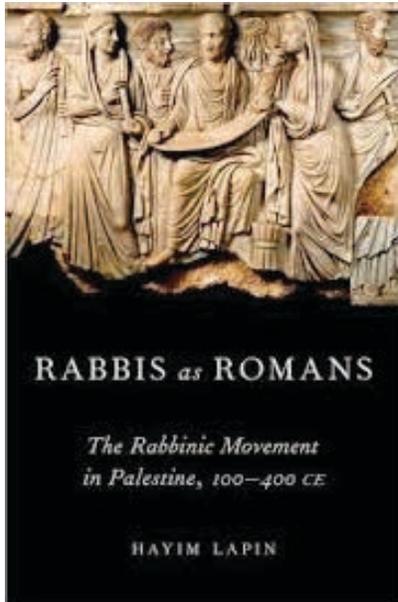


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Lapin, Hayim

Rabbis as Romans: The Rabbinic Movement in Palestine, 100–400 CE

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Each semester I introduce my undergraduate survey of Jewish history under Greece and Rome, traditionally called at Yeshiva University “Classical Jewish History,” with a very simple aphorism that serves as the “mantra” of my course. “Jews were the same as everyone else in the Greco-Roman world,” I tell my students, adding with a smile, “until they weren’t—and that’s when things get interesting.” While for most of my students this is a kind of obvious point, for a minority my assertion is mildly jolting—on the order of “Jesus was a Jew” for some Christian students at other institutions. These Yeshiva students are so used to thinking of their culture heroes—Hillel and Shammai, Rabban Gamaliel and Rabbi Joshua, Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Laqish, Abbaye and Rava—in the splendid isolation of the talmudic page and by extension, the study hall, that to imagine any of them in togas is a shock. With time, this reimagining takes hold—they did, after all, choose my course—and a richer understanding of the ancient rabbis begins to develop.

Focus on the rabbis at the center of a very bare stage is not unique to my undergraduates or even to the world of the yeshiva. The history of scholarship on ancient Judaism has been deeply rabbi-centered from its inception, with the spotlight set firmly on the talmudic sages; the stage furnished with sets that focus attention on this unique

community. Rome (and to a lesser extent, Sasanian Persia) has provided a backdrop, while the real action has been in the *beit ha-midrash*, the study house. From the pioneering scholarship of Gedaliah Alon—who masterfully harnessed the riches of halakic literature for the study of rabbinic history through Lee I. Levine’s *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine* (which brought to bear 1970s social history together with archaeology), and more recent monographs in English by Catherine Heszer, Stuart S. Miller, Alexei Sivertsev, and Seth Schwartz, the rabbis and their status within Jewish culture have been an intense focus of interest.¹ Where for Saul Lieberman “How Much Greek in Jewish Palestine?” (1963)² was the question of the day, one that fit a mid-century religious culture that developed such mottos as “tradition and change” (for Conservative Judaism) or *Torah u-madda* (an almost untranslatable phrase, something like “Tradition and/with General Culture”) used to define Yeshiva University’s brand of Modern Orthodoxy and the explicit need for balance and a kind of Hegelian synthesis that these terms evoke. For these scholars, a different set of questions was (and is) evocative. The question for the later third of the twentieth century was something like: “what was the status of the rabbis in Jewish society?” This question was related to the role of “rabbinic authority” across the Jewish community, as changes of seismic proportions were beginning to rumble, even as the actors (academic as well as clerical—often the same people) were not yet fully aware of the transformations overtaking the American Jewish community. These changes have seen the precipitous decline of Jewish endogamy and low birth rates among North American Jews whose parents supported liberal synagogues and their rabbis; the decline of the once-dominant Conservative movement; realignments within “Modern Orthodoxy,” and the related resurgence of a neo-traditionalist Orthodoxy—its numerical strength and intense commitments drawn from the grandchildren of the Holocaust survivors and their high birth rates.

Not surprisingly, questions of “rabbinic authority” are moving to the background, in a world where the very nature of “Jewish identity” is a preoccupation. The last decade or so has seen a sharp increase in studies of “Jewish identity”—both in the present and in the historical past. My own *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge, 2005, rev. 2010) was but one of these studies. Hayim Lapin’s *Rabbis as Romans: The Rabbinic*

1. Gedaliah Alon, *The Jews in Their Land in the Talmudic Age* (trans. G. Levi; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Lee I. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1989); Catherine Heszer, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997); Alexei Sivertsev, *Private Households and Public Politics in 3rd–5th Century Jewish Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002); Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society 200 B.C. E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

2. Saul Lieberman, “How Much Greek in Jewish Palestine,” in *Biblical and Other Studies* (ed. Alexander Altmann; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 123–41.

Movement in Palestine, 100–400 CE is the newest contribution to this growing library, even as it reorients the “rabbinic authority” question to the issue of the place of the rabbis on the wide stage of the Roman world.

Lapin’s dense volume is divided into six chapters in which he attempts to place the rabbis in late antique Palestine within a distinctly Roman frame. This point is made beginning with the jacket illustration (unfortunately, the only illustration in this volume, which would also have done well to include a map). On the cover is a marble bas relief, identified as “Sarcophagus said to be of Plotinus, Late 3rd–4th CE,” which resides at the Museo Gregoriano Profano at the Vatican. The philosopher, seated with a scroll open and draped across his legs, is flanked by men and women, the inner group looking toward him attentively. This, in a nutshell, is Lapin’s image of a rabbi—a Jewish-Roman (or is it Roman-Jewish?) thinker. This is an altogether reasonable image, a kind of parallel to the cover of my *Art and Judaism*, where a similarly dressed character, likely Moses, was painted above the Torah shrine of the Dura Europos synagogue holding an open scroll of similar dimensions. Were the philosopher of Lapin’s cover to mosey into the Dura synagogue, or Moses of the Dura synagogue to join a meeting of Plotinus and his students, his garments and coiffeur would in no way have indicated foreignness. This illustration makes Lapin’s point with great clarity and was a wise choice of an image in which to wrap this volume.

Lapin calls chapter 1 of *Rabbis as Romans* “Setting the Stage: The Making of a Roman Province.” This chapter is a competent treatment of the history of Palestine from a Roman imperial perspective. It will be very useful to my students, who know the Jewish sources far better than they know Roman history. Even classicists will gain from this chapter, though, through its focus on Palestine. Chapters 2–6 are a series of focused studies of central issues in the history of the rabbis and their identity as Romans. These include: (2) “Rabbis in Palestine: Texts, Origins, Development”; (3) “The Formation of a Provincial Religious Movement”; (4) “Provincial Arbitration: Cases and Rabbinic Authority”; (5) “Romanization and Its Discontents: Rabbis and Provincial Culture.” The volume ends with a final statement where Lapin couches his results within the period when many of his most important sources were edited: (6) “Epilogue: Rabbis in Palestine, Fifth to Eighth Century.”

Lapin’s model of the rabbis adopts Seth Schwartz’s hotly contested hypothesis that the rabbis (re)emerge only in the fourth century under Christian influence after the steep decline of Judaism in the wake of the destruction of Judaism in 70 (34). Lapin applies Schwartz’s template of Jewish disintegration and rabbinic reconstitution to the Samaritans as well. He writes that, as a result of “active, if not fatal engagements between the Roman state and Samaritans,” Samaritanism also withered, “only to be reborn later.”

Lapin continues: “As with the Jews, evidence for a coherent ‘Samaritan’ culture in Palestine disappeared, to reemerge in the form of vernacular literature and synagogues in the fourth century and later” (37). He then uses the Samaritan case to support his understanding of the Jewish experience. The lateness of rabbinic influence within Jewish society in late Roman Palestine—a major foundational concept in this book—tacitly assumes that evidence that exists is sufficient to support broad, often counterhistorical, reconstruction and that silence means that developments known only from later sources did not exist earlier (an approach developed by Lapin’s teacher, Morton Smith, and common to other Smith students as well).³ My own approach is somewhat less positive. The chances that historical sources would have reached the stage of being committed to writing in antiquity and then preserved to our own times are staggeringly small. I am humbled in my historical interpretation when I consider a field without the Jerusalem Talmud (of which only one complete manuscript survives), or that a single early modern manuscript of Tacitus’s *Germania* exists, or that only one liturgical poem (*piyyut*) by Yannai was known before the stupendous discoveries of the Cairo Genizah, or that Qumran studies might not exist at all if a shepherd had not thrown a stone into a cave—or had used the leather he found to make shoes.

Lapin’s approach is well-expressed in his assumption that “epigraphic rabbis,” individuals identified as “rabbis” in inscriptions are of necessity *not* members of the rabbinic community (158). This approach goes back to Shaye J. D. Cohen’s 1981 article “Epigraphic Rabbis.”⁴ This material has been the focus of heated debate, carried forward most prominently by Stuart Miller and Benzion Rosenfeld.⁵ While Lapin asserts this minimalist reading without discussion, Catherine Hezser has recently noted that Cohen’s approach is “hardly convincing and not accepted by most scholars nowadays.”⁶

3. See my *Art and Judaism*, 35–46. I expand on these issues in my *Art, History and the Historiography of Judaism in Roman Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming). See also Stuart S. Miller, “Roman Imperialism, Jewish Self-Definition, and Rabbinic Society: Belayche’s ‘Iudaea-Palaestina,’ Schwartz’s *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, and Boyarin’s *Border Lines Reconsidered*,” *AJS Review* 31 (2007): 329–62.

4. Shaye J. D. Cohen, “Epigraphical Rabbis,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 72 (1981): 1–17.

5. Stuart S. Miller, “Epigraphical” Rabbis, Helios and Psalm 19: Were the Synagogues of Archaeology and the Synagogues of the Sages One and the Same?” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 94 (2004): 27–76; idem, “Real Sages or Nothing More Than Donors and Honored Deceased? Epigraphical Rabbis Yet Again,” in *Talmuda de-Eretz Israel: Archaeology and the Rabbis in Late Antique Palestine* (ed. S. Fine and A. Koller (Berlin: de Gruyter, forthcoming); Benzion Rosenfeld, “The Title ‘Rabbi’ in Third- to Seventh-Century Inscriptions in Palestine Revisited,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 61 (2010): 234–56.

6. Catherine Hezser, “Correlating Literary, Epigraphic and Archaeological Sources,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine* (ed. C. Hezser; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 23. See also my discussion in *Art, History and the Historiography of Judaism in Roman Antiquity*, ch. 7: “‘Epigraphical’ Study Houses in Late Antique Palestine: A Second Look.”

What if archaeological evidence appears that is earlier than Lapin suggests? Take the inscription of the synagogue at Rehov. Lapin writes of the “sixth or seventh” century inscription, “the earliest piece of rabbinic writing anywhere,” but does not mention the unpublished but much-described fourth- or fifth-century inscription containing roughly the same inscription on plaster that once decorated a column within the same synagogue. I point out that this earlier inscription dates to exactly the time when the Jerusalem Talmud, which, astonishingly, includes texts parallel to our inscription, was edited. This evidence shows that agriculturalists far from the rabbinic center at Tiberias actually cared about what the rabbis had to say and considered them important enough to immortalize epigraphically—twice.⁷ The later version (and apparently the earlier one as well) begins with the introduction, “Shalom! These produce are forbidden in Beit Shean during the seventh (sabbatical) year, and in other years of the sabbatical (cycle) are tithed as *demai* (foodstuffs brought from Jewish areas of Palestine that were suspected of not having been tithed properly).” It continues with a precise application of these laws to the region of Beit Shean—a demarcation with serious economic consequences for Jews who cared to keep rabbinic agricultural law. Lapin concludes his discussion of the mosaic version with a parenthetical comment, the implications of which he uncharacteristically does not spell out: “(Why the people who paid for this particular mosaic floor should have wanted a compendium of laws on tithes and related priestly gifts and their geographical application remains a matter of conjecture.)”

To sum up, in this review I have focused on areas of Lapin’s work that touch most closely on my own current concerns and research. Indeed, Jews in the Greco-Roman world were the same as everyone else—until they weren’t. Lapin’s volume provides an important discussion of the many ways that rabbis functioned within their world and much to think about. This reality should not surprise anyone—sociologists have been discussing issues of acculturation, inculturation, confluence, and the rest in regard to modern Jews for quite some time. In an age when the very nature of cultural identity and its continuity is undergoing transformation, especially in regard to Jews, this volume is a useful addition to our understanding of the ancient rabbis—and of ourselves.

7. See Fanny Vitto, “Rehov,” *New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* [Hebrew] (ed. E. Stern; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1992), 4:1457–61; idem, “Rehov,” *New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (ed. E. Stern; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1993), 4:1272–74; Fine, *Art and Judaism*, 91–92; idem, “The Rehov Synagogue Inscriptions: The Earliest Preserved Text of the Talmudic Literature,” online: http://cojs.org/cojswiki/Steven_Fine._The_Rehov_Synagogue_Inscriptions:_The_Earliest_Preserved_Text_of_the_Talmudic_Literature.