Κατήσις*, mentioned in the Mishnah, and not in an exegetical exposition of some biblical verses. And yet, in noting R. Levi's apparent use of the tools of Hellenistic historiography, we must also note not only that such examples are rare in the vast corpus of rabbinic literature, but also that this example too in fact demonstrates how disinterested the rabbis really were in Greek-style historiography.

<sup>13</sup> For which see, e.g., Peter Pilhofer, *Presbyteron Kreiton: Der Alterbeweis der jüdischen und christlichen Apologeten und seine Vorgeschichte*, [WUNT 39], Tübingen: Mohr, 1990, pp. 143–220.

<sup>14</sup> For which see G. Schnayder, *Quibus conviciis alienigenae Romanos carpsent*, Cracow, 1928, p. 16. And cf. Josephus, *CAp.* 1.66, who stresses that Rome had not been known to the earlier Greek historians, with Pliny, *NH* 3.9.57, who admits this fact.

<sup>15</sup> For other rabbinic references to Rome's inferior origins, see Mireille Hadas-Label, *Jérusalem contre Rome*, Paris: Cerf, 1990, pp. 357–361.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Heinemann, p. 42 and passim, and M.D. Herr, "The Conception of History Among the Sages," in *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Jerusalem, 1977, vol. 3, pp. 129–142 (Heb.).

<sup>17</sup> For the ubiquitous rabbinic use of "Edom" as a code word for "Rome," see, e.g., M.D. Herr, *Roman Rule in Tannaïtic Literature (Its Image and Conception)*, Unpubl. PhD. Diss., The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1970, pp. 115–129 (Heb.).

First, we must note that the synchronizing “ladder” is broken in some of the parallel versions, especially those found in the Babylonian Talmud, which shows that other rabbis found no use for such elaborate synchronizations.<sup>18</sup> Second, it almost goes without saying that this chronological “ladder” was not taken as historiographically-binding by the rabbis themselves; it is entirely absent from such chronographic compilations as *Seder Olam Rabbah*, which display no real interest in synchronizing Jewish and non-Jewish histories, and is ignored in various rabbinic stories about the supposed Roman connections of King Solomon and King David.<sup>19</sup> Thus, one major difference between this synchronization and those of Demetrius, Eupolemus, Josephus, or Eusebius, is that it does not serve as the basis for any systematic or coherent presentation of the events of the distant past. The other major difference, and this is more significant, is that R. Levi’s “ladder” has a clear didactic message, for it plainly demonstrates how every sin of the ancient Hebrews, like Solomon’s marriage with a gentile princess or Jeroboam’s erection of two golden calves, and every setback they encountered, like the sudden disappearance of Elijah, was immediately accompanied by a rise in Rome’s power – the same Rome which eventually would punish the Jews for their sins and deal them the severest of historical blows.<sup>20</sup> In this case, then, we see how a preacher borrows a tool provided by Hellenistic historiography, coupled with bits of garbled Roman lore and with emphases borrowed from the anti-Roman rhetoric of the Roman empire, and uses the combined mixture not for a sophisticated reconstruction of ancient Jewish or Roman history, but for an equally-sophisticated moral-didactic sermon. Like all his fellow-rabbis, R. Levi had no interest in the past “as it really was,” and no use for the Greek or modern ideals of objective historiography; for him – as for many Greek and Roman intellectuals – ancient history was mainly grist for his rhetorical mills.<sup>21</sup> His synchronizing “ladder” was not intended to help him climb up and down the timelines of ancient history, but to

<sup>18</sup> bt Shab 56b offers only two rungs of this “ladder,” while bt San 21b offers only one. *Sifre Deut.* 52 (p. 119 Finkelstein, *in app.*) has two; *Song R.* on Song 1:6 provides all three rungs, and further details on Rome’s early history.

<sup>19</sup> Such as the riddles exchanged between King Solomon and the King of Rome (*Midrash Aseret haDibrot*, Eighth Commandment (vol. 1, pp. 86–87 Jellinek)), or David’s plan to fight the Romans (*Deut. R.* 1:16 (p. 20 Lieberman) and cf. *Midrash Tehilim* to Psa. 60:11 (p. 305 Buber)), or the Roman adventures of Zepho, the grandson of Esau (see Ginzberg, vol. 5, pp. 372–373) – stories which would have been impossible had their narrators taken Rabbi Levi’s synchronizations seriously.

<sup>20</sup> One must note, however, that synchronizations with a moral-didactic message were common in Greek historiography – see David Asheri, “The Art of Synchronization in Greek Historiography: The Case of Timaeus of Tauromenium,” *Scripta Classica Israelica* 11 (1991/2), pp. 52–89, esp. 52–62.

<sup>21</sup> For Graeco-Roman parallels to the rhetorical uses of ancient history, see M.I. Finley, “Myth, Memory, and History,” *History and Theory* 4 (1965), pp. 281–302. For didactic synchronisms of Rome’s founding see Asheri (previous note), pp. 62–73, with further bibliography.

raise a point about the Jews' crimes and punishments, and about the inner logic of the Jews' entire history.

### Exegesis, Anachronism, and the Study of Ancient History

So far I focused on a rare example of the rabbinic use, or abuse, of the tools of Hellenistic historiography. In the following section, I shall try to point to a more common, and far more interesting, phenomenon, which is the rabbis' use, in their attempts to interpret or understand the biblical stories, of data derived from their own world and from their daily contacts with non-Jews. I find this phenomenon interesting, because in so doing the rabbis followed a method which is not entirely different from that employed in modern historical research, where data from later periods often are used to shed light on earlier periods too. This is not to say that the rabbis had any real interest in the objective and accurate reconstruction of the events of the distant past, or that they had a solid historiographical methodology. On the contrary, as the following example demonstrates, the very same method leads in some cases to an almost "scientific" interpretation of the biblical verses, and in others to a completely a-historical anachronism. Moreover, the starting point for these discussions is not an interest in the past *per se*, but an exegetical interest in specific biblical verses or scenes. Let us look closely at one well-known example:

"And Di-Zahab" (Deut. 1:1) ... Similarly, R. Judah interpreted the verse, "A pronouncement of the word of the Lord: In the land of דרדר and Damascus is his resting place, for to the Lord is man's eye, and all the tribes of Israel" (Zech. 9:1): This refers to the Messiah, who is sharp (דר) toward the nations and tender (רד) toward Israel. R. Yose ben Dormaskit said to him, Judah biRabbi, why do you distort Scripture upon us? I attest upon me heaven and earth that I am from Damascus and that there is a place there named Ḥadrakh ... Similarly, R. Judah interpreted the verse, "And he mounted him on his second chariot, and they called before him אברר" (Gen. 41:43): This refers to Joseph, who was a father (אב) in wisdom and tender (רד) in years. R. Yose ben Dormaskit said to him, Judah biRabbi, why do you distort Scripture upon us? I attest upon me heaven and earth that אברר is ἀλαβόρχης,<sup>22</sup> for everyone used to enter and exit (Egypt) under his supervision, as it says, "And he placed him over the whole land of Egypt" (ibid.).<sup>23</sup>

In both instances dealt with in this passage, R. Judah expounds a biblical verse by way of a sophisticated word-splitting exegesis, while R. Yose insists on

<sup>22</sup> For the reading ἀλαβόρχης, first suggested by N. Brüll, see Finkelstein's and Hoffmann's notes *ad locc.*, and Wilhelm Bacher, *Die Agada der Tannaiten*, 2 vols., Strassburg, 1903, vol. 1, p. 392, n. 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Sifre Deut.* 1 (p. 7–8 Finkelstein). See the parallels in *Midrash Tannaim* (p. 5 Hoffmann); *Gen. R.* 90:3 (p. 1102 Theodor-Albeck); *Pesikta deRav Kahana* p. 317 Mandelbaum; *Song R.* on Song 7:5.

introducing extra-biblical information, data taken from his own world, to explain the given verse.<sup>24</sup> And yet, the results differ greatly on each occasion, at least from a modern reader's perspective. In the first instance, R. Judah suggests that דדרך is made up of דר (sharp) and רך (tender), and introduces a suitable subject for these adjectives, while R. Yose, the son of the Damascene woman (דורמסקית), uses his familial familiarity with the geography of Damascus to identify דדרך as a place-name. Given the verse's explicit reference to Damascus, and biblical poetry's tendency to string together near-synonyms, R. Yose's explication of this verse is in no way implausible, and may even have hit the mark with remarkable precision.<sup>25</sup> In the second instance, R. Judah again splits the word in two, suggesting that אברך is made up of אב (father) and רך (tender), since Joseph was tender in years and mature in wisdom; this interpretation, we may note, was known to Origen as well, and was adduced by Jerome as a specifically-Jewish interpretation of אברך.<sup>26</sup> R. Yose, on the other hand, creates a totally artificial connection between the Hebrew (or, rather, Egyptian?) word אברך and the Greek word ἀλαβάρχη (the title of a Roman inspector of customs in the eastern side of the Nile, and ostensibly in charge of the traffic between Palestine and Egypt) and in so doing "tortures the verses" no less than R. Judah himself.<sup>27</sup> Like his fellow-rabbis, R. Yose was not interested in the past "as it really was." He was, however, deeply interested in the biblical texts, and in "what they really meant." And yet, even his use of what he knew about Damascus or Egypt of his own days, in the second century CE, was no guarantee for approaching what we would see as the *peshat* of the biblical verses. R. Yose may have been well aware of the difference between straightforward and farfetched interpretations of Scripture, but his exegetical sensitivity is not matched by any historical sensitivity as to which bits of the data he adduced might be relevant for the interpretation of biblical place-names and court-titles, and which would be entirely misleading.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> For such differing approaches, see Heinemann, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> For דדרך, see Adolph Neubauer, *La Géographie du Talmud*, Paris: Michel Lévy, 1868, pp. 297–8, and Samuel Klein, *The History of the Study of Eretz Israel in the Jewish and General Literature*, Jerusalem: Bialik, 1937, p. 21 (Heb); cf. Heinemann, p. 31.

<sup>26</sup> Origen, *Sel. in Gen.* 41:43 (PL 12, coll. 133–5); Jerome, *Liber hebraicarum quaestionum in Genesim* to Gen. 41:43 (PL 23, col. 998): *illud quod Hebraei tradunt*, etc. See further C.T.R. Hayward, *Saint Jerome's Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1995, p. 78 and 226. Another interpretation, common in the Aramaic Targumim, took אברך for "father of the king," perhaps etymologizing the word as (Hebrew) "father" + (Latin) *rex* (as suggested by Rashi to Gen. 41:43, who also refers to אב רכא in bt BB 4a).

<sup>27</sup> In making this identification, R. Yose may have been aware of the existence of several Jewish *alabarchs* in Roman Egypt of the first century CE, more than a century before his own time (for whom see Stern, *GLAJJ*, vol. 2, pp. 96–97, and Schürer, *History*, vol. 3, pp. 136–7). For the postulated origins of the word אברך, see P.V. Mankowski, *Akkadian Loanwords in Biblical Hebrew*, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000, pp. 16–20 (I owe this reference to Ora Brison).

<sup>28</sup> Note, however, that many historians in antiquity fell in the same trap; for example,

Examples such as these could, of course, be multiplied. We could examine passages such as the rabbinic descriptions of the biblical *tophet*, for example, and note how the rabbis used contemporary accounts and rumors about Phoenician and Carthaginian *tophets* to develop their image of the *tophets* mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, and in so doing preceded those modern scholars who use the literary and archeological evidence concerning Carthaginian *tophets* to reconstruct the biblical ones.<sup>29</sup> We could also look at some of the rabbinic discussions of Egyptian idolatrous practices mentioned in the Bible, and see how they incorporated materials taken from their knowledge of the Egyptian religion of their own days in their reconstructions and interpretations of what must have gone on in the biblical period.<sup>30</sup> There are more such examples, but rather than collect them all here, let me just stress what they all share in common. All these anachronistic interpretations demonstrate the rabbis' interest in understanding what they found in their Bible, their disinterest in objective historiography, and their familiarity with many aspects of Graeco-Roman culture. They thus provide a rich vein for students of rabbinic Hellenism to explore, but their value also is limited in that they only demonstrate the rabbis' familiarity with the world around them, while shedding no light on their attitudes toward that world. To go beyond the issue of the rabbis' acquaintance with Graeco-Roman culture, and to begin assessing the worth and value of that culture in their eyes, we must turn to a different set of rabbinic anachronisms.

### The Rabbinic Hellenization of Biblical History

In the previous section, we noted examples of rabbinic attempts to correctly understand biblical verses by identifying locations, customs, or technical terms mentioned in them. We noted how, because of the rabbis' lack of interest in objective historiography, such attempts often led them to anachronistic interpretations of the biblical verses. In the following section, we shall look at an even more common occurrence in rabbinic literature – the introduction of anachronistic elements into the biblical accounts not as part of the rabbis' attempt to understand the *peshat* of this verse or that scene, but as a result of the rabbis' poetic license in what Heinemann has aptly called their “creative histo-

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both Nicolaus of Damascus and Josephus used a place in Damascus called Ἀβράμου οἴκητος as proof that Abraham once reigned there – see Nicolaus, FGrH 90 F19, Josephus, *Ant.* 1.160, and Stern, *GLAJJ*, vol. 1, p. 234. For the Greek historians' lack of criteria for separating historical facts from historical nonsense, see also A. Momigliano, “Greek Historiography,” *History and Theory* 17 (1978), pp. 1–28, esp. pp. 8–10.

<sup>29</sup> For which see my “Classica et Rabbinica I: The Bull of Phalaris and the Tophet,” *JSJ* 31 (2000), pp. 203–216, esp. pp. 211–216.

<sup>30</sup> See my “Rabbinic Perspectives on Egyptian Religion,” *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 2 (2000), pp. 215–231.

# Index of Sources

## 1. Bible

Gen		21:2	105
1:3	377	21:7	100
3:15	339	21:35	323
7:18	141	22:7	227
12:2	11	22:17	227
17:12	106		
17:14	141	Lev	
17:27	107	13:9	360
21:1	380	13:9	399
22:6	380	18, 20	79, 81
27:41	341	19:14	219
28:22	149	21:9	74
33:18	158	21:10	318
34:2	235	21:12	317
35:4	141	21:13–14	74
37:29, 37	153	21:14	316
40:20	341, 438	21:15	74
41:43	8, 9	22:10–13	74, 76
46:7	141	22:12	79
53:6	380	24:10	80, 393
56:3	380	24:44–45	105
		24:46	105
Ex		25:39	105
2:11	394	25:40–41	105
2:12	393	25:42	105
2:12	393	25:54	109
2:12	394	25:55	108
2:14	394	26:1	348
3:15	403–405		
12:19	146	Num	
12:43–44	106	5:13	209
12:44	109	5:23	398
15:26	398	13:12	386
15:26	399	19	343
20:1	277, 397	21:26	174
20:2–5	418	24:17	380
20:3	108	25:1–5	346
20:7	297	27:21	317

Deut		2:27	381
1:1	8	8:6	330
3:23	101	25:41	134
4:3	346		
4:34	396	2Sam	
5:6–9	418	5:14	388
5:11	297	9:4–5	386
6:4	360	12:8	317f.
6:9	361	17:27	386
7:5	347		
8:10	361	1Kgs	
11:19	360	2:26	23
12:3	347, 424	3:1	342
13:17	424	4:2	23
14:17–20	315	12:26–33	342
15:1ff	105	15:1	5
15:12	105	18	401
15:13–14	105	22:48	4, 6, 342
15:16	109		
15:18	109	2Kgs	
16:21	347	2:11	342
17:1	328	3:9	6
17:9	330	17:24	139, 144
17:14–20	318, 323, 329, 330	21:1	385
17:15	157, 318, 327, 328	24:3–4	387
17:15–17	317	25:25	115
17:17	322		
17:18	317, 324	Isa	
17:19	317	7:14	386
18:3	326	8:14	62
21:10–14	73	9:5	386
22:5	228	10:14	344
22:16	206	10:34	371
23	75	11:1	371
23:2	130, 282	19:19	37f.
27:8	296	21:11	381
31:12	230	33:17	327
32:35	339	43:4	126
33:17	11	43:7	45
		43:9	339
Jos		44:9	339
6:27	11	50:1	101
		51:15	394
Jdg		55:1	291
19–21	282	56:3–7	75
19:2	282	58:4	393
1Sam		58:7	198, 201
2:24	326	62:4	385

Jer		14:19	291
21:12	320	22:28	401
23:29	291	22:28	402
34:5	322		
34:8ff	106	Prov	
		3:17	232
Ez		3:19	403
1	392	3:20	403
10	392	9:17	189
12:10, 12	322	10:2	187
21:30	322	11:4	187
23:37	75	22:7	101
34:24	322	23:25	401
35:31	403		
37:22, 24, 25	322	Cant	
44:5–9	75	1:6	7
44:22	74	4:4	11
		7:5	8
Hos		Qoh	
2:1	393	10:5	399
2:5	326		
5:1	326	Lam	
		1:2	377
Am		1:16	371, 379
2:6	101		
4:4	338	Est	
		8:15	11
Mi		9:4	11
5:1	374		
		Dan	
Hab		2:31	254
2:15	287	7	382
		7:8	382
Zech			
9:1	8	Esr	
12:12	388	2:54–65	94
Ps		Neh	
1:1	449	5:1–13	106
60:11	7	5:2–5	106
62:12	21	5:4	101
68:12	295	7:67	94
92:13	254		
114:3	395	1Chr	
139:11	339	3:5	386, 388 f.
		14:17	11
Job		26:5	386
1:20	153		

## 2. Apocrypha and Pseudoepigrapha

1Mac		4:23–5:27	23
1:14	449	5:15–16	23
1:32	95	7	379
1:43	450		
1:45	435	4Esr	
1:55	447	9:26–10:59	372
10:34	435	Epistle of Aristeas	
2Mac		187–294	329
3:4	23		

## 3. Qumran

## Damascus Document

11:12	99
12:9–11	99

## 4. New Testament

Mt		Lk	
1:6	388	2:7	375
1:23	386	2:8–14	375
2:1–18	375	3:27	388
2:2	374	3:31	388
2:11	375	Acts	
15:1–11	62	6:9	97
15:21–28	209	Rev	
18:24–34	101	12:1–6	371
20:1–16	93		
Mk			
5:26	197		
7:24–30	109		

## 5. Rabbinic Literature

<i>Mishna</i>		7:1	142
Ber		8:6	419
2:7	125	8:8	142
3:3	112, 123		

<b>Dem</b>		<b>Yev</b>	
3:4	142	4:13	80
5:9	142	6:4	233
6:1	142	7:5	80
6:10	417	16:4	233
7:4	142	16:6	233
		16:7	233
<b>Shevi</b>		<b>Ket</b>	
8:10	142	1:10	233
<b>Ter</b>		2:5	204, 207
3:9	142	2:8	75
8:4, 6	186	3:1	130, 143, 145
		4:9	196
<b>MSh</b>		5:5	132
4:4	110	<b>Ned</b>	
<b>Bik</b>		3:10	143
3:3–4	3	8:3	233
		9:5	233
<b>Shab</b>		9:10	233
2:6	229	11:12	189, 234
9:1	419	<b>Naz</b>	
16:6	32	2:3	234
19:4	141	3:6	233
23:2	417	6:11	233
<b>Sheq</b>		<b>Sot</b>	
1:5	142 f.	1:6	233
5:1	47	3:4	199, 233
<b>Suk</b>		3:8	100
2:1	123	6:1	233
5:8	19, 20	7:5	296
		7:8	319
<b>RHSh</b>		<b>Git</b>	
2:2	142	1:5	143 f.
<b>Taan</b>		4:7	233
1:4	155	7:5	233
3:8	35, 400	<b>Qid</b>	
<b>MQ</b>		2:7	233
1:7	131	3:12	78–81, 85
<b>Hag</b>		3:14	129
2:1	391	4:3	143
2:1	402	4:12	228, 343

<b>BQ</b>			<b>Av</b>	
4:3	323		1:1	319
8:6	121, 233		1:8	196
10:9	230		1:12	41
			2:7	224, 228
<b>BM</b>			2:12	41
1:5	109, 111		4:13	319
4:2	170		5:5	3
8:3	110		5:9	419
<b>San</b>			<b>Hor</b>	
1:5	316, 317		2:5	322
1	315, 321, 324, 326		3:3	322
2:1, 3	325		3:6	153
2:2	318f.		3:8	41, 114, 319
2:3, 4	316–318			
2:5	316–318, 322, 327		<b>Bekh</b>	
2:8	157		7:7	74
6:4	227		8:8	46
7:3	233			
7:6	346, 419, 421		<b>Tam</b>	
10:1	151, 398, 400		4:1	19
10:2	151, 397			
			<b>Mid</b>	
<b>Ed</b>			3:5	19
5:7	41			
8:3	41		<b>Ohal</b>	
			17:3	143
<b>AZ</b>				
1:1–2:10	336f.		<b>Par</b>	
1:3	436, 439, 450		2:1	343
1:4	442, 448			
1:7	449		<b>Toh</b>	
2:1	343		5:8	143
3:1	421, 427		7:9	229
3:1–4:7	336f.			
3:2	307		<b>Nid</b>	
3:4	419		4:1	143
3:4–5	424		7:4, 5	143
3:6	419			
3:8	347		<b>Makh</b>	
4:1	348		2:7	100
4:4	349			
4:5	425		<b>Yad</b>	
4:6	447		3:1	234
4:8–5:15	336f.		4:8	31

<i>Tosefta</i>		13:9	32
Ber		15:15	143
3:26	143	15:17	418
5:21	143	17:1	417
6:18	230		
6:21	141	Pes	
		2:1	143
Pea		2:2	143, 147
4:1	143	2:3	143, 146f.
		3:7	229
Dem		Sheq	
1:11	143	1:7	143
3:3	143		
4:20	143	Yom	
4:26	143	2:2	403
4:27	143	2:5–6	45
5:2	143	5:6	41
5:21	143	Suk	
5:22	143	1:1	237
5:23	143	3:1	167
6:4	143	4:1	228
6:13	417	4:13	88
7:11	143	4:28	20, 48
8:7	143	RHSh	
Shevi		2:1	167
1:1	167	Yev	
1:4	143	4:5	233
3:1	172	6:8	233
3:8	167	8:1	75
3:13	143	13:5	233
5:16	167	14:7	233
6:20	143	Ket	
8:4	167	5:9	133
8:8–9	167	Ned	
Ter		1:9	233
1:14	143	4:3–4	233
4:12	143, 145	5:1	233
4:14	143	5:14	233
7:12, 13	186	9:5	233
MSh		Sot	
1:6	11	7:9	230
4:1	143	13:8	41
Shab			
7:18	322		

Git		2:6	445
1:3	233	3:1	143, 343
1:4	143	3:2	343
5:4	233	3:4	343
		3:13	143
Qid		5:1	423
4:12	143	5:2	14
4:16	81–83	5:6	425
5:2	143	6:3	419
5:9	143	6:6	416
5:9f.	343	6:8	146
		7:14	143
BQ		Hor	
4:3	143	2:8–10	41
4:17	234	2:9	319
6:5	46f.	2:11	115
8:16	233	Zev	
11:1	111	13:1	143
11:5, 7	230	Men	
BM		13:21	41
1:6	234	Hul	
3:23	41	1:1	143
BB		2:20	143
1:2	233	Bekh	
9:14	122	6:14	46, 48
San		Ar	
4	321	1:1	143
4:1	316f., 321	Kel	
4:2	316, 318, 321	6:10	143
4:2–3	322	Ohal	
4:5	318	18:6	143
4:7	318, 323	18:18	167
9:5	44	Toh	
Mak		8:15	234
1:4–5	121	8:16	229
2:7	143	Miq	
Ed		6:1	143
1:6	230		
2:4	80		
AZ			
1:3	438		
1:8	107		

<b>Nid</b>		<b>Shevi</b>	
5:1, 2	143	1:1 (33a)	167f., 170, 176.
6:1	75, 143	1 (33b)	265
6:15	143	1:7 (33b)	167, 171
<b>Makh</b>		1:9 (33c)	167, 169, 179
3:7	143	2:2 (33b)	178, 180
<b>Zav</b>		2:2 (33d)	169, 178
5:6–7	419	2:4 (33d)	172, 178
		2:6 (33d)	176
		2:7 (34a)	167, 171, 178–180
		2:8 (34a)	171f.
<i>Talmud Yerushalmi</i>		2:10 (34b)	178–180
<b>Ber</b>		3:1 (34c)	172
1:4 (3c)	309	3:2 (34c)	172, 178
1:10 (3d)	108	3:5 (34d)	169
2:3 (4c)	223, 237	3:6 (34d)	172
2:4 (5a)	370	3:7 (34d)	169
2:8 (5b)	125, 127	3:8 (34d)	169f.
2:8 (5c)	253	4 (35a)	418
3 (96a–b)	172	4:1 (35a)	167
3:3 (6b)	112	4:2 (35a)	171f., 176, 178, 180
3:4 (6c)	212, 216, 235	4:2 (35b)	169, 172, 178
4:1 (7d)	262	4:3 (35b)	176
6 (10a)	265	4:6 (35c)	169
7:1 (11b, 14f)	143	4:10 (35c)	164, 176
8:7 (12c)	228	5:1 (35d)	171, 174
8:8 (12c)	141	5:3 (34d)	169
9:1 (12d–13a)	307, 369	5:3 (35d)	171
9:5 (13–14d)	309	5:4 (36a)	171
		5:6 (36a)	169, 178
<b>Pea</b>		5:8 (36a)	171
1:1 (15b–c)	188	5:9 (36a)	168, 171, 176
1:1 (16a)	142	6:1 (36b)	178
3:7 (17d)	234	6:1 (36c)	167, 170–172, 235
4:6 (18b)	111	6:1 (36d)	65, 169, 171, 174, 178
		6:2 (36d)	169–172
<b>Dem</b>		6:4 (37a)	169, 176
1:3 (21d–22a)	307	6:5 (37a)	172
2:1 (22c,)	143	7:2 (37b)	167, 170f., 176
3:4 (23c)	143, 145	7:3 (37b)	172
5:8 (25a, 7–8)	143	7:3 (37c)	258
5:9 (25a)	145	7:5 (37c)	169
6:11 (25d)	143	7:6 (37c)	168
		7:8 (37c)	172
<b>Kil</b>		8:1 (37d)	171
1:6 (27a)	271	8:2 (38a)	179
6:2 (30b)	167, 169, 179	8:4 (38a)	173, 177
		8:6 (38b)	170, 176

8:7 (38b)	171f.	1 (4b)	229
8:9, 10 (38b)	176	2 (5c)	229
8:11 (38b)	172	3:2 (5d)	229
9:1 (38c)	172, 179, 239	4:1 (6d)	235
9:1 (38d)	158, 171, 174, 176, 179, 253	6:1 (7d)	228, 233, 236
9:2 (38d)	169f.	6:1 (8c)	237
9:5 (39a)	172, 179	6:9 (8c)	126, 235
9:7 (39a)	169f., 178	7:2 (10a)	235
9:9 (39a)	170, 172, 179	7:2 (10c)	235
10:1 (39b)	167, 170–172, 175	8:1 (11a)	239
10:2 (39b)	175	10 (12c)	263
10:2 (39c)	164, 171f., 175, 179	14:4 (14d)	190f., 195, 399
10:3 (39c)	171	16:7 (15d)	32, 142
10:4 (39c)	169	19:1 (17a)	143
10:5 (39d)	177	19:2 (17a)	143
10:6 (39d)	167, 175	Er	
10:9 (39d)	164, 170–172, 175	3:1 (20c)	233
Ter		3:1 (20d)	232
8:5 (45c)	186, 189, 237	3:8 (21b)	171, 174, 176
8:10 (46b)	267	6:2 (23b)	108
Maas		6:3 (23c)	232, 235
4:6 (51c)	229	7:6 (24c)	110
5:7 (52a)	190, 265	7:10 (24c–d)	232
MSh		7:10 (24d)	232, 235
4:4 (55a)	110	10:1 (26a)	123, 223, 237
4:7 (55c)	235	Pes	
4:9 (55b)	142	1:1 (27b)	112, 142, 143, 146, 147, 160
4:9 (55c)	153f.	5:5 (32c)	108
5:2 (56a)	233	6:1 (33a)	305, 364
5:9 (56d)	19	6:5 (33c)	141
Hal		8:1 (35d)	112
1:1 (57b)	230	8:7 (36a)	112
Orl		10:1 (37b)	108, 372
2:7 (62b)	143	10:1 (37c)	239
2:7 (62c)	143	Sheq	
Bik		1:5 (46b)	143, 145
2:1 (64c)	237	3:2 (47c)	239
Shab		5:2 (48d–49a)	45
1 (3c)	173	Yom	
1 (3d)	167	3:7 (40d–41a)	403, 406f.
		3:9 (41a)	42, 45
		5:2 (42c)	41
		6:3 (43c–d)	37, 41, 48

8:1 (44d)	327	Hag	
8:5 (45b)	33, 126, 142	1:1 (75d)	230
Suk		2:1	391
1:1 (51d)	237, 309	2:2 (77d)	227, 237f.
1:1 (52a)	251	2:2 (78a)	398
2:1 (52d)	123	3:2 (79a)	234
4:1 (54b)	167, 171, 265	Yev	
5:1 (55b)	236	1:6 (3a)	142, 146, 156
5:8 (55d)	20, 48	3 (4d)	252
Bes		4:2 (5d)	145, 309
1:1 (60a–b)	171f., 174, 176, 179	4:15 (6c)	130
1:9 (60d)	127	6:6 (7c)	234
4:4 (62c)	235	6:6 (7d)	141
RHSh		7:5 (8b)	75
2:6 (58b)	269	7:6 (8b)	76, 79f., 143
2:8 (58b)	167	8:1 (8d)	108f.
3:1 (58c)	167	8:2 (9a–b)	234
4:1 (59b)	257	8:2 (9b)	234
Taan		8:3 (9d)	116
1:1ff (63ff)	381	10:8 (11a)	229
2:13 (66a)	27, 29	11:4 (12a)	131
3:4 (66d)	155	12:6 (13a)	234
3:8 (66d)	253	12:7 (13a)	65, 234
3:10 (66d)	27, 29	13:1 (13c)	234
3:12 (67a)	401	13:2 (13c)	134
4:1 (67d)	262	Ket	
4:8 (68d)	380	1:1 (25a)	234
4:8 (68d–69b)	159	1:10 (25c–d)	234
Meg		2:3 (26b)	177, 189
1:6 (70c)	27, 29	2:5 (26c)	203, 209
2:2 (73a)	172	2:7–8 (26d)	116
3:2 (74a)	202	2:10 (26d)	112, 123
4:3 (75a)	123	3:1 (27a)	130, 143, 145
4:10 (75c)	142	3:10 (28a)	120–122
MQ		4:10 (29a)	236
1:2 (80b)	172, 178	4:11 (29a)	195f., 203
1:3 (80b)	178	4:14 (29b)	234
1:7 (80d)	131	4:15 (29b)	234
3:1 (81d)	217, 221	5:2 (29d)	234
3:7 (83b)	150f.	5:5 (30a)	133
3:8 (83d)	153	5:5 (30c)	111
		5:6 (30a)	133, 229
		5:9–10 (30b)	135
		5:13 (30b, c)	236
		7:6 (31c)	236
		9:1 (32d)	234

10:5 (34a)	234	1:4 (60b–c)	308
11:2 (34b)	200, 234	3:14 (64c)	81, 129
<b>Ned</b>		3:14 (64d)	80f., 130
3:2 (37d)	297	4:1 (65b)	144
4:9 (38d)	33, 142	4:1 (65c)	116
6:8 (39d)	169	4:3 (66a)	145
9:6 (41a)	169	4:4 (66a)	236
9:9 (41c)	234	4:5 (66a)	157
11:13 (42d)	234	4:6 (66b)	234
		4:8,9 (66b)	142
		4:11 (66c)	227
<b>Naz</b>		<b>BQ</b>	
5:1 (54a)	236	1:3 (2c)	108
7:1 (56a)	172	8:6 (6c)	121
<b>Sot</b>		9:7 (7a)	234
1:4 (16d)	237	9:11 (7a)	111
3:3 (19a)	199	<b>BM</b>	
3:4 (11d–12a)	230	1:5 (8a)	110f.
3:4 (19a)	236, 241	4:1 (9c)	237
3:4 (20a)	235	4:2 (9c)	170, 172
4:5 (19d)	234, 249, 251	6:2 (11a)	111
4:6 (19d)	75	<b>BB</b>	
6:1 (20d)	233	2:2 (13b)	191
6:2 (20d)	218	8:7 (16b)	234
7:3 (21c)	146	8:8 (16c)	234
9:1 (23b)	218	8:9 (16c)	122
9:11 (24a)	19	9:1 (16d)	236
9:15 (24c)	235	9:4 (17a)	236
<b>Git</b>		9:6 (17a)	196, 203
1:4 (43c)	80	10:9 (17d)	236
1:5 (43c–43d)	143–145	10:16 (17d)	177
1:5 (43d)	146	<b>San</b>	
1:6 (43d)	122	1 (18c)	269
4:2 (45c)	177	2 (19d)	267
4:3 (45c)	171, 234	2:1 (19d, 20a)	324f.
4:4 (45d)	109, 129, 218	2:1 (20a)	153
4:6 (46a)	217	2:2 (20a)	325
5:10 (47c)	171	2:3 (20a)	324
9:4 (50b)	250	2:3 (20b)	12
<b>Qid</b>		2:4 (20b)	325
1:2 (59a)	100	2:5 (20b)	324
1:2 (59c–d)	108	2:6 (20c)	237, 322, 323, 324, 326, 327
1:2 (59d)	108f.	2:6 (20d)	324, 326, 327
1:3 (60b)	110		

2:8 (20d)	157	3:4 (1)	346
3:6 (21b)	172, 418	3:4 (5)	345
3:9 (21c)	304	3:6 (4–6)	347
6:3 (23b)	44	3:6 (7)	347
6:8 (23c)	238	3:13 (2)	347
6:9 (23c)	227	4 (43d)	265
7:10 (25b)	150	4:1 (1, 3, 9)	348
7:19 (25d)	227	4:4 (3)	349
9:11 (27b)	142	5:4 (44d)	141–143, 146
10:1 (28b)	151	5:5 (44d)	146
10:2 (28d)	235, 347	5:5 (1)	348
10:2 (29a)	397	5:11 (45a)	143
10:2 (32)	347		
10:6 (29c)	14		
		<b>Hor</b>	
<b>Shevu</b>		3 (47a)	266
5:7 (36c)	120–122	3:4 (48a)	237
6:5 (37a–b)	48	3:4 (48b)	228
7:10 (38a)	116	3:5 (48a)	42
		3:5 (48b)	114, 116
		3:5 (48c)	365
<b>AZ</b>		3:6 (47d)	153
1:1 (9)	338	3:7 (48a)	188
1:1 (39d)	107		
1:2 (39c)	4	<b>Nid</b>	
1:2 (2)	339	1:1 (48d)	234
1:2 (3)	340	1:4 (49b)	234
1:2 (4)	341	1:5 (49b)	119
1:2 (6)	341	2:1 (49d)	234
1:2 (7)	341	2:7 (50a–b)	234
1:2 (8)	341	3:2 (50c)	234
1:2 (39c)	442		
1:2 (39d)	442		
1:4 (39c–d)	107	<b>Talmud Bavli</b>	
1:4 (39d)	448	<b>Ber</b>	
2:1 (6)	343	5a	367
2:1 (7)	343	18b	188
2:2 (40d)	192, 195, 235	22a	216, 252
2:3 (41a)	187, 189, 237	27b	262
2:9 (41d)	173	27b–28a	287
2:9–10 (42a)	127	47b	143, 145
2:10 (1)	350	51b	141
3 (42b)	422	53a	142
3:1 (2)	344, 350	55a	240, 403
3:1 (3)	350	55a–57b	154
3:1 (9)	344	63a	141
3:1 (42c)	308		
3:2 (42c–d)	307	<b>Shab</b>	
3:3 (3)	349	21b	27–29

33b	12, 262	9b	256
56b	7	12a	27
88b	295	18a	27, 29
121a	32f., 49, 51	18b	27–29
137a	141	23a	262, 401
149a	417	23b	188
152a	252	28a	27, 29
156b	188		
		<b>Meg</b>	
Er		6a	27f.
13b	362, 365, 367	7b	264
21b	46, 48f.	18a	172
80a	232	25a	142
		<b>MQ</b>	
Pes		16a	258
50a	403	17a	172, 219, 221
57a	42	25a	153, 258
66a	365		
104a	14	<b>Hag</b>	
		3a–b	277
Yom		5b	252
38a	45, 49, 51	25a	142
38a–b	42		
39b	41	<b>Yev</b>	
69a	27, 29	10	303
71b	42	13b	156
87a	259	24b	144
		25a	74
Suk		37b–38a	304, 309
3b–4a	304	44b	80
3b–4b	309	45a	76, 80
27a	33	45a–b	83
44a	249, 251, 265	64b	141
53a	397	68a	75
56b	19, 48f., 88	68b–69a	76, 79
		75b	80
Bes		92b	79
4a	172	99b	74
		115a	33
RHSh		<b>Ket</b>	
15b	171	22a	206, 208
18b	21, 23, 27f., 30, 49	23a	208
19a	27	29b	79
26b	172	49a	360
		52b	197, 203
Taan			
5b	142		

54b	201	50a	46, 49
62b	264	59b	188
85b–86a	201	80a	252
		97b	11f.
Ned		113a	142
49b	240	117a, b	248f., 258, 260, 269
53a	169		
90b	189	<b>BM</b>	
		1–2	303
Naz		39a	249
3a	172	59a–b	34
19a	251	84a	260, 265, 267
		84b	261f.
Sot		86a	259
26b	76		
33a	27, 29	<b>BB</b>	
48a	19	4a	9
		38b	249
Git		73a	395
6b	282	115b–116a	27
10a	143, 144, 146	130b	364
35a	46–48, 51, 200		
36a	171, 220	<b>San</b>	
38a	218	18a	319
45a	218	19a–b	319f.
57a–58a	159	21b	7
60a	324	34a	291
68a	268	36b	251
68a–b	51	44b	44
84b	251, 265	52b	322
		53a	79
Qid		60a	150f.
8a	251	74a	418
30b	291	82a	142
31b	172	90b–91a	226
65b	156	94a	386
66a	75	96a	42
71a	403, 406	98a	371, 377
74b–75a	75		
75a–b	143f.	<b>Shevu</b>	
75b	76	26a	251
76a	143, 146		
77	74	<b>AZ</b>	
BQ		10b	264
11a–b	308	11a	322, 439
32b	293	12b	442
38a	42	26b–27a	143
		28a	194f.

31a	143	17:3	233, 237
50a	14, 32	17:7	241
		18:1	229
Hor		18:2	229
13a	42	19:10	229, 233
14a	365	20:6	237
		32:19	141
Men		35	258
29b	269	39:11	11.
42a	143	41:2	382
65a–66a	29	44:5	229
109b	36	44:15–21	382
109b–110a	48 f.	45:4	237
		47:10	107
Hul		62	258
4a	143, 146	63:4	237
129b	27	63:5	237
		70:7	149
Bekh		79:6	158
45b	74	80:1	235, 326
51b	46, 48 f.	80:5	229
		81:3	141
Ar		90:3	8.
29a	101	94:7	141
		99:2	382
Nid			
20b	63	MekhY	
45a	210 f.	Bahodesh 8	416
		Beshalach 5	395
		Beshalach 8	417
		Pisha 13	416
<i>Minor Tractates</i>			
Massekhet Kutim		SifBam	
1:9	143	8	228
2:5	147	99	228
2:6	143, 146	111	419
		131	346
<i>Midrashim</i>		148	264
ARNA			
A:13	396	SifDev	
A:20	393	1	8
A:20	394	26	101
BerR		52	7
3:6	377	156–162	323
4:7	241	157	328
8:9	307	159	318
16:4	382	160	324
		162	326

221	227	2:4	169
226	228	24	380
263	101		
266	101	QohR	
306	323	2:20	236
357	323	12:1	286
ShemR		PesR	
1:39	393	36:2	377
		36:4	378
WaR		PRK	
5:4	237	5:3	51
9:9	237	11	258
12:5	51	19:6	394
13:4–5	382	26:2	51
23:12	416		
25:5	236	PRE	
29:2, 10	382	4	396
32:4	80, 393	36	396
34:14	233, 237	38	160
BamR		48	394
14:4	286	50	11
DevR		Sifra	
1:16	7	Emor 10:2 (100a)	167
7:7	436	Behar 1:8 (105 c–d)	167
RutR		Sifra Kedoshim	
7:2	231	Tan	
7:15	237	Va-yeshev 1	293
MShem		Va-yeshev 2	160, 399
13 (44b)	143	QohR	
ShirR		3.11.3 (11a)	403
3:5	42, 45	SER	
EkhaR		6	13
1:15	142, 153f.	SOR	
1:50	379	28	5
1:51	371		

## 6. Ancient Authors

Asterius of Amaseia		Eusebius of Caesarea	
<i>Sermo adversus Kalendas</i>		<i>Chronikoi kanonis</i>	
40.217	441	2.220	444
Augustine		<i>Preparatio evangelica</i>	
<i>Confessiones</i>		12.1	64
4.2.3	446	Hecataeus of Abdera	
Ausonius		<i>Aegyptiaca</i>	
<i>De feriis Romanis</i>		Diodorus Siculus	
Ecl. 24:15	443	1.70–72	329
Cicero		40	330
<i>Pro Flacco</i>		Hieronimus	
69	102	<i>Ad Jerem.</i>	
<i>De natura Deorum</i>		31.15.6	96
1.29.81	429	Horace	
<i>De provinciis consularibus</i>		<i>Saturae</i>	
5.10	102	2.7.43	103
Codex Justinianus		Jerome	
1.9.8	66	<i>In Esaiam</i>	
Codex Theodosianus		8.11–15	62
1.18.19	447	<i>Liber hebraicarum</i>	
2.1.10	59, 66	<i>quaestionum in Genesim</i>	
2.18.19	441		9
16.1.2	60	John Chrysostom	
16.8–9	59	<i>Oratio in Kalendas</i>	
16.8.8	59	47.854	441
16.8.13	59	John Lydus	
16.10.8	441	<i>De mensibus</i>	
Columella		1.158	443
<i>De re rustica</i>		4.10	441
12.10	132	4.42	443
Dio Cassius		Josephus	
15.19	441	<i>Antiquitates</i>	
Dionysius of Halicarnassus		1.160	10
<i>Antiquitates Romanae</i>		1.170	5
2.31.2	446	1.417	330

3.276–80	74	1.11.2	95
4.209	330	1.19.4	94
4.218	330	2.5.1	95
4.224	330	2.17.6	102
4.304	330	3.7.31	96
5.233–34	330	3.10.10	96
6.35–43	330	4.9.1	96
6.36–37	331	4.9.3, 508	102
6.83–85	330	6.9.2, 418	96
8.131	330	6.9.3, 420	96
8.395	330	7.6.4, 208	96
11.8.2–7	43	9.4, 190	40
11.111–112	330	7.10.2–3	40
12.3.3	95		
13.3.1–3	40	<i>Contra Apionem</i>	
13.9.1	94	1.29–30	330
13.11.3	94	1.30–36	74
13.14.2	94	1.54	330
13.15.3	94	1.66	6
13.15.4	94	1.126	5
13.292	75	2.164–65	330f.
13.373	75	2.165	331
14.4	330	2.184–88	330
14.4.4	102	2.186	331
14.41	330	2.193–95	330
14.7.3	95	2.194	330
14.78	330	2.5.51–55	40
14.8.1	40		
14.11.2	95	<i>Vita</i>	
14.12.2	95	1–9, 198	330
15.264	449		
16.187	330	<i>Justinianus</i>	
16.5.1	444	<i>Novellae</i>	
16.6.2	31	146	58
17.10.9	95		
18.1.5	99	<i>Livius</i>	
19.328–31	330	1.9.6	446
20.229	330		
<i>Bellum</i>		<i>Malalas, John</i>	
1.1.1	40	<i>Chronographia</i>	
1.2.6–7	94	7.9	446
1.3	330		
1.4.2–3	94	<i>Macrobius</i>	
1.4.3	94	<i>Saturnalia</i>	
1.4.6	94	1.7.22	12
1.7.6	102	1.10.3	437
1.8.9	95	1.10.23	437

1.11.13	115	Pseudolus	
1.11.15–29	117	1103 ff	117
Origenes		Rudens	
<i>Contra Cels.</i>		920 ff	117
3.54	124	Pliny the Elder	
<i>De principiis</i>		<i>Naturalis historia</i>	
4.3.2	63	3.9.57	6
<i>Sel. In Gen.</i>		34.36	415
41.43	9	34.38	430
Pausanias		34.63	431
2.2.6 ff	432	36.18	431
Philo		Pliny the Younger	
<i>De agricultura</i>		<i>Epistulae</i>	
84–89	329	8.16.3	127
<i>De decalogo</i>		Plutarch	
40–43	329	<i>Quaestiones Romanae</i>	
<i>Legatio ad Gaium</i>		21.1 (30c)	435
155	97	Seneca	
<i>Quod omnis probus liber sit</i>		<i>Epistulae</i>	
79	99	7.4	449
<i>De specialibus legibus</i>		<i>Epistulae moralis</i>	
4.157	328	47.5	115
4.157–169	329	47.13	126
4.160	323	<i>On anger</i>	
<i>De vita contemplativa</i>		3.40.1–3	120
70	99	<i>Tranq.</i>	
Philostratus		11.3	127
<i>Im.</i>		Severus of Minorca	
1.15.2	430	<i>Epistulae</i>	
Plautus		6–7	61
<i>Aulularia</i>		Sozomenus	
587 ff	117	<i>H. E.</i>	
Menaechmi		8.20	430
966 ff	117	Strabo	
		<i>Geographica</i>	
		17.2.5, 824	100

Suetonius		<i>De corona</i>	
<i>Caius</i>		12.3	451
16.4	447		
		<i>De idolatria</i>	
<i>Domitian</i>		14	451
7	121	14.4	442
		19	412
<i>Vita Aug.</i>		<i>De spectaculis</i>	
64.2, 3	132	7.1	449
<i>Vita Ter.</i>		10	450
1	124		
		Ulpian	
Symmachus		<i>Dig.</i>	
<i>Epistulae</i>		34.2.1, 14	417
5.62	449	40.12.37	100
		48.8.4.2	121
Tacitus		48.8.6	121
<i>Annales</i>		Varro	
2.85.4	97	<i>De agricultura</i>	
		1.17.2–3	93
<i>Historiae</i>		<i>De lingua latina</i>	
5.5	100	6.20	446
		6.29	440
Tertullian			
<i>Apologeticum</i>			
35.7	451		
42.3	442, 451		

## Modern Authors

- Adler, W. 5  
Albeck, H. 19, 31, 162, 170  
Albeck, S. 257  
Alexander, Ph. 153, 155, 412  
Alon, G. 42, 140, 152, 156, 320, 324, 411  
Amit, D. 58  
Anderson, R.T. 158  
Applebaum, S. 445  
Aptovitzer, V. 268  
Arafat, K.W. 432  
Asheri, D. 7  
Attridge, H.W. 330  
Avi-Yonah, M. 157
- Bacher, W. 4, 150, 152, 263, 267, 269, 328, 370  
Baker, C. 229  
Barag, D. 58  
Barnes, M.R. 285, 289, 298  
Baron, S. 376  
Barrow, R.H. 99f., 111, 115  
Barthes, R. 350  
Barton, C. 449  
Bauckham, R. 388  
Baumgarten, A.I. 52, 88  
Beard, M. 447  
Beatrice, P.F. 382  
Becker, H.-J. 176, 403  
Beer, M. 324  
Bell, C. 356, 368  
Bell, M.H. 91, 140  
Ben Sasson, M. 269  
Ben-Hayyim, Z. 152  
Biale, R. 230  
Bickerman, E.J. 5, 420  
Blau, L. 227  
Blaufuss, H. 438, 440  
Blidstein, G. 419f., 435  
Bohak, G. 38, 40, 43, 152
- Bokser, B.M. 51, 146f., 187  
Borkowski, A. 85  
Bowersock, G.W. 430  
Boyarin, D. 35, 210, 212, 229, 242, 247, 284, 298  
Bradbury, S. 61  
Bradley, K.R. 91, 93, 115, 122, 126, 128, 134  
Brinktrine, J. 152  
Brison, O. 9  
Brockmeyer, N. 91, 111  
Brody, R. 250, 269  
Brooks, R. 154  
Brown, P. 242, 420  
Brüll, N. 8  
Bruns, G.L. 274  
Buber, S. 153, 373  
Büchler, A. 21, 44, 75, 80, 159  
Bünger, F. 441  
Burrus, V. 296, 298  
Burton, A. 330  
Butterworth, M. 308f.
- Cameron, A. 15  
Casson, L. 431  
Castriota, D. 428  
Charlesworth, J.H. 320  
Chonowitz, S. 91  
Clark, Elizabeth A. 242, 298  
Cohen, B. 79–81, 84, 87f.  
Cohen, Sh.J.D. 17, 36, 44, 56, 92, 140, 199, 202, 274  
Cohen, St.A. 319, 332  
Colorni, V. 67  
Cooper, J. 100  
Cooper, K. 242  
Cotton, H. 443  
Crawford, J.R. 443  
Csillag, P. 78, 88  
Culler, J. 350

- Dan, J. 384  
 de Lange, N.R.M. 57, 67, 412  
 de Lubac, H. 296, 298  
 Deacy, S. 235  
 Delcor, M. 38, 320  
 Dexinger, F. 156  
 Di Segni, L. 98  
 Dixon, S. 231  
 Dodds, E.R. 421  
 Dolbeau, F. 441  
 Donohue, A.A. 429  
 Dunn, J.D.G. 17  
  
 Egger, R. 139  
 Eliav, Y.Z. 411, 413, 425, 427  
 Elman, Y. 309  
 Elon, M. 55  
 Elsner, J. 420–21, 432  
 Epstein, J.N. 169, 319  
 Eshel, E. 99  
  
 Farbstein, D. 91, 101  
 Faur, J. 418  
 Feldman, L.H. 4, 99, 418  
 Feliks, Y. 161  
 Fiensy, D.A. 99  
 Fink, Robert O. 442  
 Finkelstein, L. 40, 47  
 Finley, M.I. 7, 91, 103, 119  
 Fischer, M.L. 415  
 Fishbane, M. 247  
 Fishwick, D. 446  
 Fitzmayer, J.A. 30  
 Fleischer, E. 57  
 Florsheim, Y. 14  
 Flower, H. 417  
 Flusser, D. 25  
 Fonrobert, Ch.E. 213  
 Forbes, C.A. 123f.  
 Fossum, J. 152  
 Fraade, S.D. 101, 175, 295, 298, 319, 332  
 Fraenkel, Y. 52, 205f., 214, 222, 247, 372f., 376, 378  
 Frankel, Z. 169, 186f., 274, 357, 361, 368  
 Freedberg, D. 431  
 Frei, A. 98  
  
 Friedland, E.A. 411  
 Friedländer, G. 160  
 Friedman, Sh. 25, 36, 75, 210, 248, 251, 259f., 263, 265, 303f., 322  
 Fuks, A. 38, 40, 94f., 442  
  
 Gafni, I. 144, 146f., 160, 248–250, 267–269, 324  
 García Martínez, F. 298  
 Gardner, J. 86f., 134  
 Geiger, A. 139, 141, 151f.  
 Gelzer, H. 5  
 Geuthner, P. 59  
 Gibbs, J.G. 99  
 Gildemeister, J. 98  
 Gilman, Sander L. 225  
 Ginzberg, L. 3, 7, 212, 250f., 253, 303, 342, 411  
 Glatzer, N.N. 4  
 Gluckner, C. 446  
 Goldberg, A. 274  
 Goldenberg, R. 420, 423  
 Goldhill, S. 58  
 Goodblatt, D. 25, 50, 56, 69, 267–269, 288f., 298, 321f., 327–329, 331f.  
 Goodenough, E.R. 11  
 Goodman, M. 370, 415, 443  
 Gordon, M.L. 110f., 125  
 Graf, F. 339, 437  
 Gray, A. 53  
 Green, W.S. 51  
 Griffin, M.T. 127  
 Grubbs, J.E. 77f., 86–89, 235  
 Gruen, E.S. 38  
 Grünbaum, M. 152  
 Grünebaum, E. 91  
 Grünfeld, R. 91, 105f.  
 Grünhut, L. 64  
 Gülzow, H. 95  
 Gunkel, H. 372  
  
 Hachlili, R. 58, 98  
 Hadas-Lebel, M. 6, 335f., 348, 419, 423, 435, 437  
 Halbertal, M. 281, 284, 298, 345, 412, 419f.  
 Halevi, E.E. 11, 194, 237  
 Halevy, I. 251, 258, 267

- Halivni, D. 21, 30, 48, 168  
 Halkin, A.S. 139  
 Hampel, I. 25  
 Handelman, S. 274, 277, 284, 290, 292, 294f., 298  
 Harries, J. 60  
 Harrington, D.J. 30  
 Hartman, G.H. 283, 298  
 Hasan-Rokem, G. 226, 241, 372–375  
 Hauptmann, J. 19, 185, 213, 230, 322  
 Havlin, Sh.Z. 268  
 Hayes, Ch.E. 87, 141, 226, 273f., 296, 298, 315  
 Hayward, C.T.R. 9, 38  
 Heinemann, I. 3, 6, 9f., 102, 140, 290, 298  
 Hemelrijk, E.A. 237  
 Hengel, M. 23f., 38, 66, 320  
 Henshke, D. 258  
 Herman, G. 49, 332  
 Herr, M.D. 6, 15, 40, 226, 319, 326  
 Heschel, A.J. 355, 368  
 Hezser, C. 48, 56, 61, 93, 119, 149–50, 158, 161, 175, 231, 304, 327  
 Himmelfarb, M. 319, 376, 383  
 Hirsch, S.A. 36  
 Hirshman, M. 279, 298  
 Hopkins, K. 91, 93, 103f., 115, 275, 299  
 Horsley, G.H.R. 117  
 Horst, P.W.van der 57, 237  
 Hyman, A. 33, 46f., 57, 170f., 252, 258
- Ilan, T. 112, 133, 140, 152, 190f., 226, 228, 230–232, 239  
 Ipta, K. 143  
 Isaac, J. 103
- Jacobs, M. 15, 61, 303f., 326, 345, 350, 445, 449f.  
 Jaffe, M. 175, 186  
 Johnson, F.P. 432  
 Johnson, M.D. 388  
 Jones, A.H.M. 103f.  
 Juster, J. 59, 65
- Kadushin, M. 149, 355, 368  
 Kahn, Z. 91
- Kalmin, R. 17, 38, 42, 49–53, 59, 153f., 161  
 Kasher, A. 38  
 Kennedy, Ch.A. 426  
 Kimelman, R. 50  
 Kirchheim, R. 139, 145  
 Kirsopp Michels, A. 440  
 Kitzinger, E. 384  
 Klein, S. 9, 24, 98  
 Kleiner, D.E.E. 414, 417, 428  
 Klijn, A.F.J. 62  
 Klingenberg, E. 68  
 Kloner, A. 324  
 Knohl, I. 376  
 Koch, G.A. 61  
 Kofsky, A. 445  
 Kohut, A. 19  
 Koortbojian, M. 430  
 Kosovsky, M. 141f., 148, 151, 154, 156f.  
 Kraemer, D.Ch. 165, 169, 273f., 285, 299, 362, 368  
 Krauss, S. 4, 37, 61, 92, 104, 127, 150, 154, 156, 416, 437f.  
 Kristeva, J. 350  
 Kristianpoller, A. 153  
 Kugel, J.L. 247, 274, 292, 299, 351
- Lapin, H. 61, 163, 225  
 Lauterbach, J.Z. 416  
 Lehnhardt, A. 148f., 160  
 Lemche, N.P. 105f.  
 Lerner, M.B. 149  
 Lévi, I. 376, 384–387  
 Levin, B.M. 252  
 Levine, L.I. 11, 13, 56, 58, 61, 146, 148, 158, 161, 326  
 Levinson, J. 378  
 Levy, J. 37, 141, 152  
 Lévy, M. 9, 11  
 Lewis, Ch.T. 429  
 Libson, G. 55  
 Lieberman, S. 19, 33, 36, 57, 64, 75, 82, 130, 142, 147f., 150–152, 187, 253–255, 322, 411, 416  
 Lifshitz, B. 98, 442  
 Lim, R. 275, 299  
 Linder, A. 59, 66

- Loraux, N. 288, 299  
 Löw, L. 151, 154  
 Löwinger, A. 153
- Maier, J. 141  
 Mandel, P. 154, 268  
 Mankowski, P.V. 9  
 Mantel, H. 44  
 Margulies, M. 258  
 Martin, D.B. 92, 95, 99  
 McCracken Flesher, P.V. 92, 106, 135, 140  
 McNamara, M. 157  
 Meeks, W. 92  
 Mendels, D. 320, 329  
 Meshorer, Y. 12f.  
 Meyres, J.L. 111  
 Mielziner, M. 91f.  
 Milikowsky, Ch. 53  
 Milns, R.D. 20  
 Modrzejewski, J.M. 38  
 Momigliano, A. 10  
 Montgomery, J.A. 139, 142  
 Moore Cross, F. 99  
 Mor, M. 148, 159  
 Moretti, L. 444  
 Moscowitz, L. 304  
 Moshe, P. 348  
 Murphy, F.J. 418
- Naveh, J. 58  
 Necker, G. 143  
 Neubauer, A. 9  
 Neusner, J. 18, 36, 38, 130, 144f., 150, 152, 155–157, 168, 233, 256, 273f., 299, 336ff., 358, 368  
 Newman, H. 61–63  
 Niehoff, M. 89  
 Noam, V. 26  
 Noja, S. 141  
 Nöldeke, Th. 142  
 North, J. 412  
 Noy, D. 57, 60
- Olitzki, M. 91  
 Oppenheimer, A. 140, 446, 450  
 Osborne, R. 242
- Packman, Z. 231  
 Parente, F. 24, 36, 38, 40  
 Parker, H. 113, 117f.  
 Pastor, J. 102f.  
 Patlagean, E. 15  
 Perkins, J. 242  
 Perles, J. 15  
 Peskowitz, M.B. 228  
 Pierce, K.F. 235  
 Pilhofer; P. 6  
 Porton, B. 38  
 Porton, G.G. 140, 149, 304  
 Powels, S. 147  
 Price, S.R.F. 429, 438–39, 446f.  
 Pummer, R. 141, 153, 158  
 Purvis, J.D. 141
- Rabbिनovitz, A.Z. 169, 249, 260  
 Rabello, A.M. 66  
 Radford Ruether, R. 290, 299  
 Rahmani, L.Y. 98  
 Rajak, T. 27, 60  
 Ratner, B. 146, 148, 171  
 Rawson, B. 128, 130  
 Reeg, G. 143, 146  
 Reinink, G.J. 62  
 Reisner, A. 50  
 Rice, E. 445  
 Robert, L. 444, 447, 449  
 Rosenthal, D. 268–269  
 Rosenthal, E.S. 251, 268f.  
 Roth-Gerson, L. 95, 98  
 Rubenstein, J.L. 201, 247, 262, 270, 305, 319  
 Rubin, N. 153  
 Rubin, Z. 61  
 Rutgers, L.V. 58, 60, 66f.
- Safrai, Sh. 13, 36  
 Said, E. 280  
 Saller, R. 100, 129, 132  
 Salomon, R. 91  
 Salzberger, G. 15  
 Salzman, M.R. 443  
 Sanders, E.P. 274  
 Satlow, M. 175, 228, 230, 235  
 Schäfer, P. 4, 36, 38, 159, 274, 392, 436, 438, 450

- Schechter, S. 355, 368  
 Scheindlein, R. 57  
 Schiffman, L.H. 140, 144, 146–148,  
     152, 274, 317, 320, 418  
 Schlüter, M. 345  
 Schmidt, B.B. 418  
 Schnapp, A. 428  
 Schnayder, G. 6  
 Scholem, G. 392  
 Schremer, A. 248 f., 253, 260, 263, 265,  
     268 f.  
 Schürer, E. 3, 330  
 Schüssler Fiorenza, E. 210  
 Schwabe, M. 98  
 Schwartz, D.R. 21, 38  
 Schwartz, S. 43, 50, 53, 57–60, 161,  
     332, 345, 347, 350, 412, 419 f., 426  
 Schwemer, A.M. 66  
 Sebanc, M. 296  
 Segal, E. 274  
 Shanks, E.A. 168  
 Shapira, H. 287 f., 299  
 Shimhoff, S.R. 12, 15  
 Short, Ch. 429  
 Simon, M. 64  
 Simonsohn, S. 57  
 Sinclair, T.A. 330  
 Smith, M. 43  
 Sokoloff, M. 57, 139, 151 f., 156 f.,  
     238  
 Soloveitchik, H. 55  
 Sonne, I. 143  
 Speck, P. 383  
 Sperber, D. 11, 248–251, 254, 256,  
     258–59, 263–265, 269, 413  
 Spiegel, Sh. 374  
 Spivey, N. 414, 428, 432  
 Stein, D. 288, 290  
 Steiner, M. 294  
 Stemberger, G. 25, 36, 48, 143  
 Stern, D. 15, 276–281, 283, 290, 293,  
     299  
 Stern, M. 3, 10, 38  
 Stern, S. 13, 58, 233, 243, 421  
 Strack, H. 176  
 Straus, J.A. 103  
 Stupperich, R. 415  
 Sukenik, E.L. 58  
 Sussman, Y. 25, 58, 220  
 Sweeney, M. 320  
 Taglicht, I. 141 f., 144 f., 147, 149  
 Ta-Shma, I. 55  
 Tcherikover, V.A. 38, 40  
 Tchernowitz, H. 36, 45  
 Thornton, C.G. 61  
 Tilly, H.-P. 150  
 Tobin, Thomas H. 296, 299  
 Treggiari, S. 85, 88  
 Trombley, F.R. 429  
 Ulmer, R. 377  
 Urbach, E.E. 13, 25, 27, 30, 40, 44, 92,  
     94, 101, 140, 151, 355, 368  
 Urban, M. 143  
 Valler, S. 190, 201  
 VanderKam, J.C. 36  
 Veltri, G. 66–68, 192, 335, 339–341,  
     435, 437–440, 449–450  
 Versnel, H.S. 437  
 Vischer, E. 372  
 Vittinghoff, F. 416  
 Vitto, F. 58  
 Vogt, J. 117 f., 125 f.  
 Volkmann, H. 94–95  
 Wacholder, B.-Z. 5  
 Wald, Stephen G. 303  
 Watson, A. 91, 120 f., 128–130  
 Weinfeld, M. 320, 418  
 Weinstock, St. 442  
 Weiss, A. 303  
 Wertheimer, S.A. 376, 388  
 Westermann, W.L. 91, 99 f.  
 Wewers, G.A. 142, 196, 338–340  
 Wheeler, M. 414  
 Wiedemann, T. 91, 100, 105  
 Wildensee, G. 143  
 Wilken, Robert L. 383  
 Williams, M. 382  
 Winston, D. 296, 299  
 Winter, J. 91, 140  
 Wissowa, G. 429, 437  
 Woolf, G. 60  
 Wünsche, A. 154

Yadin, A. 295 f., 298 f.  
Yadin, Y. 317  
Yahalom, J. 15, 50, 57  
Yankelevitch, R. 36  
Yarbrough, O.L. 114  
Yardeni, A. 99  
Yassif, E. 307

Yuval, Y. 379  
Zakovitch, Y. 247  
Zangenberg, J. 140, 154  
Zeitlin, S. 25, 31, 92, 101, 288  
Ziegler, I. 416  
Zlotnick, D. 150  
Zucrow, S. 91

## Index of Names and Subjects

- Abba bar Adda 217  
Abba bar Zutra 218  
Abba Hilqiah 188  
Abba Saul 151  
Abbahu 109, 134, 164, 169–172, 178,  
223, 239, 306f., 413  
Abdimus of Mazuba 200  
Abin 163f., 172, 178, 338, 396f., 406  
Abina 172, 404  
Abraham 10–14, 38, 139, 151, 374,  
379, 395  
academy 3, 36, 38, 57, 191, 217, 248f.,  
268, 270, 281, 287, 320, 328, 330,  
350, 421  
Adam 229, 340  
Aelia Capitolina 12, 415, 444  
Aggadah 18, 35, 52, 64f., 149, 159,  
186, 222, 247f., 250, 256, 259, 271,  
277, 279, 304, 306, 370  
Agrippa 33f., 96, 331  
Aha 25, 30f., 81, 151f., 170–173, 176,  
179, 193, 218, 220, 305, 399  
Ahitophel 397f.  
Aibo 370, 381  
Akiba 48, 53, 236, 304  
Alexander Jannaeus 94f., 319f.  
Alexander the Great 20, 344f.  
Ammon 171, 174  
*amoraim* 25, 30, 33, 46–50, 75–84, 87,  
92, 113, 122, 127, 144f., 148, 150f.,  
155f., 160–175, 177, 179, 194, 206,  
239, 251–254, 259, 263, 268f.,  
304–309, 332, 357, 370, 391f.,  
395, 397, 399, 401–407, 415,  
422f., 425  
androcentric 209f., 213  
Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) 23f., 75, 95,  
435, 447, 449  
Antiochus III 95  
Aphrodisias 414f., 444  
Aphrodite 345f., 350f., 415, 419f.,  
424f., 429  
Aqabiah ben Mahalalel 217  
Aqiva 144, 188, 210f., 380, 398f.  
Arabs 94, 370f., 374–378, 381, 445  
Aramaic 9, 29–32, 48, 57, 64, 69, 119,  
139, 148, 152, 155, 171, 231, 238,  
254, 260, 322, 349  
Arcadius 441  
*archipherekittai* 67–69  
Armilos 383–385  
Artemis 432  
Ascalon 12, 444  
Ashera 337, 347, 351  
Assi 161f., 168–178, 199f., 251–253, 291  
Asterius of Amaseia 441  
Athena 235, 288, 299, 432  
Augustine 65, 78, 86, 285, 441, 446  
Augustus 31, 78, 80, 82, 101, 122,  
132f., 339, 379, 428, 438, 441, 444  
Aurelius Septimius Irenaeus 444  
Ausonius 443  
Babylonia 7, 14, 17f., 23, 25, 27, 30,  
33, 39, 46–53, 69, 75, 84, 92, 141,  
165, 172, 175, 177, 186, 189, 194,  
197, 206, 210–212, 215, 220, 240,  
248–290, 295–298, 303, 309, 315,  
319–321, 339, 357, 371, 386, 395,  
397, 399–401, 403, 405–407, 439, 442  
ban 160, 217–220, 401f., 418, 422f.,  
443, 451  
Bar Derosai 349f.  
Bar Kokhba 96, 102, 147, 159, 322,  
324, 380, 443  
Bar Pata 217  
*baraita* 19–27, 30, 33, 36, 40f., 44–48,  
101f., 107, 111, 114, 121, 123, 133,  
146f., 180f., 196, 198, 206, 219, 223,  
358, 364, 438

- beggar 187f., 206, 217  
 Bemeseles 94  
 Berachiah 11  
 Bet Shean 58  
 Betar 158, 380  
 Betzalel 403  
 Bilga 19–24, 27, 35  
 Brumalia 441, 443, 451  
 Byzantium 15, 57, 69, 139, 349, 383f.,  
 414, 417, 421, 443, 446  
  
 Caesar 120, 438, 439  
 Caesarea 142, 146, 148, 173, 178, 187,  
 415, 444f., 448  
*calendae* 339–341, 351  
 Cato 127  
 Chama b. Uqba 123f.  
 Chisda 131  
 Chiyya 112, 134  
 Christians 5, 22, 39, 51, 56–67, 82, 88,  
 101, 117, 140, 142, 160, 210, 213,  
 227, 242f., 274–279, 285, 290f., 296,  
 298f., 317, 332–335, 345, 369–371,  
 374f., 379f., 383, 388, 412f., 420,  
 427, 433, 437, 440f., 444–451  
 Chuna 134  
 Church Fathers 59, 61, 242  
 Cicero 85, 102, 127, 429  
 Codex Justinianus 59, 66  
 Codex Theodosianus 59, 120  
 Columella 132  
 Constantinople 289, 376, 384, 415, 421,  
 430, 441, 447, 451  
 conubium 79, 81, 84–86  
 Corinth 96, 431f.  
 customs 9f., 88f., 141, 152, 156, 160,  
 265, 335–338, 345, 350, 416, 449  
  
 David 7, 11–15, 20f., 25f., 36, 39–41,  
 48, 50, 60, 69, 226, 273f., 276, 283f.,  
 288–290, 296, 298f., 317, 319–324,  
 331f., 355, 370, 374, 376, 385–389,  
 397f., 428, 431  
 Demetrius I. Soter 435  
 Deuteroseis 61–65  
 Diocletian 143, 448  
 Dionysus 432  
  
 Divine Name. see also Tetragram-  
 maton 150–153, 159, 392–400,  
 402f., 405, 407  
 Dobrudja 442  
 doctor see physicans  
 Duro-Europus 442  
 Durostorum 442  
  
 Edom 4, 6, 342  
 Eleazar 13, 80f., 109–112, 134, 144,  
 179, 199, 233, 240, 305–308  
 Eliezer 11, 33f., 62, 125, 133, 160, 169,  
 172, 217, 239f., 274, 299, 305, 343,  
 380, 393, 396, 407  
 Elijah 4, 7, 282f., 342, 373, 401  
 Ephraimite messiah 377, 383f.  
 Epictetus 98, 124  
 Epicurus 124  
 Epiphanius 61, 64f.  
 Epistle of Barnabas 382  
*eruv* 232f., 235, 237  
 Esau 7, 341, 352  
 Esther 11  
 Eusebius 5, 7, 64  
 excommunication 34, 217, 219, 401  
 exegesis 6, 8f., 63f., 141f., 146, 156f.,  
 279, 281, 304, 306, 315, 319f., 323,  
 330  
  
 festivals 336–341, 351, 370, 435f.,  
 439–451  
  
 Gabinius 102  
 Gamliel 118–126, 133, 143–147, 263,  
 338, 345–347, 350, 420  
 Gaza 94, 96, 107, 444–448  
 gender 80, 140, 183–191, 195, 201f.,  
 211, 213f., 216f., 220f., 228, 236,  
 238f., 242, 282, 288  
 gentiles 7, 73–88, 92, 96f., 100,  
 107–110, 129f., 135, 140, 145,  
 171, 173, 193–195, 203, 217,  
 336–338, 343f., 347, 349f., 352,  
 370, 419, 450  
 Gerizim 43f.  
 Germana 127  
 Gospels 99, 101, 281, 374, 379  
 Graeco-Roman civilization 15, 346

- Graeco-Roman culture 3, 10, 212, 335, 409  
 Graeco-Roman society 91, 101, 134  
 Greek 426, 448, 450  
 gymnasium 415, 449  
  
 Hadrian 38, 62, 85f., 121, 236, 239, 447  
 Haggai 169, 171f., 326  
 Halakha 11–14, 18, 29f., 34f., 51f., 55, 58f., 64f., 68, 78–80, 86–89, 92, 114, 119, 139–141, 145, 148–151, 156, 158f., 185–189, 193–195, 198f., 202, 206, 210, 213, 217, 230, 258, 265, 269, 286f., 304, 308f., 315, 339, 346, 348f., 357, 362, 364, 398, 413, 417, 419, 421–427, 433  
 Hama b. Hanina 170  
 Hananiah b. Iddai 80  
 Haninah 82, 168, 327  
 Hannah 199, 237, 443  
 Hanukkah 29  
 Har Garizim 140, 146  
 Hasmoneans 13, 21, 27–30, 49f., 94, 319f., 330f.  
 Hebrew 4–6, 9f., 16, 25f., 29, 31f., 48f., 57f., 61, 64, 66f., 69, 75, 79, 84, 99, 105–111, 116, 121, 140, 142, 145–147, 151–153, 158–162, 170, 186, 190, 194, 199, 205f., 222, 231, 237, 247–251, 253f., 257f., 268–270, 287–291, 293, 296, 298f., 303, 305, 318–320, 322, 324, 326, 330, 332, 339, 351, 368f., 373–379, 396, 405, 415–418, 426f., 436f., 444  
 Hekhalot 391f., 398, 407  
 Hela 109, 170, 172  
 Hellenism 3–16, 23, 26, 38, 57, 89, 140, 153, 253, 276f., 321, 329f., 351, 411–413, 435, 437, 442, 447  
 Hellenization 3f., 10, 12, 14–16  
 Hephzibah 383–389  
 Heraklios 384  
 heretics 174, 355, 368  
 Herod 13, 331, 374, 376, 443f., 449f.  
 Hezekiah 156f., 223, 370, 377, 385–387  
 High Priest 20, 25–28, 31, 37, 41, 43, 49, 74, 114, 136, 210, 316–321, 324f., 328, 330–332, 396, 403–405  
  
 Hillel 62, 281, 305, 364f., 400  
 Hippolytus of Rome 382  
 historiography 3, 6–8, 10, 15, 162  
 Hiyya 47, 171f., 235, 258, 265, 422  
 Hizkiah 82, 172, 176, 328  
 Homer 124  
 Honi the Circle-maker 217  
 Hoshaiah 109, 253  
  
 Iddi 131  
 Idumaea 94  
 Ila 126  
 images 12f., 101, 136, 225, 337, 344, 349, 384, 414, 418, 424, 427–431  
 Imma Shalom 188  
 Inaini bar Susai 404  
 Ineffable Name see Divine Name  
 intermarriage 73f., 80, 82, 85, 87–89, 110, 135  
 Irenaeus 382, 444  
 Isaac 57, 103, 171, 217, 324, 374, 379f.  
 Israel 3, 5, 8f., 12f., 17, 19f., 25f., 35, 37f., 44, 52, 55–58, 64, 66, 88, 97f., 108, 130, 144–150, 152, 154, 156f., 174, 176, 190, 194, 212–219, 229, 233, 247, 252, 254, 264, 273, 282, 289f., 316f., 319f., 322, 324, 326, 328, 330, 336, 338, 341f., 351, 356, 358, 360, 366f., 370–374, 376, 379–381, 383, 385, 387, 389, 393–397, 426  
*ius civile* 78, 80, 84  
*ius gentium* 84–86  
  
 Jacob 17f., 36–39, 56, 130, 233, 273f., 299, 319, 336, 341, 352, 369, 380–383, 395, 416, 419, 422  
 Jacob bar Aha 81, 152  
 Jacob bar Idi 346  
 Jacob ben Aha 151  
 Jannai 320  
 Jeroboam 4, 338, 342  
 Jerome 9, 61–65, 68, 96, 382, 445f.  
 Jerusalem 3f., 6, 9, 11–15, 19, 21, 25, 33, 36, 38–43, 46, 50, 55–58, 62, 64, 75, 82, 88, 94–103, 140–142, 145–147, 150–155, 159, 161f., 169, 187, 222, 226, 248f., 251f., 255, 258f., 268–270, 290, 298, 303,

- 307, 315, 317, 319f., 322, 324, 326,  
330–332, 335, 357, 368, 370f., 374,  
376, 379, 382–384, 387, 395, 397,  
401, 411, 413, 415f., 418, 421,  
436–445, 449
- Jesus 3, 66, 191, 330, 332, 369,  
374–376, 379f., 386, 388, 412, 448
- John Hyrcanus 31, 43, 74, 94f., 319f.
- John Lydus 441
- Jonathan 82, 84, 350
- Jordan 444
- Josephus 5–7, 10, 15, 18, 24, 31, 36,  
39–43, 50, 74f., 91, 94–96, 99, 102,  
104, 139, 318, 320, 329–332, 418,  
446, 449
- Joshel 112
- Joshua 11–13, 62, 212f., 218, 269, 378
- Joshua b. Levi 81, 172, 346
- Jove 429
- Jubilee Year 36, 39, 57, 102, 105–109,  
270
- Judaea 5, 20, 62, 95, 102, 204, 443
- Judah (ben Ilai) 316
- Judah Nassia 219
- Judeo-Greek 3, 5f.
- Jupiter 429
- Justin Martyr 382
- Justinian 66–68, 87, 120, 122
- kashrut* 13, 38, 81f.
- kingship 5f., 23, 28, 39, 49, 51, 94, 139,  
144, 157, 315f., 319–324, 328–332,  
342, 384–387, 400f., 415f., 435–439,  
447
- kratesis* 339, 341f., 351, 438
- Kutim see Samaritans
- Laban 396
- Laodicea 444
- Latin 3, 4, 9, 23, 32, 38, 64, 66, 85f.,  
97, 117, 119, 125, 242, 330, 339, 429,  
436–439, 444, 446
- Law see also Halakha 13, 59f., 64–68,  
73f., 78, 84, 87–89, 92, 94f., 101f.,  
105f., 113, 128, 131, 143f., 157, 173,  
213, 218, 231, 252, 291, 293, 297,  
304f., 317–320, 329f., 346, 362,  
418f., 426
- Leontopolis 24, 36, 38, 40, 43–45
- Levi 4–7, 65, 81, 116, 172, 212f., 218,  
308, 323, 342, 346, 348, 367, 393f.,  
399, 411
- Levite 75f., 114, 324, 386
- Lex Minicia* 80, 85f.
- Libanius 82, 101, 379, 440f., 444
- liturgy 57, 67–69, 400, 403, 405, 425,  
429
- logos* 273f., 276, 290f., 296, 298f.
- Luke 374f., 388
- Maccabean 20, 31
- Macrobius 12, 115, 117
- magic 227, 231, 238, 241f., 249,  
391–393, 398, 400, 402, 407, 430,  
445
- mamzer* 75, 79–87, 114, 130, 136f.,  
144f.
- Mana 122, 151f., 169, 171, 173f., 176,  
178, 229, 363
- Marc Anthony 438
- Marcus Aurelius 439, 447f.
- marriage 7, 49, 73–89, 128f., 131–134,  
144f., 158, 199f., 205–207, 233–235,  
253, 316f., 321, 342
- Mary see also Virgin 110f., 369, 379f.,  
384f., 389, 447
- Matrona 237–243
- Matthew 62, 210, 374f.
- Megillat Taanit 25–31, 48
- Meir 37f., 41f., 47, 62, 317, 339, 362f.,  
421–425, 431, 442, 450
- Menahem 14, 24, 32, 38, 170, 330,  
370–372, 375–380, 383–389
- Menelaus 23f.
- Merkolis 337, 348f., 351
- Messiah 8, 369–389
- Metatron 383
- Michael 4, 225, 228, 230, 235, 238,  
317, 321, 342, 349, 383, 430
- Mikhal bat Kushi 223
- Minerva 429
- minim* see heretics
- Mishnah 6, 17, 19f., 23f., 31–36, 42–47,  
52, 62, 64f., 68, 75, 79–84, 92, 100,  
107, 109f., 114–116, 121f., 125, 130,  
133–135, 140, 142, 145, 148f., 151,

- 156, 158, 162–171, 174–182, 185f.,  
189, 196, 199, 204–207, 210, 212, 228,  
233f., 238, 254, 281, 307, 315–329,  
332f., 342–345, 355, 357–361, 367,  
381, 391, 395, 397–402, 412, 423f.,  
427, 435f., 438f., 442f., 448–450
- Moab 94, 171, 174
- Mordechai 11, 13, 41, 51
- Moses 91, 103, 108, 211, 269f., 277,  
284, 286, 290, 298f., 324, 326, 328,  
331, 367, 380, 393–396
- Mount of Olives 384
- Musonius Rufus 124
- Nahum bar Simai 344
- Name of God 28, 30, 150, 194, 200,  
394, 396–399, 405f.
- Nasi 217, 322, 326
- Nathan 83f., 387–389, 393–397, 400
- Nazaraei 62
- Neapolis 444
- Necho 4, 342
- Nehemiah b. Hushiel 383f.
- Neptune 429
- Nero 124
- Northern Africa 442
- Onias 24, 36, 38–40
- Origen 9, 63f., 124, 296, 332
- pagans 242, 335f., 345, 382, 411f., 420,  
445, 449
- Palmyran 218
- Paneia 444, 448
- Passover 108f., 112, 147, 240, 358f.,  
364
- Patriarch 11, 14, 59f., 125, 213, 266,  
286, 289, 322–328, 332, 364f., 384
- Pausanias 431f.
- Pax Augusta 95, 428
- Peroqlos 345f.
- Persia 4, 248, 309, 383f.
- Pesah 239, 436
- Pharao 342
- Phokas 384
- physicans 155, 192–198
- piety 215, 230f., 237f., 369
- Pinchas 131
- Pirqoi ben Baboi 250, 271
- Pishpesha 171
- Pliny 6, 127, 415, 430–432
- Plutarch 126, 435
- Pompey 95
- priests 17–24, 36–46, 49–53, 73–77,  
83, 88, 98f., 112, 114, 116, 235, 252,  
275, 315, 318–320, 323, 325–332,  
404, 429
- proselyte 62, 106, 109, 114f.
- Ptolemy II Philadelphos 445
- Qalah the Southerner 127
- Qiliri 57
- Rabba bar Rav Huna 200
- Rabban Gamliel 143–145, 345f., 350,  
420
- Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel 196, 198
- Rabbinic Hellenism 4, 10, 16
- Rabbinic Judaism 55f., 273–279, 284,  
287, 290f., 335f., 352, 355, 364, 368,  
412
- Rabbinization 18, 55–58, 67, 69
- Rachel 230
- rape 209–213, 234f., 445f.
- Rashi 9, 14, 28f., 144, 150, 249f., 253,  
260, 282, 293
- Rav 21, 25, 30, 48, 201f., 219f., 291,  
304, 308, 339–341, 362, 399, 403,  
416, 437, 443
- Rav Jeremiah of Bira 200
- Rav Joseph 83, 320
- Rav Kahana 47, 51, 247–271, 394, 396
- Ravina 220, 362
- redemption 381f., 393, 396
- Remus 4, 5, 342
- Resh Laqish 107, 171, 201, 247, 257f.,  
260, 262–271, 326
- rituals 141, 153, 335f., 356, 424, 429,  
438f., 441, 445–447
- Romans 3, 5–15, 24, 26, 32–39, 53,  
56–61, 65–69, 73, 76–80, 82, 84–89,  
91, 93–104, 107, 110–137, 140, 146,  
152f., 158f., 161, 177, 204, 212,  
225f., 229, 231, 237, 239, 242f., 309,  
324, 326f., 329, 332–336, 339–346,

- 350f., 369f., 379, 383f., 409–421, 425–451
- Rome 4–7, 15, 30, 46, 58, 60, 84f., 91, 94, 96f., 100, 102, 105, 117, 124, 128, 336, 340–344, 351, 371, 377, 381f., 412, 414, 422, 435, 438, 441, 443–447
- Romulus 5, 342, 384, 447
- Saadiah 365f.
- Sabbatical Year 105f., 171f.
- Sadducee 240
- Sages 6, 17–39, 42, 44–53, 82, 106, 114, 123, 129, 136, 143, 149, 151, 153f., 158f., 161, 173f., 178, 188, 200f., 217, 219f., 222f., 226, 236f., 251, 253–255, 259, 265, 269, 273, 285, 287, 304f., 307–309, 317, 324, 343, 348, 355, 358, 368, 395, 403, 406f., 415, 417–425, 431, 433
- Samaria 43, 94, 144, 147, 415, 444
- Samaritans 43, 75, 139–160, 243, 335, 343, 399
- Samuel 4, 9, 24, 36f., 98, 133, 175, 178, 200, 207, 237, 250–252, 292, 331, 363, 376, 388, 416, 437
- Samuel bar Nahmani 219
- Sassanian 212, 256, 332
- Satan 384f.
- saturnalia* 6, 115, 117, 339, 341, 351, 436–438, 440, 442f., 446, 450f.
- Scythopolis 12, 415, 442, 444f., 448f.
- Sebaste 94
- Sefer Zerubbabel 369, 371f., 374, 376–379, 383–389
- Seleucid Greeks 21, 23
- Seneca 115, 120, 126f., 449
- Sepphoris 12, 32f., 95, 233, 404, 406f., 415
- sex 35, 115, 136, 205, 209–215, 225, 228f., 234f., 242
- sexual abuse 212–215
- sexual violence against women 209
- Shabbat 27–29, 32–34, 49, 51, 63, 146, 192–194, 258, 286, 294–296, 322, 417
- Shabtai 199
- shem ha-meforash* see Divine Name
- Shimon b. Gamliel 133, 198, 338
- Shimon b. Jehuda 81f.
- Shimon b. Laqish 81, 174, 177, 326, 367
- Shimon b. Shetah 227, 238f., 401
- Shimon b. Yehosadaq 178
- Shimon bar Abba 81, 196f.
- Shimon bar Gorias 102
- Shimon the Righteous 36f., 40–42
- Shmuel see Samuel
- Shobetai 171f.
- Sidon 444
- Sihon 174
- slavery 13, 73–87, 91–137, 140, 144–146, 189, 213–218, 228, 239, 320, 360
- Solomon 4, 7, 11–15, 26, 42, 80, 155, 324, 342, 368, 388f.
- statues 344, 350, 413–433
- Stoicism 124–127
- Suetonius 121, 124, 132, 447
- Sukkah 19f., 24, 33, 48f., 123, 125, 237, 239, 265, 292, 361, 397, 436
- Synagogue 47, 56, 58, 60, 65, 69, 97f., 125, 217, 230, 237, 326
- Syria 82, 89, 91, 94, 96, 101, 103, 379, 420, 435f., 439–444
- Tabi 118–126, 136
- Tamar 202
- Tanchum b. Papa 130
- tannaim* 6, 8, 20, 25, 27, 33, 38f., 41, 44–49, 52, 62–64, 75, 77–80, 83–85, 92, 111, 113, 118–121, 123, 125, 140, 144f., 149, 159, 162–167, 170f., 174–177, 186, 199, 206, 222, 227–230, 233f., 258, 263f., 277, 295f., 317, 319–321, 357, 397, 399–402, 405, 407, 415, 417, 423, 425
- Tarfon 46, 62, 172, 264, 404f.
- tax 102, 327, 449
- tefillin* 112, 123, 361
- Temple 3, 5, 12–24, 28, 30, 36, 38–45, 47, 49–52, 74f., 92, 101, 114, 140, 150f., 199, 220, 228, 233, 275f., 278, 317–320, 323, 326, 331f., 346f., 370–379, 381, 383f., 387, 396f., 400, 403, 405, 415, 418, 427, 429, 435
- terafim* 396

- Tertullian 412, 442, 449–451  
*terumah* 75, 190f., 234f.  
 Tetragrammaton see Divine Name  
 Theodoret of Cyrus 152  
 Theodosius I. 436  
 Tiberias 5, 61, 98, 158, 191, 267, 349f.,  
     415  
 Tiberius 239, 439  
 Timinis 191f., 197  
 Titus 96, 103  
*tophet* 10  
 Tosefta 19, 23, 25, 27, 32–34, 36, 44–46,  
     48f., 52f., 75, 107, 140, 143, 149,  
     305, 322, 343, 345, 351, 405, 416f.,  
     423, 425, 435, 438–440, 445  
 Trimalchio 124  
 Tyre 448  
  
 Ugarit 347  
 Urim and Thummim 317  
  
 Valentinian 87, 441  
 Valerius Maximus 117  
 Vespasian 62, 75, 96  
 Virgin see also Mary 63, 74, 210f.,  
     242, 369, 380, 383–386, 389  
  
 water 172, 185, 189, 209, 214, 228,  
     286, 291f., 338, 398, 416  
 Wissenschaft des Judentums 24, 391  
 women 9, 11–15, 43, 73–87, 100f., 105,  
     110–113, 118, 128–135, 186–220,  
     223, 226, 228–243, 282, 318, 321,  
     343, 371f., 379, 385, 387, 389, 398  
 woman doctor 192–195  
  
 Yaakov b. Dosaii 362f.  
 Yaaqov b. Acha 112, 127, 193, 305  
 Yaaqov bar Idi 348  
 Yannai 57, 82, 171f., 176, 178, 235,  
     362f.  
 Yannai b. Rabbi 81  
 Yassa 127, 171f., 174, 252  
 Yehoshua 34, 36, 116, 120, 228, 232,  
     287, 348, 399  
 Yirmeyah 123  
 Yirmiya 169, 172, 178f.  
 Yishmael 76, 79f., 116, 129, 348  
 Yitzhak bar Tablai 234  
 Yitzhaq bar Matni 348  
 Yohanan 25–27, 31, 49, 76, 80–82,  
     101, 108, 110f., 115f., 122, 127,  
     129, 143–145, 164, 166–172, 174,  
     176–178, 190–214, 239, 247–271,  
     281, 285, 291, 295, 306, 308, 326f.,  
     340f., 348, 349f., 362, 379f., 420,  
     425, 436, 438, 440, 444  
 Yom Kippur 209f., 259, 327, 405  
 Yona 170, 178  
 Yonatan 170, 173, 177, 282f.  
 Yose 116, 129, 130f., 146f., 154, 168,  
     172f., 176, 252, 326, 349  
 Yose b. Bun 168–178  
 Yose b. Chaninah 123f.  
 Yose b. Dormaskit 8f.  
 Yose b. Hanina 164, 170  
 Yossa 109, 358f.  
 Yudan 125–127, 171f., 174, 176, 307,  
     370, 395  
  
 Zeira 82, 84, 123, 170, 255, 307  
 Zerubbabel 369, 371f., 374, 376–379,  
     383–389  
 Zeura 127

## Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism

### Alphabetical Index

- Albani, M., J. Frey, A. Lange* (Ed.): *Studies in the Book of Jubilees*. 1997. *Volume 65*.
- Avemarie, Friedrich*: *Tora und Leben*. 1996. *Volume 55*.
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- Band I/6–11: 1992. *Volume 35*.
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- see *Schäfer, Peter*
- Schmidt, Francis*: Le Testament Grec d'Abraham. 1986. *Volume 11*.
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