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Introduction

EVERY DAY, WE all interact with the world around us in endless ways. We make choices about where we go, what we do, and whom we talk to and how, as well as the places we avoid and the actions we refrain from doing. Sometimes these choices affect us dramatically and alter our lives irrevocably. Most of these judgments, however, are so mundane we don't even think about them. A wide range of principles and perceptions conditions these infinite decisions. We are aware of some of these, while others loom silently in the background, propelling or impeding: ideology, psychology, history, politics, religion, and superstition, all play a role in determining our path. The interminable interactions they lead to are what life consists of. Little by little, person by person, day by day, they mold the experiences and propel the ideas that shape one's existence. Defined broadly, this system—together with its representations in literature, art, and other media—is human culture.

This book dwells on one tiny slice of those cultural interactions—somewhat surprising, seemingly contradictory, and long forgotten. In it, I tell the story of ancient Jews and how they engaged with the Roman public bathhouses that were ubiquitous in their world. It offers a study about cultural interaction in the Roman Mediterranean. On one side stand the Jews, a loosely organized, culturally variegated minority group, living in widely dispersed communities throughout the Mediterranean basin and beyond and defined by their long-established heritage and way of life, anchored in the texts we now call the Hebrew Bible.[1] On the other side rest the mores of the ruling power, the Romans, referred to already in antiquity by the elusive category *romanitas*. While no clear definition ever existed about what it meant to be Roman, a cluster of concepts, behaviors, images, and institutions—shifting in emphasis and extent over time

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and place and owing much to the Graeco-Hellenistic legacy that preceded them—came to represent Roman identity, lifestyle, and self-image.[2] How did these two cultural systems, Judaism and *romanitas*, and the people who lived by them engage? Were they utterly distinct entities eyeing each other from across the town square, ancient versions of the Sharks and the Jets, deciding whether to fight or keep the peace? Or were their daily lives enmeshed in ways big and small, a model of intercultural cooperation, albeit uneasy at times? Or is there another, totally different model that better describes their relationship? Modern scholars have long probed and debated this question, whose implications are vast, at the very heart of the evolution of Western civilization.

Frequently, the adoption of Roman habits and norms by minorities subsumed under the effective yet methodologically problematic rubric of "Romanization."[3] The current book revisits and reexamines the cultural encounter between Jews and *romanitas* as it took shape in one particular space, the Roman public bathhouse, with special attention to the texts known collectively as rabbinic literature. Most of the figures discussed in this book lived in the Roman province of Judaea, known since the early second century CE as Syria Palaestina (or, in short, throughout this book, Palestine). So, essentially, this book asks: Were the Jewish residents of Judaea/Palestine Romanized, and if so, to what extent, and what model can explain this process and their experiences?

I use the Roman bathhouse as a laboratory to tease out, reconsider, and test the attitudes of the Jews of antiquity toward the Graeco-Roman world. To carry out this task, I utilize the full gamut of available sources—literary, documentary, archaeological, and artistic, both Jewish and not—with special attention and focus on rabbinic literature. I follow some ancient Jews as they patronized the bathhouse, walking in their footsteps and seeing through their eyes. What did they see? What did they do? How did they feel about it? I document their pleasures, examine their anxieties and concerns (occasionally what modern historians imagined to be their concerns), and reconstruct their thoughts, emotions, and convictions about the bathhouse and the activities that took place there. Because the bathhouse was integral to Roman culture, my exploration intersects with a vast swath of topics, from the technology of heating the bath water to the social hierarchies of Roman life, and from nudity and sex to sculpture and magic.[4] All this allows me to reassess the nature of the cultural encounter between Jews and the Roman way of life and to offer a new model to understand it, which I label "filtered absorption."

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Why Bathhouses?

The Roman public bathhouse was a unique institution. It housed and boldly displayed what were arguably the most popular leisure activities in the Roman world. In sprawling cities and small villages, in an empire that extended from modern England and Spain to Egypt and Iraq, people from all walks of life attended the bathhouse on a daily basis. Other structures and spaces were much less inclusive. Only members of a certain religion and followers of a particular god or goddess visited and worshipped at the temples associated with their divinity; similarly, other than occasional visitors and sympathizers, only Jews attended the synagogue, and only those newfangled people called Christians went to church. Places of entertainment such as theaters and hippodromes, although very popular, did not operate daily, and the cost to erect and maintain them precluded many localities, certainly villages but also small cities, from building them altogether. Similarly, only buyers and sellers visited the markets, and other municipal structures, such as the courts, housed in the civic basilicas, served specific needs. The public bathhouse, on the other hand, attracted everyone, and even the smallest of villages spared no effort to build them. Wealthy and poor, prominent citizens and ordinary, men, women, and children, and their household slaves, all came in droves, usually every day. The Jews were no different.

Furthermore, no other space embodied so many different features of the Roman way of life (the *romanitas*): everything from engineering and architecture to food and fashion, from sculpture to sports, from nudity and sex to medicine and magic, to name just a few. Ideas about the human body, about science and metaphysics, about life and its carnal and spiritual pleasures, as well as constructs about fate, aesthetics, social hierarchy, and imperialism, all manifested themselves in the physical environment and the daily experience of the baths. If you want to examine the ways people interacted with each other, and, in particular, how a segment of society engaged with the norms and ways of the Romans, the public bathhouse offers an ideal place, a laboratory of sorts, to carry out this investigation.

Roman bathhouses are also very well documented. Graeco-Roman authors writing in different literary genres and in different locales mention bathhouses time and again. In addition, archaeologists have excavated and studied hundreds of bathing facilities all over the Mediterranean, providing a wealth of information. Researchers have also deciphered hundreds of inscriptions and papyri that refer to bathhouses, highlighting many aspects of their operation and the conduct of people there. During the

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past decades, great efforts have been made to investigate this rich tapestry of data: archaeologists have organized and dissected the findings from excavations, illuminating the distribution, architecture, and layout of the buildings, as well as the engineering and technological mechanisms that enabled bathhouses to function; literary scholars, social historians, and anthropologists have studied the wide range of behavior that took place at the baths, as well as the imagery of the place and its symbolism in literature and art.[5] The present book owes a great debt to this work, as it laid the foundation for the current study about the Jews and their engagement with the baths, and by extension their attitudes toward Roman culture.

However, most modern studies have neglected one particularly large group of ancient sources that speaks volumes about the Roman baths, in great detail, namely rabbinic literature. This huge corpus of ancient Jewish texts, indeed, the largest that survived from Roman times, frequently alludes to public bathhouses: over five hundred references to the baths and associated activities, which makes the bathhouse the best represented Roman institution in rabbinic material! Modern investigators of bathhouses have mostly ignored this treasure trove of information, partially because of linguistic obstacles—rabbinic texts generally speak Aramaic and Hebrew, languages outside the sphere of most classical experts—and also because of the entrenched misconception that the Jews in general and the rabbis (the authors of this literature) in particular were an isolated and detached element in the Roman world. Furthermore, as I show in great detail in chapters 3 and 4, when modern scholars have attempted to use rabbinic material, even if only sporadically, they have gotten the picture mostly wrong.

A major goal of this book is to break down the long-standing barriers that divide Rabbinics from Classics and Archaeology to both demonstrate how knowledge of classics and archaeology is necessary for the study and understanding of rabbinic material and clearly show the added value that rabbinic material brings to the study of Roman antiquity and its institutions.[6] Studying the Jews in the Roman bathhouse requires placing excerpts from rabbinic literature in direct dialogue with Graeco-Roman texts and with the archaeological and documentary record. This opens a plethora of exciting possibilities. After all, ancient people living their lives, side by side, throughout the Roman Mediterranean—Greek, Roman, Jewish—produced these ancient sources and they naturally relate to each other on many levels. Each group of sources sheds new light on the other, and age-old questions—namely, the relationship between Jews and their Graeco-Roman neighbors—beg for reexamination when seen through the perspective of the bathhouse.

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At the same time, this reshuffling of our source material offers other benefits. Rabbinic literature, if properly studied, uniquely enables modern classicists and archaeologists to communicate with a segment of the Roman world that is rarely heard in its own voice and on its own terms. One of the central obstacles to understanding Roman civilization is the absence of sources from the empire's periphery. What do we know about the Celts, about the Palmyrians or other Syrians, and the Arabs, or about the Gallic and German tribes that settled in and out of the empire, other than what Roman authors, such as Julius Caesar or Tacitus, or an occasional local writer who embraced Graeco-Roman ways such as Lucian in Syria and Cyprian in North Africa, as well as Josephus in Judaea, tell us about them? Searching for authentic indigenous voices, we are normally left with archaeology, an occasional inscription (papyri where they are available), and some artistic depictions. In contrast, rabbinic literature offers thousands of pages written by local provincial residents of the Roman world in their own language and in their own words. It can add an abundance of information to elaborate and nuance our understanding of life in this era.

These possibilities have long been recognized by scholars studying rabbinic material in its Graeco-Roman context. The line of inquiry that pays attention to archaeology and brings rabbinic material into conversation with its Graeco-Roman surroundings began with Samuel Krauss in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Hungary and Austria. His monumental work, *Talmudische Archäologie* (published 1910–12), remains the entry point for anyone approaching this subject. The great talmudist Saul Lieberman carried on after Krauss, and this direction of research came to full fruition in the work of my teacher Lee Levine at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and in some of the projects spearheaded by Peter Schäfer in Germany and the United States.[7] The current book continues on the path that these scholars and their students have paved. When it comes to the institution of the Roman bathhouse and its appearance in rabbinic texts, here too my book does not operate in a vacuum. Over the past century and a half, several scholars have addressed this topic, chief among them Krauss himself, who devoted long and at times insightful discussions to this place.[8] Earlier scholars, however, could not benefit from the extensive archaeological data that has only become available in the last few decades, and even today, although offering valuable insights at times, scholars seem to be limited by insufficient training in classics and archaeology or misguided by anachronistic misconceptions about the rabbis and Jews. Throughout the current book—the first full-length monograph

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devoted to Jews and Roman bathhouses—I refer to these earlier studies, use them where appropriate, take issue with them, and reject their conclusions when necessary. I too have studied and written extensively about bathhouses and expect future scholars to disagree with me. Indeed, while writing the current book I found that some of my early arguments and conclusions required adjustment and at times rejection altogether.[9] Such is the nature of scholarship.

Jews and Graeco-Roman Culture

Western civilization shapes much of our way of life today. At its core, even two millennia later, stands the relationship between ancient Judaism (and its later manifestation in Christianity) and Graeco (sometimes also called Hellenistic) Roman norms. Generally speaking, the democracies of North America and Europe have embraced, although in a modified form, the legacies of the Greeks and the Romans—their philosophy and copious literature, their statecraft, government, and conventions about art, architecture, and aesthetics. They have then infused this rich tapestry with ideas, morality, and religious principles adopted from the biblical traditions of the Jews and the Christians. Naturally, endless studies, debates, and discussions explore both components of this heritage—the Graeco-Roman and the Judaeo-Christian—and the confluence between them.

What are the historical roots and what is the nature of this Judaeo-Graeco-Roman hybrid? Judaism came into the orbit of the Greeks with the conquests of Alexander the Great in the early fourth century BCE. In the next thousand years or so—until Islam's emergence in the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa during the seventh century CE—Jews became the largest, and the most widespread, minority in the Graeco-Roman realm, with the Jewish communities of Persia remaining outside this dominion. According to some estimates Jews comprised 10 percent of the Roman Empire's population.[10] For convenience and structure, throughout this book I divide those thousand years into the following four periods: (1) Hellenistic—from the Greek conquest of Alexander to the arrival of the Romans in Judaea under Pompey in 63 BCE; (2) Early Roman—from 63 BCE to the destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE; (3) the High Empire—from 70 CE to rise of Diocletian in 284; and (4) the Late Empire—from 284 to the Arab conquests in the seventh century. The High and Late Empires, the periods during which public bathhouses proliferated and rabbinic literature produced, stand at the core of the current book.

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The encounter between the Jews (if one can even speak of them as one group) and the Roman ruling powers fluctuated between volatility, even violent confrontations at times, and long durations of peaceful and accommodating relations. When Christianity took the helm of the empire in the fourth century CE, communities and individuals throughout the Roman world inherited and then gradually adopted the ideas and mores embedded in ancient Jewish tradition, molding and reshaping them in the process. In the long run a new civilization replaced the old Roman way of life. It has been given many names and taken a variety of forms—medieval, Catholic, Byzantine, to name a few—and, through this long and tortuous process, it came to shape the modern era in which we live.

Because ancient Judaism played a major role in the foundation of our own world, everyone seems eager to explore its origin and development: modern Jews see ancient Jews as their ancestors; Christians seek their roots in ancient Jewish culture; and those cherishing the values of classical antiquity wish to clarify the role of Jews in Roman society. Acknowledging the importance of the issue, however, researchers regularly complain about the scarcity of sources that shed light on it.[11] At the same time they disagree on almost every aspect of it. One group of recent studies champions the argument promoted by Steve Mason and accepted by (too) many that Judaism, as a coherent ethnic and cultural entity, did not exist in the Hellenistic and Early Roman periods. Mason suggests that we should instead use the term "Judaeans," that is, the citizens (even if not the actual residents) of Judaea—a region in the eastern Mediterranean (somewhat but not completely geographically equivalent with modern Israel) where many, but far from all, Jews resided. Other researchers, chief among them the late Jacob Neusner, believe that in antiquity not one form of Judaism existed but rather many, identifying numerous Judaisms and associating each with different ancient texts, which supposedly present a distinct and coherent cluster of ideas and practices that set it apart from other forms of Judaism. These scholars have argued for a Hellenistic Judaism, Enochic Judaism, and later Rabbinic Judaism, to name a few. At the later end of the chronological spectrum, another influential scholar, Seth Schwartz, argued that whereas Judaism flourished in the Early Roman period, during the High and Late Empires it practically evaporated and ceased to exist, only to reemerge from the dead with the rise of Christianity in the fourth century CE. A fourth argument, championed by the vocal and very popular scholar Daniel Boyarin, claims that Judaism never existed in antiquity as a religion or a coherent category of identity and only took shape with the development of Christianity.[12] If these fantastic constructs

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cause the reader to raise an eyebrow, they should. They are mostly remnants of the overly skeptical and speculative scholarly agenda that took shape in the second half of the twentieth century (itself a reaction to the overly positivistic first half of the century). They raise interesting questions but rely too much on postmodern, theoretical modes of thinking and fail, at least in the eyes of this writer, to make a convincing case.[13]

Surprisingly, while these modern scholars disagree about the nature of the Jews in antiquity, many (although not all) agree that, whoever they were, the Jews opposed the Roman (and earlier Hellenistic) outlook on life and rejected its standards and customs. Many modern scholars typically emphasize that despite mutual influence and cross-fertilization, Judaism and Hellenism, and later, Roman culture, harbored inherent tension, suspicion, and antagonism toward one another, leading to resentment and apprehension, and often degenerating into violence and bloodshed. According to this understanding, ancient Jewish communities lived in what many modern investigators portray as their own bubble (sometimes described as their own turf) and held themselves apart from the larger cultural landscape, rejecting the ties that bound most of the other residents in the Hellenistic and then the Roman world. From that Archimedean point, the imagined ontological exterior of classical Roman civilization, Jews despised Hellenism and resisted the process of Romanization, *romanitas*, at times vigorously. They strove to distance themselves from what they viewed as foreign manners and firmly maintained their unique and exclusive forms of existence. In this reconstruction, scholars acknowledge that some ancient Jews, those living in the Diaspora, for example (referring to the millions of Jews living outside Judaea/Palestine), were seduced by the rival lifestyle and became Hellenized, speaking Greek and embracing many of the customs of their neighbors; they were "influenced" by the trappings of an adversarial foe. But those were deviations from the norm, the exception that proved the rule. The ancient Jews are seen as a nation dwelling alone, walled in by their own set of beliefs and guided by an exclusionary practical apparatus.

For centuries this was the prevailing view, championed as recently as 2008 in the best-selling monograph by the British historian Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations*. In 1990, on the other side of the British Channel, the leading French scholar on the topic, Mireille Hadas-Lebel, published her now classic tome called *Jérusalem contre Rome*, reissued in 2012. The titles say it all. Both authors present a panoramic tour of the Roman world and the Jews in it, aiming to show that in almost every detail of life Judaism conflicted with Roman

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mores. When it comes to the rabbis, most scholars hold the same view, summarized succinctly by Seth Schwartz: "The rabbis rejected Roman values."[14] Consequently, the paradigm of the great divide between Jews and Roman culture prevails in countless studies and textbooks alike.[15]

To be sure, over the years more than a few scholars voiced their dissent, to some extent or another, from this mainstream model, myself included. The current book joins these recent attempts (and some, like Lee Levine's work, not so recent) to contest the standard currencies of understanding by placing the Jews and their way of life as an integral part of the Roman world.[16] But unlike other works that focus on intellectual, literary, religious, or (less often) social matters, my study locates the entire discussion within the confines of a physical space—the bathhouse—and thus brings into the discussion analytical tools that emerge from the discipline of archaeology. It uses the colorful and multifaceted environment of the public baths to illuminate the place of Jews in the Roman world. In the following chapters I reconstruct the cultural experience of (at least some) Jews in the bathhouse of the Roman Mediterranean in order to take a fresh look at the numerous ways in which they engaged Graeco-Roman culture.

It is anachronistic, in my view, and misleading to position Jews outside the cultural sphere of their time and to explore either their influence on it or its influence on them, as if they were two distinct, antagonistic entities. Such a model essentially projects the situation in modern societies, with well-demarcated lines of separation enforced by nationalism and statehood and possibly informed by medieval competition between Christianity and Islam, on the ancient world. But it is far removed from the lived reality of the Roman Mediterranean, where the blending of cultures was both convoluted and seamless. On the contrary, we must acknowledge that Jews lived in the larger environment of the ancient Mediterranean world,[17] deeply embedded in the texture of its life and sharing its ontological outlooks. Focusing our inquiries on their practices and beliefs within this shared cultural landscape, I reach the conclusion that conflict and amity coexisted and intermingled in the spheres of culture and identity. Counter to the view that insists Jews restricted themselves to their own turf, I show that Jews and non-Jews were densely entangled in the baths, and their ongoing encounters went far beyond the oversimplified binary notions of conflict or influence. I call the subtle complexities and dynamics that the book uncovers "the poetics of culture"; and I call the model used to explain it "filtered absorption." The institution of the public bathhouse serves here as the spatial setting, the stage on which this cultural drama played out.

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Filtered absorption places Jews not on the exterior of the Roman realm but rather deep in its interior, embedded in the shared experience of those days and embracing many of its fundamental values and conventions; on many levels, they were part and parcel of the Roman milieu just like everyone else.[18] During the High and Late Empires, numerous Jews, at least those of whom we know much about, lived and functioned in the cities and towns of the Mediterranean. Even those who resided in rural settings—and many did, whether in Roman Judaea (later renamed Palestine) or elsewhere—were closely connected with municipalities. Living for hundreds of years in such a mixed environment, rubbing shoulders daily with their non-Jewish neighbors, meant not just close proximity to but also intimate engagement with the Roman way of life—in commerce, in everyday undertakings on the street and in the markets, in local politics, and in leisure activities. Documentary evidence in the papyri found in the Judaean Desert shows Jews casually interacting with non-Jewish peers in the local courts on matters of business but also on a range of family issues. Similarly, countless references in rabbinic literature testify to such contacts, although not always with approval.[19] Many scholars, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (but some to this day), influenced by the segregated status of Jews in medieval, Christian Europe and by the attitudes of some ghettoized ultra-Orthodox Jews today, project this image of Judaism onto ancient times, failing to appreciate how deeply embedded the Jews were within the Roman world.

In order to live as part of the Roman world while also maintaining their heritage and unique practices, Jews continually identified and assessed features of their surroundings that were inconsistent with their convictions and way of life. To be clear, they never achieved unanimous agreement on which features of Roman life were a problem. However, a few elements of *romanitas*—surprisingly few, considering our widespread assumptions about Judaism—bothered at least some Jews in various parts of the Roman world, and these elements were then either rejected altogether or reframed to adapt to Jewish norms. This process of cultural negotiation, subversion, and appropriation was messy and diverse, neither regulated nor uniform. Rather, different individuals and dispersed communities took assorted paths, sometimes converging under similar principles, overlapping, and crisscrossing, and on other occasions diverging and departing far from each other. This is the disorderly nature of cultural dynamics. Dissent and reluctance are as much a part of the shared discourse in Roman society as praise and acceptance. Indeed, as

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will be shown in detail, all (or almost all) of the reservations raised by rabbis regarding the baths find equivalent articulation in other segments of Roman society.

At the end of the day, filtered absorption allowed (at least some) Jews to live in peace with the surrounding culture, which from this perspective was also their culture. Minority groups apply similar mechanisms throughout human history, allowing them full, or nearly full, integration in the shared cultural landscape of their time while also maintaining and preserving their own identity and customs. Rabbinic literature, which contains an assortment of views and positions, allows us to follow and chart these dynamics at least partially and to explore the strategies and mechanisms at work as they took shape within some strands of the Jewish world. Far from being texts promoting exclusiveness, I present it here as a literary corpus engaging in cultural negotiation and appropriation.

What Is Rabbinic Literature and Who Were the Rabbis?

The group of texts we call rabbinic literature includes some forty documents of various sizes, about half of them of a legal nature (named *halakhah*, from the Hebrew verb "to go"—in the sense of "the way in which we live"). The other half features non-legal material, known as *haggadah* ("telling"). The latter consists of stories, homilies, parables, proverbs, and other genres. Some of these works, both from *halakhah* and *haggadah*, offer commentaries on the scriptures known today as the Hebrew Bible, which ancient Jews considered sacred and divine in nature. Rabbis labeled these latter exegetical works as *midrash* (from the ancient Hebrew verb that means "to investigate" and find meaning). No strict lines divide the different genres and they often intermix and overlap.

During a long and convoluted process spanning the eras of the High and Late Empires (roughly second to seventh centuries CE), the figures often referred to collectively as "the rabbis" produced and then gathered, collected, and edited the *halakhah*, the *haggadah*, and the *midrash*.[20] Written in Hebrew and Aramaic, although with thousands of words borrowed from Greek and Latin (and less from Persian), the texts reflect nearly every aspect of life in the Roman province of Palestine. As they developed their literature, the authors used their surroundings and their daily lives as the building blocks for the content of their discussions. On the one hand, they only sparsely mention specific historical events; clearly, the authors never aspired to offer a historical narrative. On the

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other hand, rabbinic texts richly represent the stuff of daily life. Both the non-legal and the legal writings abound with discussions and descriptions of physical structures and artifacts from both urban and agrarian settings; the workings of institutions and organizations (private and public, local, provincial, and imperial, social and communal) and the colorful settings of everyday occurrences (birth, childrearing, marriage and family, education, the entire gamut of work and vocation, the calendar, entertainment and leisure, all the way to death and burial).[21] One of the texts, the Babylonian Talmud, was produced in Sasanian Persia and offers a wealth of information about that realm as well.

The creators of rabbinic literature, whom we now call rabbis, did not use that name to define themselves. Rather, in their own eyes they were learned Jews—scholars. The most common term they applied to introduce who they were was *ḥakhamim*, the plural form of the Hebrew word *ḥakham* (wise), meaning, in this context, scholars, sometimes translated in English as sages. They were erudite individuals who devoted their lives to study. They were active in Roman Palestine in the generations after the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem during the Jewish revolt against the Romans in 70 CE and later, from the third century, also in the Sasanian Persian territories of what are now Iraq and Iran, which they called Babylonia (see map 2). The title "rabbi," which means "my teacher," expressed status and prestige (similar to today's "professor"), and individual scholars and students used the word out of respect for other teachers who were particularly important to them, but none of them utilized it to refer to all of them as a group.[22]

Like other intellectuals throughout history, the *ḥakhamim* were animated by their personalities, in particular their natural proclivity toward learning. The focus of their studies, the foundation texts of their curriculum, consisted of the Jewish scriptures, which later became the Hebrew Bible. Their preferred field of study centered on legal discourse and exegesis (unlike other ancient Jewish scholars, who pursued philosophy, mysticism, and even history). Accordingly, rabbinic scholars endeavored to channel what they believed to be the eternal truth of God, as articulated in the Torah (the Pentateuch, namely the first five, most important, books in what came to be the Bible), into meticulous and well-structured legal formulas—strictures, proscriptions, and directives that came to be known collectively as *halakhah*. But in the course of their learning they also crafted stories and anecdotes, transmitted traditions about innumerable topics, and related plentiful information related to their areas of interest.

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For all we know, this small group of intellectuals exerted minimal, if any, influence—let alone official authority—over the Jewish public in Roman Palestine, and even less so on the Jewish communities elsewhere in the Mediterranean regions. They never consisted of more than a few dozen at any given time, and sometimes even fewer.[23] The evidence neither shows the *ḥakhamim* as judges sitting in courts issuing rulings and offering guidance according to Jewish law nor establishes them as leaders of the Jewish population of their time; those roles emerged only hundreds of years later, mostly in the Islamic and medieval European realms, and also in Persia. Furthermore, when it comes to ancient Jewish society in the Roman world at large, despite the traditional view that sees them as a "nation" living by the laws and norms of the rabbis, the evidence speaks clearly to the contrary. As far as I can tell, rabbinic norms as a whole never prevailed in antiquity, even as specific details did. The term "Rabbinic Judaism," which many modern scholars use to characterize either Jewish society or the mores of the rabbis, is a misnomer and anachronistic; Jews were quite diverse in their ways of life.[24]

Moreover, it is quite clear that for at least 150 years after the Temple's destruction, the *ḥakhamim* never even constituted an organized group, let alone a movement (as is all too commonly, and mistakenly, presumed today); they had no sense of collective self-awareness, no well-defined political goals, and no coherent, uniform conceptual outlook on Jewish life.[25] For generations, these rabbis functioned as individual scholars, teachers with no sense of a larger community beyond the small number of students they had attracted. Whatever links existed among these teachers and their devotees were loose and limited and generally restricted to intellectual interests and scholarly debate.

The situation gradually began to change only at the beginning of the third century, with the project of redacting and publishing the Mishnah, the first comprehensive compilation of rabbinic legal material, organized thematically and intended to cover all aspects of Jewish life. The so-called "rabbinic movement" did not produce the Mishnah; rather, the creation of the Mishnah began to create the rabbinic movement. Once this text became popular among these scattered circles of learning, their shared admiration for and constant engagement with this text laid the foundation for what became, generations later, something that would be familiar to us today: a wide community of scholars devoted to the study of the Mishnah and the legal traditions associated with it as its core curriculum.

In the few decades after the publication of the Mishnah, some scholars produced an addendum, called exactly that in Aramaic—the Tosefta. Other

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texts, published over the next few centuries, continued to gather the learning of the *ḥakhamim*. They called many of them *midrashim* (*midrash* in the singular, after the interpretive activity called by that name), organizing them in sequence with the biblical text. They structured other compendia thematically. Chief among the latter was the Palestinian Talmud (also called *Yerushalmi* in Hebrew). Produced in the fourth century as a large addendum to the Mishnah and following its thematic structure, its editors intended to bring together a century and a half of rabbinic scholarship on the Mishnah. A century later its twin text, the Babylonian Talmud, came out, featuring the learning of rabbinic scholars in Sasanian Persia.[26]

These texts—the Mishnah, the Tosefta, the various *midrashim*, the Palestinian Talmud, and the Babylonian Talmud—stand at the heart of the current book. They contain hundreds of references to public Roman bathhouses. The rabbis never show real interest in providing a full description of bathhouses or all the activities that took place there (in contrast, for example, to their discussion of the Temple in Jerusalem—long gone by their day—to which they devote an entire tractate in the Mishnah). Their attention to the bathhouse emerges only as it pertains to whatever specific legal topic they are dealing with, or if it comes up in a story they are telling or a tradition they are conveying.

Neglect of the bathhouse as a focus of discussion is itself a fascinating part of this story. The modern reader, conditioned by the projection of today's orthodox Jewish views back on antiquity and particularly on the rabbis, expects sustained outrage at a place where nudity and licentiousness prevailed, as well as detailed and strict decrees about what Jews should and should not do in the baths. However, one never finds such judgments. Rather, rabbinic authors offer only passing references to the bathhouse and express its acceptance as a regular part of life. In what follows throughout this book, I discuss these surprising conceptual gaps and what they may tell us about the attitudes toward the bathhouse and the activities that took place there, as well as the plentiful—if scattered—references to this establishment, packed with rich detail and insight, gathered together and analyzed alongside other ancient sources: archaeological and epigraphical remains as well in numerous excerpts in Graeco-Roman literature. The result of this unprecedented triangulation of sources provides a fascinating portrayal of the institution of the Roman bathhouse, its manifold functions in the everyday life, and the perceptions of it held by at least some Jews living on the provincial periphery of the Roman Empire. Between the lines emerges a remarkable story of cultural interaction.

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Some Methodological and Theoretical Considerations

In closing this introduction, the central methodological and theoretical principles that guide this book should be presented and clarified.

First, for several decades starting in the mid-twentieth century, a series of methodological disputes rattled the field of Rabbinics, focused mainly on the question of whether rabbinic literature may be used as historical evidence. Many of these methodological debates have long been resolved, at least for most researchers. The romantic, positivistic view that took nearly every reference in rabbinic texts at face value and viewed it as reporting actual events has long been rejected. The opposite view, the extreme skepticism of those who mounted the early criticism against the positivists, chief among them Jacob Neusner, has also been discarded.[27] Most investigators today are comfortable using the rabbinic corpus in historical studies involving society and culture, as well as in inquiries about law, literature, and religion. Using the legal formulations and debates of the rabbis creates challenges for the historian, as the line between reality and legal fiction is seldom clear-cut; one must watch out for what Seth Schwartz calls "moving too easily from prescription to description."[28] Similarly, the numerous anecdotes and stories told by rabbis cannot be taken to recount real-life events. But in truth, the historiographical challenges here are no more difficult than with other genres of the ancient world, such as the satire, the novella, and other types of fiction and legends. Scholars have found productive strategies to deal with these problems and extract whatever information possible. Fergus Millar put it best: "The invented world of fiction may yet represent, perhaps cannot help representing, important features of the real world."[29]

Second, in the same vein, most scholars today agree with the harsh (but mostly justified) criticism directed at many of the early studies of Rabbinics that seamlessly mixed Persian material from the Babylonian Talmud with the literature that emerged from Roman Palestine. Although here too, the categorical rejection of all traditions about Roman Palestine mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud, as if an iron, impenetrable wall separated these two realms of rabbinic activity, is mostly misguided. Many scholars, myself included, have shown that nuggets of information traveled in both directions between Palestine and Persia; used with proper caution, at least some passages preserved in the Babylonian Talmud are undoubtedly informative about the Roman world in general and Jewish society in Palestine in particular.[30]

Third, I do not subscribe to the extreme restrictions that some scholars of Talmud place on the study of rabbinic texts before they are established

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with philological certainty. Simply put, the philological status of many ancient texts, not only rabbinic, remains quite murky, and it does not (and should not) prevent us from studying them and using them to glean information about the ancient world, always keeping in mind that the echoes we hear may not always be accurate and that future generations may hear and thus conclude differently.

Furthermore, with respect to methodology, it is worth noting that the current book deals solely with Roman public bathhouses (as defined in chapter 1), not with water in general or with other ancient hydraulic installations. Nor does it deal with bathing establishments in other periods, beyond the Roman world. Many scholars bind together different institutions associated with water, such as the thermal baths or the Jewish ritual immersion installation used for purification (called *miqveh*). As I explain later in the book, the sources use distinctive names for each of these installations, though they are all called baths in English. True, they all involve water, but their functions were dissimilar, and they served separate and to a large extent discrete purposes. The people of antiquity regarded them as different from one another, and mixing them together usually leads to erroneous, at times quite far-fetched, conclusions.[31]

Finally, on the theoretical side, various strands of scholarship have influenced my thinking and research. From the French Annales school I took my distaste for the historiography of states and nations, politics, wars, and powerful institutions. In particular my debt goes to Michel de Certeau's seminal work, *L'invention du quotidien I: Arts de faire* (in English *The Practice of Everyday Life*), where he lays out the framework for the study of habitual, daily practices of people as categories of cultural appropriation in a specific time and place. The current book applies de Certeau's version of small history (in contrast to the Big History so fashionable these days) to the study of ancient Judaism; simple people, mundane, everyday moments, and ordinary, seemingly unimportant institutions lie at the heart of this research, which attempts to show the richness they can bring to our understanding of the past.

A second layer of influence comes from current developments in the field of Materiality, or as it is sometimes called, The History of Things, or by others, myself included, Material Culture.[32] This subcategory of cultural studies deals with the agency of physical objects and artifacts and sees them as both carriers and instigators of human experiences. On the practical level, it champions the integration of texts and archaeology (and art where applicable). The central claim here is that by studying people's encounter and engagement with artifacts, in the case of this book with the

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public bathhouse building, with its various installations, apparatuses, and paraphernalia, we are able to re-create the mindsets and perceptions of ancient people on topics and issues that form their lives.

All in all, this book targets multiple audiences: scholars and students of diverse fields such as Archaeology, Rabbinics, and Classics, as well as Ancient Judaism and the history of the Roman Mediterranean. It also aspires to interest the general public: Jews who wish to understand the roots of their tradition and anyone interested in the ancient world as a whole who wishes to see it from the perspective of one of the largest minorities of the time. As it presents the story of cultural interaction between Jews and Graeco-Romans, it also aims to unpack the vast corpora of rabbinic texts and make them accessible to those not too familiar with their nuances and intricacies. For experts in those texts it strives to show how much more can be gleaned by placing them in close dialogue with classical, Graeco-Roman, and archaeological materials. To achieve this, I have tried to eliminate the technical taxonomy and professional jargon that usually overshadow studies of the rabbis and make the text seem undecipherable and impenetrable to the uninitiated. In May 2006 I participated in a conference at what is arguably the most prestigious academic venue in North America, the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Around the table sat some of the biggest names in the study of the ancient world, and when it came to ancient Judaism, they concluded that "Jews, particularly rabbis, lived on their own planet." I vehemently disagreed then, and I hope to prove them wrong in the following pages.

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