PART I

# ROOTS & STARTING POINTS


1.1 Palestine in the time of Jesus

# Second Temple Judaism

In 587 or 586 B.C.E., Babylonian troops conquered Jerusalem, carried out a massacre among its inhabitants, destroyed the temple, and put an end to the existence of the small state of Judah as an independent kingdom. Several thousand members of the upper class were deported to Babylon. The catastrophe initiated a far-reaching ideological process, when some literate members of the exiled community set out to rebuild its identity with the aid of a theological reinterpretation of Israel's past. This process resulted in a thorough change in worldview and religious practice.[1]

A word on the nomenclature is in order here.[2] "Judah" is unequivocally a political term, referring to a territory in central Palestine with Jerusalem as its center; in discussions of the Persian period it is often also called "Yehud." By contrast, "Israel" is used in many different senses. As a political term it can denote either the territory ruled in the tenth century B.C.E. by the kings David and Solomon or, after the split of that kingdom, its northern part that had Samaria as its last capital. This northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E. and its upper-class members were deported to Assyria. The surviving southern kingdom, Judah, could now also be called "Israel," and its inhabitants "Israelites"; this was, however, a religious or spiritual (rather than political) designation, which implied the idea of a people in a special relationship to its God, Yahweh, a relationship built (according to the master story in the Hebrew Bible) in premonarchic times when "Israel" had consisted of an alliance of twelve "Israelite" tribes. As a religious ("eschatological") idea, even the notion of "greater Israel" could be maintained: ten of the tribes had been dispersed and lost in the disaster of 722, but the hope gained ground that Yahweh would one day gather "all Israel" back together. In light of this linguistic development it is possible to speak of "*Israel's* religious past" even with regard to the conditions in the monarchy of *Judah*. It was all-important to the exiled (and returning) "Judeans" to maintain continuity (even if it was largely imagined continuity) with the Israel and Israelites—the beloved people of Yahweh—of the past.

## The Aftermath of the Exile

When the Persian ruler Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 B.C.E., he permitted the Judeans, or Jews,[3] to return to their homeland. Some took the opportunity. The returnees came to be involved in conflicts with the mass of the population that had stayed in the land, but with support from the Persian king they managed to assert themselves, gain power, and even build a modest new temple. Its dedication, traditionally dated in 516 B.C.E.,[4] marks the beginning of what is generally called Second Temple Judaism.[5] Its religion came to be very different from what had been the case before the exile.

In early times, Yahweh had been the main Deity and the official God of the state, but worship in Judah did not differ very much from that in surrounding regions.[6] The official religion was centered on the temple in Jerusalem and its sacrificial cult. Like other Near Eastern peoples, the Israelites favored the cult of their own national Deity, but other Gods and Goddesses were also worshiped, probably without major problems. In the new situation, when national existence was threatened, this "tolerant monolatry" (worship of one God) was challenged. During and after the exile Israel's religious past was radically reinterpreted by the scribes who constituted what scholars call the Deuteronomistic school.[7] The disaster that had happened was interpreted as a punishment for the worship of God/esses other than Yahweh. The Deuteronomists thus created a (historically quite distorted) picture of the past, in which Israel was constantly at war with the demands of its own religion. This "intolerant monolatry" was finally transformed into exclusive monotheism with separatist tendencies that amounted to a thorough break with Israel's own past.[8] "The differences are so substantial that the very fundaments of religion had been changed."[9] Israel's relationship with Yahweh was reinterpreted as a covenant modeled on Near Eastern treaties of kings with their vassals; from now on his law (Torah) was the center of Israel's religion.[10] Collective repentance of past sins was called for so that God would fulfill his promises to the ancestors and turn the fortunes of his people.

The tradition ascribes a crucial part in the process to Ezra, a scribe who arrived in Jerusalem from Babylon, possibly in 458 B.C.E. He introduced in Judah a book of the Torah, making the people commit itself to this law by way of a common confession. The historical value of the biblical account of Ezra is controversial (and generally overestimated in scholarship),[11] but the story reflects the fact that the roots of the Torah as a document lie in the Babylonian exile, where the "nomistic" editors of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History played a decisive role. Ezra appears as an embodiment of the scribal class that came to possess a leading role as innovators of the religion.[12] The increased esteem of written texts and the vast literary activity, out of proportion with the modest resources available, point in the same direction. Identity was established and religious boundaries were drawn on the basis of a written law and written prophecies.

In the religious world of Deuteronomy, the temple and the cult were subordinated to a written text that demanded constant study and interpretation. Yahweh himself acted as a heavenly scribe who twice wrote the Decalogue on stone (Deut. 5:22; 10:4) and ordered the storage of the tablets in a special wooden ark.[13] Gradually, the written Torah grew round this core, when legal material from various sources was put together; it came to be thought that this Torah as a whole

had been revealed by Yahweh to Moses, the famous leader who had once led the people to freedom from slavery in Egypt.

The efforts of the scribes (including priestly scribes) led to the gradual emergence of an extensive sacred scripture that Jews came to call the "TaNaK"[14] and Christians the "Old Testament"; modern scholars speak of the "Hebrew Bible." "In the Persian period, the various strands of the Torah were woven together for the final time, and the resulting product became the 'constitution,' or foundation document for all forms of Judaism."[15] The Torah amounted to a compromise between the interests of the scribes and those of the priests, for it combined laws that focused on the temple and cult with others that lacked such concerns. Somewhat later, the words of prophets (and some stories about them) were gathered and edited into an authoritative collection that complemented the Torah. Finally, a collection of "writings" (wisdom literature and cultic psalms) came to be added to the Torah and the prophets (cf. Sir. prologue 8-10). By the time of the early Christians this tripartite scripture formed the authoritative basis of Jewish life and thought and was probably taken for granted by most Jews (including Christian Jews[16]), even though no formal decision had been taken to mark out its limits.[17] Not only was the scripture considered to be divinely inspired; God himself was regarded as its real author, who spoke in his own voice through its words. However, various interpreters expounded scriptural texts according to their particular traditions or predilections. "From the start, what came to be 'scripture' was treated as tradition, to be interpreted in the context of other traditions and of one's circumstances."[18]

An enormously influential innovation took place when, beginning with the Torah, the scripture was gradually translated into Greek in the Egyptian Diaspora (dispersion).[19] The translation, which is known as the Septuagint ("seventy," according to a legend about seventy-two translators),[20] gave the vast population of Greek-speaking Jews direct access to their scriptural tradition. The Septuagint came to be the scripture of Greek-speaking Christians.

## Jewish History in Hellenistic and Roman Times

Alexander the Great's conquest inaugurated the Hellenistic period, characterized by a blend of the Greek civilization with the various local cultures.[21] Judea was now ruled first by the Ptolemies of Egypt and then by the Seleucids of Syria. All varieties of Judaism in this period, in Judea as well as in the Diaspora, were integral parts of the culture of the ancient world. Nevertheless, some varieties had imbibed more influences from outside than others, so that valid distinctions can still be drawn between the Judaism of the Diaspora and that of Judea.[22]

### *The Maccabean Uprising*

By the second century B.C.E. we find in Judea two parties, sometimes called the Hellenizers and the Devout. The Hellenizers had gained the upper hand in Jerusalem. Regretting the consequences of cultural separation, they wanted to reform Judaism (not to destroy it) by erasing some of its distinguishing characteristics and by "making a covenant with the Gentiles" around them (1 Macc. 1:11). This process seemed to carry on peacefully under the Syrian rulers, even during the early reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. It is

impossible to reconstruct the events that put an end to the peace, but somehow an inner-Jewish power struggle in unstable political circumstances led to a situation that Antiochus construed as rebellion. In 167 B.C.E., Jerusalem was taken by his forces and many of its inhabitants were killed. Jewish worship was suppressed and the temple polluted with the alien cult of Zeus Olympios (referred to as the "desolating sacrilege" or "abomination of desolation" in Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). A decree of the king prohibited the practice of Jewish religion in Judea (though not in the Diaspora). Possession of Torah scrolls, celebration of the Sabbath, and circumcision were to be punished by death.

Ironically, this very attempt to destroy traditional Jewish identity seems to have saved it, for it evoked a massive reaction. The mass of the people joined the strict party of the Devout, led by the family of the Hasmoneans, nicknamed Maccabees, in order to defend the old ways. Their efforts, "history's first recorded struggle for religious liberty,"[23] came to be engrained in the collective memory of the Jews, ensuring that in the future any attempt to delete ancient religious customs would meet with stern opposition. Jews would live their lives according to the law of Moses.

At some point during the rebellion, the goals of the Maccabees changed. Even after they had reconquered the temple (it was rededicated in 164) and put an end to the persecution, they continued to fight—now for political independence. Taking advantage of the power struggle between rival claimants to the Seleucid throne, they succeeded, surprisingly enough, in founding a kingdom that lasted for a full century. They even undertook to bring all of the land of ancient Israel, including many Gentile areas in Galilee and elsewhere, under the law of Moses. John Hyrcanus, who reigned 135–104 B.C.E., took the important Samaritan cities Samaria and Shechem, and destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim. The deep-seated enmity between Samaritans and Jews, reflected in the New Testament, goes back to these events. Hyrcanus also conquered Idumaea and forced its inhabitants to convert to Judaism by subjecting them to circumcision. Yet the Hasmonean dynasty of the Maccabees never succeeded in securing the support of all Jews. Many of the devout who had supported them when religious freedom was at stake later abandoned them, disapproving of their worldly ways. The pious were particularly appalled by the Hasmoneans' usurpation of the office of the high priest, to which their family could make no legitimate claims.

### *Rome and Judea*

In 63 B.C.E. the Roman general Pompey took advantage of the disorder caused by strife between two claimants to the Hasmonean throne and conquered Jerusalem. He turned part of the Hasmoneans' territory over to the Roman province of Syria and appointed one of the claimants as high priest and "ethnarch" ("ruler of the nation," a lesser title than "king"). But due to the turmoil of the civil war, in which the Roman republic came to be caught, and the military threat posed to Rome by the Parthians in the East, a new dynasty rose to power in Judea. To help combat the Parthians, the Romans installed a strong man, Herod, as king of Judea. Herod, later called "the Great," ruled in 37–4 B.C.E. with the backing of Rome as a client king who had autonomy in his own territory.

Herod has had bad press, but modern historians take a balanced view. Broadly speaking, his reign was a success. It is true that he tolerated no opposition and proceeded ruthlessly against any

who might threaten his rule, having many members of the aristocracy and even of his own family executed.[24] On the other hand, his services to the Jews were many. He remitted taxes during times of famine. He carried out large building projects that brought employment; his most spectacular achievement was the rebuilding of the temple. Herod's temple was a magnificent structure that by far surpassed the previous shrines in size and splendor and became a major site of pilgrimage. Herod lived as a Jew and defended Jewish worship outside Palestine. Peace reigned during his rule, and the economic situation created by him was beneficial to the nation.[25]

After Herod's death his kingdom was divided among his sons. Archelaus received Judea, Samaria, and Idumaea; Galilee and Perea fell to Herod Antipas; and the territories north and east of the Sea of Galilee to Philip. After only a decade Archelaus was deposed and his territory was again made a Roman province. In this connection, a census (6 C.E.; dated somewhat too early in Luke 2:1-3) was taken in order to introduce Roman taxation. There were riots, and the seeds were sown for small revolutionary movements that were later to lead the nation into a disastrous war.[26]

Rome now moved to rule Judea (not Galilee, see below) through foreign administrators (called procurators or prefects), and things got worse. Some of these governors, such as Pontius Pilate (26–36 C.E.), were brutal, others corrupt; most were ignorant of local customs. Thus, when he took over the office, Pilate ordered his troops to bring standards with the bust of the emperor on them into Jerusalem. A large crowd of Jews gathered outside his residence in Caesarea, where they sat for five days and nights. When Pilate's soldiers finally drew their swords, the Jews fell to the ground and exclaimed that they were ready to die rather than to transgress the law. Pilate backed down and ordered that the standards be removed.

A greater threat came from the emperor himself: in about 41 C.E. it occurred to Caligula to have his statue placed in the temple of Jerusalem. A very large crowd appealed to the Syrian legate, asking that he slay them first. The legate hesitated; the problem was solved when the report arrived that Caligula had been assassinated.

Rome governed Judea (and later Galilee) remotely, content with the collection of tribute and the maintenance of stable borders. Palestine was not colonialized (until in the aftermath of the Bar Kokhba revolt, 132–135 C.E.): Jewish cities were not repopulated by Roman settlers nor was Jewish farmland given to veterans.[27] The prefect resided in Caesarea and utilized local aristocrats, especially the high priest, who also presided over a council (the Sanhedrin); the day-to-day control of Judea was in his hands. Towns and villages were run as they had always been: by a small group of elders, some of whom served as magistrates. During major festivals the prefect came to Jerusalem with troops to ensure that the crowds did not get out of hand. The Feast of Passover in particular was a potential source of trouble, as it reminded people of the liberation of their ancestors from the grip of another superpower in bygone times—the exodus out of Egypt.

Although the possibility of serious trouble was always there, Palestine was not in Jesus' time (contrary to a common view) constantly on the edge of revolt. "Foreign rule was not judged bad by everyone all the time."[28] Many preferred the rule of a distant empire with its guarantee of certain stability to the rule of a despot closer at hand.[29] Cooperation with Rome was beneficial for the aristocracy concerned with its possessions; the priestly elite were willing to make compromises,


Lyon
Adriatic Sea
ILLYRICUM
Corsica
Rome
Ostia
THRACE
MACEDONIA
Philippi
Pompeii
Sardinia
Tyrrhenian Sea
Thessalonica
Aegean Sea
Athens
Cenchreae
Delphi
Corinth
Sicily
Hippo
Carthage
Olympia
Epidauros
ACHAIA
Fair Havens
Mediterranean
Cyrene
Lepis Magna
CYRENAICA
AFRICA
LIBYA
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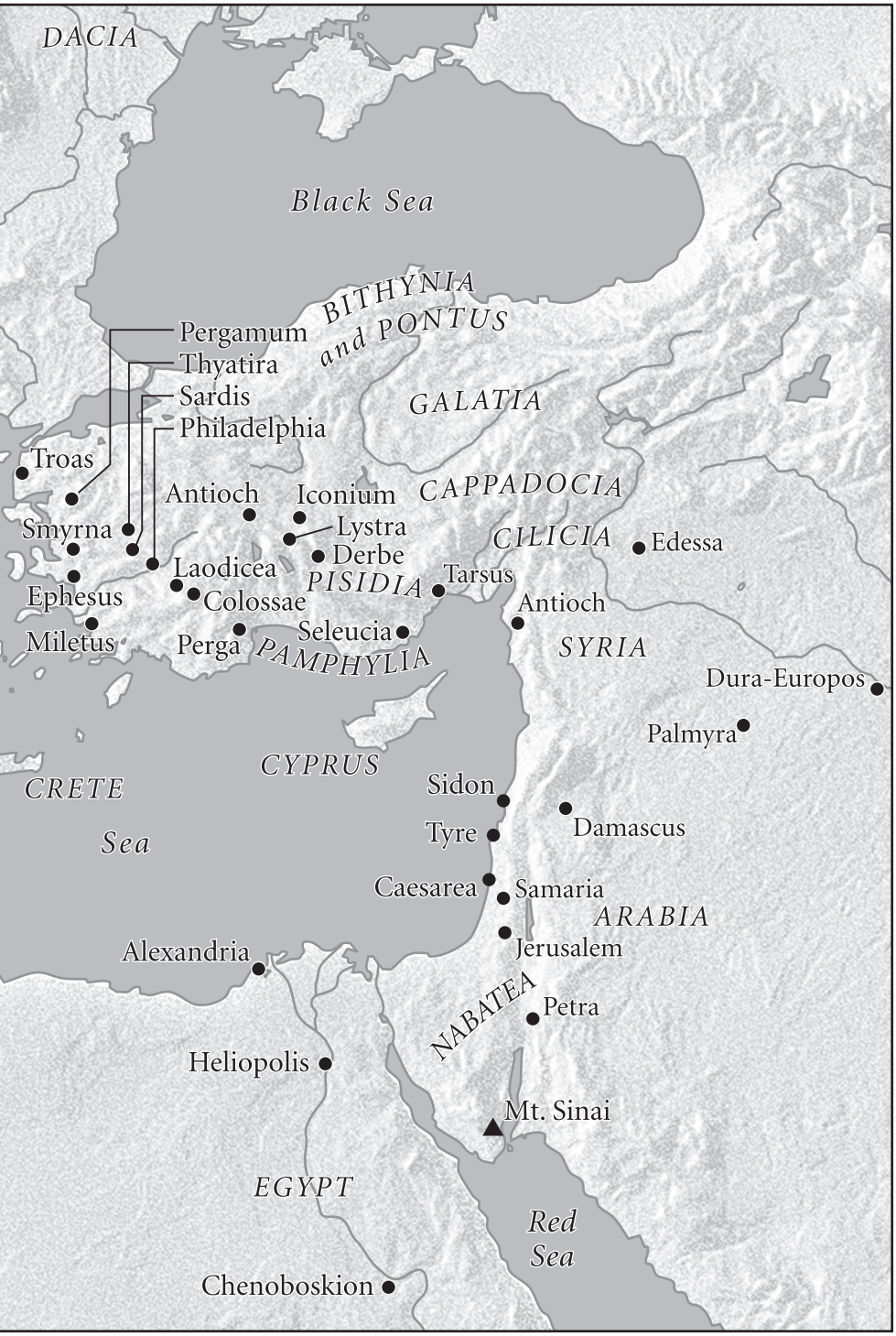
300 Miles




1.2 The Mediterranean environment of early Christianity

such as arranging a daily sacrifice in the temple for the welfare of the emperor and the Roman nation. The Jewish historian Josephus, though biased, may nevertheless be correct in his claim that even the majority were prepared to be obedient to Rome. They felt that "fighting against Rome was foolish at best and sinful at worst."[30] God would redeem Israel, but Israel could do nothing to hasten the appointed time (a point once made by Jeremiah and advanced after the war by Josephus). The dominant political stance of the Jews both in the land of Israel and in the Diaspora was accommodation: Jews must support the state until God sees fit to redeem them.[31] It was religious ideals more than a response to economic, political, or social injustice that spurred Jews to acts of resistance. When, in the early 40s, Jewish peasants neglected their farms and were willing to die, this was not because of the exploitation of the land or the economic injustice imposed by the wealthy, but in protest over Caligula's plan to erect a statue of himself in the temple. A small minority was prepared to engage in an armed fight against the Romans.

### *Galilee*

In Galilee in Jesus' time, Herod Antipas was as independent as his father had been. There was no official Roman presence; it is unwarranted to speak of "Roman occupation" in Galilee in the first century (the second century is a different matter).[32] It would have been quite exceptional for Rome to station troops in a client king's territory.[33] The troops in Galilee were those of Antipas, and the taxes collected went to him (though he paid tribute to Rome). By Antipas's time, Galilee had become "a relatively peaceful region."[34] The focus of Jewish anti-Roman activity was in Judea; the Sicarii (see below) concentrated their terrorist activity in Jerusalem.[35]

It has been common among New Testament scholars to posit a profound cultural and religious difference between Judea and Galilee; it is often held that Gentiles were numerous, perhaps even in the majority, in the Galilee of Jesus' day.[36] It is also claimed that Galilee was thoroughly suffused with Greco-Roman culture, an assumption based largely on a particular interpretation of archaeological remains. This picture of Galilee has played a prominent role in recent research on Jesus and on the putative source of his sayings known as "Q";[37] it has produced images of Jesus as a Cynic-like social critic[38] and of members of the Q community (increasingly located in Galilee) as a "multiethnic, multicultural mix."[39]

This picture of a hellenized Galilee can be challenged. According to Mark Chancey, it exists "despite the evidence, not because of it."[40] Chancey's thorough surveys show that the image that results "from an integration of information provided by Josephus and the Gospels with the discoveries of modern excavations is entirely different."[41] Gentiles were a small segment of the populace, even in Sepphoris (in remarkable contrast to cities in the neighboring areas such as Caesarea Maritima, Ptolemais, or Paneas);[42] the vast majority of the archaeological finds that suggest Gentile presence or Greco-Roman cultural influence comes from later periods (a turn took place when a Roman legion, with support personnel, arrived in Galilee c. 120 C.E.).[43] In the first century, Galilee was still almost wholly Jewish.[44] On the whole, the populace seems to have shared the common Jewish concerns: circumcision, Sabbath observance, purity, and loyalty to the Jerusalem temple. It is unwarranted to posit (though this is often done) a widespread Galilean antipathy to the temple.[45]

Many assume that Jesus' world faced a severe social and economic crisis: that "institutionalized

injustices" caused by the Romans and the Jewish aristocracy—double taxation, heavy indebtedness and loss of land—made the life of the small landholders miserable.[46] Others emphasize that while the situation was bad, it should not be exaggerated.[47] The burden of taxation was heavy, but hardly excessive by the standards of the day.[48] "What was *peculiar* to the situation was not taxation and a hard-pressed peasantry, but the Jewish combination of theology and patriotism."[49]

The topic remains controversial. For the present purpose it is enough to note that there were in any case a number of poor people whose life conditions were harsh, even if Jewish farmers were "by no means at the point of destitution."[50] All people in the countryside could not be farmers; inevitably there were numerous landless people, as the parcels of land divided among his sons after the death of a farmer quickly became too small to support a family. Like his father, Antipas took care of unemployment through big building projects, and for quite some time the *pax Romana* even permitted him "to control a strong economy." This began to change toward the end of his rule when the building program was completed and Antipas himself entered a period of political instability. Then the rural areas would have experienced a changed economic situation, "an atmosphere of perceived if not real decline in the standard of living," resulting in increasing hostility on the part of the peasants toward the wealthy and powerful.[51]

### *Toward Disaster*

Herod's grandson Agrippa was given the old territories of Antipas, when his personal friend Caligula was made emperor. After Caligula's death, the new emperor Claudius made Agrippa king of Judea, and from 41 to 44 C.E. he ruled over a territory comparable to that of Herod the Great. After his early death, however, Judea became once again a province subject to Roman governors. The incompetent administration of the latter eventually led to a catastrophe.

The repressive administration of a new governor, Fadus, triggered a major protest action. A "popular prophet" called Theudas persuaded a large number of people to follow him to the Jordan River, expecting him to divide the waters in two (a symbolic act recalling earlier acts of liberation by Moses at the Red Sea or Joshua at the Jordan). The governor had them attacked and slain. A decade later, during the governorship of Felix, another prophet known as "the Egyptian" headed with a mass of people for the Mount of Olives, promising to make the walls of Jerusalem fall down at his mere command (thus repeating the miracle of Jericho in Joshua's time). Felix arranged a massacre (the Egyptian managed to flee). Both incidents seem to have been cases of unarmed rebellion, based on the expectation that God himself would intervene as of old.[52]

A sacrilegious act—taking money from the temple treasury—by one governor, Gessius Florus, led to public protests. These were followed by a massacre and crucifixions—and soon a revolt, first signaled by cancellation of the sacrifice for the emperor, broke out in 66 C.E. Other causes, such as ethnic tensions between Jews and Gentiles in the country, economic problems,[53] and general social unrest, played a part. The majority might have preferred the status quo, tolerating any inconvenience it entailed, but the zeal of the self-appointed revolt leaders from the ranks of the Sicarii and the Zealots (see below) could not be restrained. And in a critical situation their zeal could easily become contagious, for "Jewish memory of their free and autonomous past, suitably embroidered and idealized,

was a constant reminder of how much below that model state was their present situation. . . . Religious beliefs and expectations were clearly a prime mover behind the revolt when it came."[54]

The Jews had some initial success, but they were unable to form a united front and spent much of their time fighting one another. The revolt came to a disastrous end that threatened the very survival of Judaism: Jerusalem was sacked and the temple burned in 70 C.E.

These events marked the end of an era, but more trouble was to come. A series of revolts broke out in 115–117 in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Cyprus, caused by the political tension between Jews and Gentiles and fueled by messianic speculations. There was much bloodshed; many Jewish communities were destroyed. A last insurrection took place in 132–135 in Judea. Its leader, Bar Kokhba, had messianic pretensions and was apparently supported mainly by the landless poor in Judea. The outcome was deplorable: Jerusalem was turned into a Roman city, renamed Aelia Capitolina, which Jews were not allowed to enter. On the temple site a pagan cult was set up; circumcision and other Jewish practices were forbidden.[55]

## Jewish Religion

Judaism, like other ancient religions, was based on shared practice (rather than doctrinal theology). The main religious institution was the

1.3 The Roman army taking the spoils from the Temple in Jerusalem. Full-size cast of the bas-relief on the Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum. Museo della Civilta Romana, Rome. Photo: © Vanni/Art Resource, NY.

1.4 Synagogue ruins from Capernaum, second century C.E. Photo: Marshall Johnson.

temple of Jerusalem, and the main activity that took place there was animal sacrifice. There were daily, weekly, and monthly sacrifices, and others at the major festivals. If a person wanted to seek atonement for a trespass or express his gratitude for blessings, he brought a sacrifice. Sacrifice was no empty ritual; the act was suffused with deep religious symbolism. Possibly most male Jews in the land of Israel came to the temple at least once a year. During festivals, temple worship was a social occasion, because much of the meat derived from the individual worshiper's sacrifice of quadrupeds went to the person who brought it and was consumed by him along with family and friends.

The priests were also obliged to teach the Torah to the people, although it is not clear how they did this; there may have been public readings of the law.[56] The temple served as a place of prayer, too, and at some point prayer had become part of its daily liturgy (cf. Acts 3:1).[57] The Ten Commandments and the Shema (the confession "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone," based on Deut. 6:4) were recited; the nucleus of the *Shemone Esreh*, the "Eighteen Benedictions" (which bear similarity to the Lord's Prayer) also derives from Second Temple times.

By the first century it had become common to gather for worship on the Sabbath in a *synagogue* (the term means "gathering" and, by extension, a place of gathering).[58] Reading and interpreting the Torah was the focus of these meetings. The synagogues had other functions, too, as meetinghouses for social and administrative purposes. For Palestine one may have to distinguish between the synagogues as public

assemblies on one hand and as "semi-public" associations on the other,[59] even though the reading and teaching of the Torah had a prominent position in both.[60] The latter type had been inspired through influences from the Diaspora, where synagogues had been organized after the model of the voluntary associations (collegia) of the Greco-Roman world (and were regarded as such clubs by the authorities). In the Diaspora the synagogues served to mark out Jewish identity and to strengthen group cohesion.

1.5 Moses reading the Law. Fresco, c. 239 C.E. Synagogue, Dura Europos, Syria.
Photo: © Art Resource, NY.

Independently of where they gained their knowledge (whether at the temple, in a synagogue, or perhaps at home), it is clear that Jews had access to the Torah in one form or another. "Writings from many different quarters show a knowledge of the law and an intense interest in understanding and interpreting it." The same applies to other books of the Hebrew Bible. The written word and its interpretation were very important even while the temple stood.[61]

Jewish identity in the time of the Second Temple was based on the notion of common ancestry and the concepts of election and covenant. God had chosen Israel to do his will; he had made a covenant with the people and set forth its terms in the Torah ("guidance," commonly rendered as "law").[62] Being Jewish was understood to consist in responding to God's call by faithfully obeying these commandments; the designation "covenantal nomism," coined by E. P. Sanders (see below p. 155), aptly characterizes the common denominator of the ideology of the various Jewish groups, all their differences notwithstanding. For differences there were; diverse groups could engage in bitter debates on the right interpretation and practical application of the Torah. In view of such inner-Jewish polemics, Jacob Neusner and others prefer to speak of "Judaisms" in the plural.[63] Yet such usage places too much emphasis on the language of insiders[64] keen on enhancing the social identity of their group by maximizing the differences between the in-group and relative out-groups.[65] In comparison with the outside Gentile world, the Jewish groups have so much in common that it is reasonable to speak, now as before, of a common Jewish identity that

included, and mostly tolerated, variation. Different groups were united on a social level because they held to distinct convictions and practices that marked the Jews off from other people.[66] The most prominent of such identity markers were the abstention from idolatry, circumcision, food laws, and the observance of the Sabbath.

The Jews "saw themselves as the heirs and continuators of the people of preexilic Israel"; they also felt, despite all cultural and political differences, an affinity for fellow Jews throughout the world (a feeling normal for minority groups then and now). "This self-perception manifested itself especially in the relations of Diaspora Jewry to the land of Israel and the temple." Diaspora Jews responded positively to the efforts of the Hasmoneans and Herod the Great to obligate every Jew to contribute one half shekel

1.6 Scale model of Jerusalem and the Second Temple at the time of King Herod the Great. The picture shows the temple compound. Holy Land Hotel, Jerusalem. Photo: © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

to the temple of Jerusalem every year; by Herodian times at the latest, they also streamed in the thousands to Jerusalem to participate in the festival rituals of the temple.[67]

### *Groups*

Certain groups stood out from "common Judaism"[68] through their lifestyles and particular beliefs. Josephus singles out the groups of Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes, which he represents as equivalents to the philosophical schools known to his Greek and Roman readers. The two first groups loom large also in the Christian Gospels. The Essenes are (strangely enough) absent from the New Testament texts, but their putative connection with the Dead Sea Scrolls has made them play an important part in any construction of the context of early Christianity.

We are not well informed about the Sadducees. A connection with the priestly aristocracy is very probable (the name is derived from Zadok, the alleged ancestor of the high-priestly family), but one cannot take for granted that all Sadducees were either wealthy or associated with the priesthood.[69] The Sadducees seem to have maintained conservative theological views (recognizing only the Pentateuch as authoritative scripture?), denying the relatively recent idea of resurrection. They have a bad reputation even in Jewish tradition, but there is no real evidence that they were corrupt. According to Josephus, they were less lenient than the Pharisees. Similarly, Acts 4–5 depicts them as the chief persecutors of the early Christian movement, while a Pharisee, Gamaliel, argues for leniency. In times of crisis the high priesthood found itself in a difficult position between the Romans and the people. "The Romans expected not only the high priest, but also the aristocrats in general to control the populace and to maintain order. The aristocrats did this with fair success, and the populace was generally willing to heed them."[70]

The Pharisees were a lay movement keen on studying the law. The nature of the movement is highly controversial in scholarship.[71] The Pharisees have had an extraordinarily bad press as hypocrites in Christian circles, due to the polemical caricatures drawn of them in the Gospels, particularly in the Gospel of Matthew. On the whole, however, there is no reason to doubt their sincerity. They were "known for the precision with which they interpreted the law and the strictness with which they kept it."[72] They emphasized the responsibility of each individual in the hope that every Jew could apply the decrees of the Torah in his or her own life.

In general, the Pharisees seem to have shared common Jewish religious ideas. Belief in resurrection set them apart from the Sadducees, but resurrection (though a relatively new doctrine) was not a Pharisaic invention; by the first century C.E. it was already quite popular. It is more noteworthy that the Pharisees developed a substantial body of nonbiblical "traditions of the fathers" about how to observe the Torah.[73] Some of these traditions made observance more difficult, but others made the law less restrictive.[74] They also had significant school differences among themselves; Hillel and Shammai were two prominent teachers to whom contrary opinions on several issues are attributed in the tradition, Hillel having the reputation of being more lenient and Shammai stricter in his decisions. For the most part, the Pharisees made special rules only for themselves and did not try to force them on everybody else (although they had probably once done that during the Hasmonean period, when they had also been a political force).[75] But they were respected popular teachers who had influ-

1.7 Qumran. Photo: John Collins.

ence on the opinions of people, even though they did not have a popular following on many points of their legal program.[76]

Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the ruins of Qumran, the Essenes were known from descriptions by Josephus, Philo, and Pliny; they give the picture of a small movement (some 4,000 members) withdrawn from society and preoccupied with strict observance of the law and purity.[77] The origin of the movement lies in the dark; it may have resulted from a schism in the movement of the Devout in Hasmonean times. In light of the ancient descriptions, there are good grounds to believe that those who inhabited the Qumran site[78] were members of the Essene movement,[79] though only a small part of all Essenes could have lived at Qumran (at its largest, the site was able to accommodate a few hundred persons).

The most important documents from the large Qumran library include the following.[80] The *Rule of the Community* (1QS)[81] contains instructions concerning communal life. Extant fragments show that the *Rule* was industriously copied (not without adaptations to new circumstances),[82] which proves its importance. The *Damascus Document* (CD)[83] reports on the origins of the movement, referred to as the "new covenant in the land of Damascus" (CD 6.19), and its interpretation of the Torah. The *War Scroll*

(1QM) describes the eschatological war between the sons of light and the sons of darkness. The *Hymns* (1QH) are devoted to thanksgiving; they open a window to the piety of the group. The *Pesharim* are commentaries on biblical books, of which those on *Habakkuk* (1QpHab) and *Nahum* (4QpNah) provide hidden glimpses of the early history of the movement. The *Halakic Letter* (4QMMT) casts light on issues of legal interpretation (halakah), as does the *Temple Scroll* (11QT), in which decrees concerning the temple are in focus. Finally, the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* (4QShirShab) acquaints the reader with aspects of liturgy at Qumran.

Research on the scrolls is at present in a state of turmoil. Until quite recently it was customary to speak of a self-contained, independent "Qumran community" with a distinctive social and religious outlook.[84] Its early phase was connected with the "Teacher of Righteousness," a figure mentioned in some of the scrolls. He appears to have been a Zadokite priest who was persecuted by a Hasmonean "Wicked Priest." The Teacher seems to have opposed the usurpation of the high priesthood by the Hasmoneans and rejected the temple, which he considered corrupt and defiled. It used to be thought that he withdrew with a small group of supporters to the desert (Qumran), where they led a monastic life and observed a divinely revealed solar calendar, different from that used in Jerusalem.[85] They worshiped Israel's God without animal sacrifices, being themselves the embodiment of a new, pure temple (1QS 9.4-5 and elsewhere). Their strictly hierarchical lifestyle is described (it was thought) in the *Community Rule(s)* (1QS), while the life of the larger Essene movement is reflected in the *Damascus Document* (CD). This writing presupposes a town-dwelling group that was not physically isolated from the greater society; members could marry and, surprisingly enough, sacrifice in the Jerusalem temple.[86]

Recent research has cast doubt on parts of this picture. Archaeological investigation indicates that Qumran was settled only from about 100–50 B.C.E. onward[87]—too late not only for the Teacher of Righteousness to have been the founder of the settlement,[88] but even for 1QS to have been "first written for the desert community at Qumran."[89] It may not be taken for granted any more that the community (*yahad*) of which the *Community Rule* (1QS) speaks is identical with the settlement at Qumran.[90] John Collins claims that "there is no evidence that any of the scrolls were written specifically for a community that lived by the Dead Sea."[91] Experts continue to debate the issue,[92] but it seems wise at present to avoid the term "Qumran community" (found in most textbooks and studies) and speak instead of the Essene movement. Those who produced or used texts like 1QS—whether they were a large community or a small cell and whether they lived at Qumran or elsewhere—were part of this movement. In any case the beliefs and practices reflected in these texts show a distinct family resemblance both with each other and with the beliefs and practices of the Essenes as portrayed by Josephus and Philo; therefore the assumption of a common religious worldview in a broad sense still seems justified.

Central texts from Qumran reflect the ideas and ideals of people—the Essenes—who were convinced that they alone constituted the true Israel. They could trust in God's promises, whereas the mass of the people had forfeited this privilege. The Essenes were the minority chosen by God to enter his "new covenant." They pledged themselves to return to "every commandment of the law of Moses," but this total obedience also included observance of se-

cret additions to the Torah revealed to their Teacher and to the "sons of Zadok." The study of scripture was a central undertaking; a hard line was taken in the application of its laws. Members were to follow strict regulations on food and purity; they regarded even the Pharisees as compromisers ("those looking for easy interpretations": 4QpNah 1.2). Some of the texts display a sharply dualistic worldview, combined with antagonism toward outsiders. A strong end-time expectation involved an apocalyptic war between the sons of light (the Essenes) and the sons of darkness. Aided by heavenly troops, the sons of light would destroy both their Israelite enemies and the Gentiles, take control of Jerusalem (1QM), and rebuild the temple (11QT). It is claimed that the end time had actually begun; in their cultic gatherings members of the movement were already communicating with angels. They were predestined for salvation; outside the movement no salvation was possible. Some texts even refer to "everlasting hatred" toward the men of darkness (1QS 9.21).[93] On the other hand, the conviction of being chosen by God had brought about a humble sense of gratitude, "a feeling of personal unworthiness and an intense perception of God's graciousness."[94] On the whole, texts from Qumran make the impression of an intriguing combination of "internal self-absorption, fanaticism, vitriol and hatred of others, trust in God's grace, and love and devotion to him and his elect."[95]

The conviction of representing a holy remnant or the true Israel within a sinful people who had fallen away from God's covenant, which therefore no longer protects them from judgment, links the Essenes with other pious circles who likewise authored "sectarian" literature but whose social reality is unknown.[96] Among such circles, those who produced and cultivated writings connected with the name of Enoch, the mythical ancient hero who had been taken to God without having to die, stand out. The Enoch literature, which combines vivid end-time expectation (largely expressed in apocalyptic visions granted to the ancient seer)[97] and the certainty of election over against a sinful majority, forms a substantial part of the context of the Jesus movement.

The comprehensive book of *1 Enoch* has been preserved in an Ethiopic translation. It consists of several originally independent units.[98] An intriguing issue, in view of the study of early Christianity, is the dating of the so-called *Similitudes of Enoch* (*1 En.* 37–71); one's understanding of the "Son of Man" passages of the Gospels partly depends on whether one regards the *Similitudes* as pre-Christian.[99]

A similar sense of a general apostasy and need of a fresh start characterized the activity of John the Baptist, a prophet whose rugged appearance reminds one of Elijah. In the late 20s of the first century C.E., he heralded a call to repentance and offered a baptism for the remission of sins as the means of avoiding God's impending judgment.[100] Those willing to change their ways were to undergo in the Jordan a bath that symbolized (or effected?) the purification from sin and the beginning of new life. Unlike the repeated ablutions undertaken by all Jews (especially diligently by the settlers of Qumran), John's baptism was probably a once-and-for-all act, an initiation rite of sorts. John did not, however, found a community, though he was surrounded by a circle of disciples (out of which Jesus of Nazareth was to emerge). According to Josephus, Antipas feared John's ability to gather great crowds (a potential source of rebellion) and had him executed, but the movement initiated by him stayed alive for quite a while, at times making a worthy rival for the Jesus movement in some places.

All groups would have been happy with the termination of Roman rule, and many looked forward to a restoration of Israel's glory—in God's own time, with or without a Messiah. Some, however, were more impatient than others and more given to direct armed resistance. An open conflict took place in 6 C.E., when Judea became a Roman province and a census was taken. Josephus reports that one Judas, a Galilean, aided by a Pharisee called Zadok, "threw himself into the cause of rebellion" (*Ant*. 18.3-10) and started "an intrusive fourth school of philosophy." Its slogan, "No king but God!" testifies to a program designed to attack the Romans and their supporters. Josephus goes on to tell that this school "agrees in all other respects with the Pharisees except that they have a passion for liberty that is almost unconquerable." He also suggests that this Fourth Philosophy gave rise to the Sicarii ("dagger-men") in the 40s.[101] The Sicarii would conceal a dagger (*sica*) inside their clothing and among throngs stab to death those Jews who, in their opinion, had betrayed the battle for freedom (they generally avoided clashes with Romans). They were active in the first phase of the revolt of 66 C.E., but after the early death of their leader, Menahem, they retreated to the mountain fortress of Masada and were not involved further in the war. In the end they committed suicide rather than be captured by the Romans.

The Zealots fought a religiously motivated battle for freedom in the spirit of Phinehas.[102] This group first became apparent during the revolt, being active in Jerusalem before and during the siege. It consisted mostly of peasants who fled to Jerusalem from Galilee, where the Romans swept southward. The Zealots fought bravely and fanatically, and most of them perished in the battle. However, they and other related groups in Jerusalem wasted a vast amount of energy in fighting one another, rather than the Romans.

The rebellion proved disastrous for many of these groups. The Essenes seem to have been wiped out in the war. The priests and the Sadducees lost their prestige with the disappearance of the temple. The groups that grew and developed were those who had potential to continue without a functioning sacrificial cult, such as the Pharisees and the scribes (who may or may not have belonged to the Pharisees). The rabbis, who in the long run—only after several centuries, according to recent research[103]—emerged as winners, combined a concern for purity with fervor for the study of scripture.[104]

## Diaspora Judaism

As a consequence of the Babylonian exile and of migration waves in subsequent centuries, the great majority of Jews lived in the Roman period outside Palestine. Rome and Alexandria were the most important centers, but there were Jews virtually everywhere in the empire (a vast number of Jews lived in Mesopotamia). Roman authorities (largely respecting the services that some of the Jewish leaders had rendered) took a tolerant attitude, granting the Jews the right to observe their ancestral customs,[105] including freedom from civic religion and a virtual freedom from the cult of the emperor, which would have clashed with their religious principles.[106] Life in an alien environment had the effect of binding Jews closer together and strengthening their ethnic identity, but naturally they were exposed to influences from the surrounding world. Greek philosophy had a great impact on Jewish thinking in the Diaspora, for instance

on ideas of immortality and providence. Many Jewish authors (for example, Josephus) tried to present Judaism to Gentiles in an attractive light as a "philosophy." They tended to emphasize ethics and morality, suggesting that the ideal way of life recommended by Greek legislators and philosophers had been put into practice by the Jews, in fact by them alone. Such apologetics reached its peak in Philo of Alexandria, who tried to prove that the God of Judaism was very like the God of Plato and that the stories of the Bible contained hidden philosophical truths that were to be discovered through allegorical exegesis. Diaspora Judaism was to become a very important channel through which a rich treasure of Greco-Roman culture could flow into nascent Christianity.

There is no evidence for an organized Jewish mission to the Gentiles, though some individual Jews or small groups seem to have engaged in such an activity.[107] Still, several Roman authors refer to the willingness of Jews to win Gentiles to their side, if not for religious reasons then at least for political and social support; indeed, a number of Gentile sympathizers, often known as "God-fearers," showed a remarkable interest in the synagogues.[108] Most of them, shunning circumcision, did not convert and thus did not need to deny their Gods and their worship. They attended the synagogues, however, and quite a few observed some Jewish practices such as the Sabbath and some food laws.

On the other hand, the social separation of the Jews and their abstention from the public cultic ceremonies (which meant that they refused to participate in all major communal events) also raised the suspicion and sometimes the anger of their neighbors. Tensions were enhanced through the attempt of some Jewish communities to demand civic equality with their Gentile neighbors despite their rejection of major aspects of the civic life; they thereby "antagonized certain elements of the local population by demanding both tolerance and equality."[109] This resulted in several riots and bloodshed in Alexandria, Caesarea, Antioch, and in many cities of Asia Minor during the first century C.E.; a climax was reached in Alexandria and Cyrene in the uprising of 115–117 C.E.

## Jewish Writings from the Period

Apart from books that have become part of the Hebrew Bible, the most important Jewish writings from the Second Temple period (writings to which reference will often be made in subsequent chapters) include the following.[110]

### *From Palestine*

The collection known as *1 Enoch* was introduced above (p. 35). Sirach (Ben Sira, also known as Ecclesiasticus) is a book about wisdom by a Jerusalemite scribe, composed in Hebrew around 180 B.C.E. It was translated into Greek by his grandson in 132 B.C.E. The Greek version is preserved in the Septuagint; in recent times large parts of the Hebrew text have been found.

*Jubilees* (second century B.C.E.) retells the early stories of the Pentateuch from the creation to Moses, as revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai. The author shows special interest in religious festivals and sacred time. He is an adamant spokesman for the sectarian solar calendar that was used at Qumran; numerous fragments of the work have been found at Qumran, where it apparently had a scriptural status.

First Maccabees (written c. 100 B.C.E.) is an account of the Maccabean rebellion. In the *Psalms of Solomon* (first century B.C.E.) a group of devout Jews (traditionally often identified as Pharisees, sometimes as Essenes, but such labeling is precarious) reacts to the capture of Jerusalem by Romans (63 B.C.E.) and looks forward to liberation.

The *Testament of Moses*, also known as the *Assumption of Moses*, was probably written in Palestine during the first century C.E. Presented as Moses' farewell speech before his death, the work predicts in apocalyptic style the subsequent history down to the time of King Herod and his sons, the sufferings that would ensue, and God's final victory.

*Fourth Ezra*, a great apocalyptic work from the end of the first century C.E., has been preserved in a Latin translation. Faced with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, "Ezra" boldly wrestles with the question of theodicy in a series of dialogues with an angel whom he encounters in visions; another set of visions predicts the Roman rule and its overthrow by a Davidic Messiah. *Second Baruch*, preserved in Syriac, is an apocalypse from the early second century C.E. that deals with similar issues. The *Apocalypse of Abraham* (late first century C.E.?) tells of Abraham's rejection of idolatry and of his visions in which he sees the destruction of Jerusalem and the final victory of the righteous.

*Pseudo-Philo*'s *Biblical Antiquities* (first century C.E.) freely retells the history of Israel from Adam to David.[111] The *Ascension of Isaiah* is a composite work that contains comprehensive Christian additions (see below p. 66). The oldest part is a Jewish legend of the martyr's death suffered by the prophet Isaiah (*Martyrdom of Isaiah*), composed in the first century C.E. at the latest.

For the library of Qumran (the Dead Sea Scrolls) see above, p. 33–34.

### *From the Diaspora*

Tobit (c. 200 B.C.E., possibly from the eastern Diaspora) is a story about the fortunes of an exiled Jewish family in Assyria. The *Letter of Aristeas* (second century B.C.E., from Alexandria) tells the story of the origins of the Septuagint. The Wisdom of Solomon is a piece of hellenized wisdom literature, also from Alexandria (c. 100 B.C.E.).

Philo of Alexandria (early first century C.E.) was a wealthy intellectual, a Platonist Jewish philosopher who excelled in allegorical exegesis of the Septuagint. Most of his works (more than forty treatises) were preserved for posterity by Christians.[112] Philo embodies many Hellenistic-Jewish traditions on which many early Christians in the Greek-speaking world also drew; a little later, he had a direct impact on Christian intellectuals in Alexandria (Clement, Origen).

Second Maccabees (first century B.C.E.?) retells the Maccabean story for a Diaspora audience. Drawing on the same material, 4 Maccabees combines Hellenistic philosophy with Jewish piety; the philosophical exposition is clothed as a rhetorically powerful speech honoring the memory of the Maccabean martyrs. The work was probably composed in Antioch toward the end of the first century C.E.

*Joseph and Aseneth* is a story of Egyptian provenance about the conversion to Judaism of Joseph's Egyptian wife; its date could be anywhere between the second century B.C.E. and first century C.E. The *Testament of Job*, too, was composed in Egypt, in the first century either B.C.E. or C.E. A free reworking of the biblical story (Job is presented as an Egyptian king), it seems less interested in the fortunes of the Jewish nation than in individual piety. Yet another

work that probably comes from Egypt is the *Testament of Abraham* (c. 80–120 C.E.). Abraham is granted a vision of heaven and of the judgment of souls.

The *Sibylline Oracles* are predictive poems from various times, composed in Greek hexameter. The Sibyl, an aged woman uttering ecstatic prophecies, was a prominent pagan figure, and Sibylline collections were a pagan phenomenon. Nevertheless, both Jews and Christians ascribed to her inspired end-time oracles with Jewish or Christian content, and the twelve books that are now connected with her name are all either Jewish or Christian. Books 1 and 2 are a Jewish work from Phrygia (from about the turn of the era) that has been subjected to an extensive Christian redaction. Book 3 was written in Egypt in a Jewish community that could, surprisingly enough, hail a Ptolemaic king as a savior. The earliest part of the work dates from the second century B.C.E., the latest probably from the end of the first century C.E. Book 4, from the late first century C.E., presumably comes from Jewish baptist circles. Book 5 reflects the atmosphere that fostered the Jewish revolt in the Diaspora in 115 C.E.

The writings of Flavius Josephus, the only Jewish historian whose works are extant to any degree worth mentioning, are an indispensable (though obviously tendentious) source for Jewish history during the first century C.E. He wrote (c. 75–79 C.E.) in Rome an account of the *Jewish War* (abbreviated *B.J.*), in which he had himself been involved in Galilee as a general; he was captured by Vespasian and during the siege of Jerusalem rendered service to the Romans. Josephus absolves Roman leadership from blame for the destruction of the city and places the guilt on the shoulders of the revolutionary leaders, described as tyrannical brigands. In a polemical autobiography (*Life*) he later defends his actions against the attacks of a rival historian. The *Jewish Antiquities* (abbreviated *Ant.*) tells the story of his people from the creation of the world to the eve of the Roman war, emphasizing divine providence. Although the account of the postbiblical times is very uneven, it is an important source for a generally poorly attested period. An apologetic and polemical tract, *Against Apion*, is designed to refute the slanders of an anti-Jewish Alexandrian author; it amounts to a panegyric for Jewish people and Jewish tradition.[113]

### *Uncertain Provenance*

The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* is a collection of addresses given by each of the sons of Jacob on their deathbeds to their descendants, containing mainly ethical exhortation and eschatological promises. Much of the exhortatory material is "virtually timeless and could have been composed by either Jew or Christian anywhere in the Hellenistic and Roman eras," and there is "no evidence to tie the framework of the *Test. 12 Patr.* to any specific location."[114] The collection (whose textual history is quite complicated) is mostly considered an originally Jewish work, in itself a conglomerate of successive layers, which was later subjected to Christian revision(s) (see below, p. 66). However, the issue of provenance is highly controversial.

*Second Enoch* is an apocalypse, preserved in a Slavonic version, whose date and provenance are quite uncertain. It is a story about Enoch and his descendants; a large part describes Enoch's journey through the seven heavens.

### *Rabbinic Literature*

The vast corpus of rabbinic literature is obviously relevant to our purposes, but difficult to use, as it contains material from different periods, and it is

hard to trace the oldest layers that may go back to the first and early second century C.E. The earliest part, the Mishnah ("repetition" or "teaching"), was collected and edited around 200 C.E. It may be characterized as an anthology of discussions by various legal authorities.[115] The Mishnah forms the core of the much larger collection of the two (Palestinian and Babylonian) Talmuds ("teaching"). Rabbinic material is also available in the exegetical and narrative Midrash ("exposition") collections. The dating of the interpretive traditions found in the Targums (Aramaic translations of the texts of Hebrew Bible, based on the practice of translating the biblical lections in synagogue services)[116] is controversial, and the usefulness of the Targums in reconstructing Second Temple Judaism is problematic.[117]

It used to be thought that the rabbinic literature stands in direct continuity to the traditions of the Pharisees, but the assumed connection is not without problems. With due caution, the rabbinic literature, too, can (and must) be used in the efforts to create a context for the nascent movement of the followers of Jesus.