

Introduction

It is precisely because people are aware of the fearful distance that separates us from our beginnings that so many embark upon a search for the roots, the “deeper causes” of what happened. It is in the nature of roots and “deeper causes” that they are hidden by the appearances which they are supposed to have caused. They are not open to inspection or analysis but can be reached only by the uncertain way of interpretation and speculation.

—HANNAH ARENDT

IF WE WERE SOMEHOW able to conduct a survey of Jews around the world today, I have no doubt they would tell the story of their origin in many different ways. Jews, of course, come from many different parts of the world. Some Jews would be able to trace their ancestry back only a few generations—personally, things get murky for me beyond the generation of my grandparents. Others can claim lineages that go back to the Middle Ages or even earlier, and those who have chosen to become Jews might tell origin stories that go back to a recent conversion experience rather than to a distant ancestor. For many Jews, however, the story of their people predates the history of their particular community, going back to founders, a homeland, or a formative experience in the distant past. It is that common origin we are after in this book: the origin that connects all Jews into a single people, religion, or community; the very beginning of their collective story.

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Many people assume the answer to the question of Jewish origin is already known: it is to be found in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, more precisely, in the Five Books of Moses or Torah. The narrative that begins with the Book of Genesis does not concern the Jews per se but is focused on the people of Israel, tracing their descent from Abraham through his grandson Jacob (who is later given the name Israel). The Israelites as depicted in the Torah are related to each other as members of an extended family—twelve tribes descended from Jacob—but their connection is not only genealogical. They undergo a series of trials and tribulations together—enslavement in Egypt, deliverance at the hands of Moses, a harrowing trek across the Sinai desert—and jointly commit to a covenant at Mount Sinai that imposes on them shared responsibilities to each other and to God. Nowhere does the Torah refer to “the Jews” as we understand that term today, but it does single out for special attention Jacob’s son Judah—the eponymous ancestor of the tribe of Judah, which plays a special role in the biblical account, going on to produce the royal dynasty that would rule the Israelites under David and his successors, and emerging as the sole survivors, along with the tribe of Levi, of the catastrophes of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests. Jews identify as the descendants of those who survived these catastrophes, tracing their origins to the Judahites who returned from exile to rebuild a life in the land of their ancestors and renew their covenant with God.

One reason we cannot begin with this narrative is that, from the perspective of modern scholarship, it cannot be relied on for an understanding of history. The story told of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Genesis, most biblical scholars would agree, is an attempt by much later authors to explain the origin of their people: they might preserve certain kernels of genuine experience, but for the most part, many scholars believe, they do not reflect historical reality, having been composed in a much later period and projecting on to the past the experiences and perspectives of much later authors. Similar considerations have led scholars to conclude that the Exodus probably did not happen, or at least not in the way the Torah describes, and they have their doubts as well about the Israelite conquest of the land of Canaan, the existence of a kingdom ruled by David and Solomon, and other events and people mentioned

in the biblical account especially in the formative period of Israel's history. There is plenty of debate about the history that lies behind the biblical account, about what really happened, but scholars generally agree that there is more to the story of how the Jews came to be than we can glimpse in the Bible.

For these and other reasons, this book must begin by acknowledging that we do not already know the origin of the Jews. But if we cannot look to the Bible for an answer, what can we say about where the Jews come from or how they came to be? The main goal of this book is to describe how scholars answer these questions. It is not a history of the Jews but an attempt to chronicle an intellectual quest, to explore scholarship's efforts to answer a question that emerged into view only after people began to doubt the veracity of the Bible and to think in new ways about how people and cultures originate. This book cannot promise a definitive answer to the question of Jewish origin, but it seeks to help the reader to think more deeply about the question by surveying what scholars have learned so far, and wondering aloud about why it is that this origin has proven so hard to pin down.

Some readers might be suspicious of such a project as an attempt to discredit the Jews. Going back to antiquity, anti-Jewish animosity has sometimes expressed itself in the form of counter-origin stories that seek to mock and discredit the Jews by negating their own understanding of their origin. The Roman historian Tacitus, writing in the second century CE, preserves a number of such stories that trace the Jews back to various origins (Tacitus, *Histories*, 5.1–4). Some describe them as fugitives from Crete, Ethiopia, Assyria, or Asia Minor, but most authors, Tacitus tells us, agree that they descend from a group of lepers driven from Egypt by its king. The distinctive customs that distinguished the descendants of this group from other peoples, the historian explains—their strange sacrifices, their avoidance of pork, the practice of circumcision and other rites that Romans like Tacitus deemed barbaric—were invented by Moses to secure the allegiance of his people. Tacitus was by no means the last author to disparage the Jews by ascribing to them a suspect origin different from the one Jews claim for themselves, and it would certainly be understandable if there were readers wary of a book that potentially gives

license to anti-Jewish stories by calling into question the traditional account.

But the proliferation of origin stories, including many that are hostile to the Jews, is to my mind a reason to pursue an investigation like this, not an argument against it. While there are plenty of reasons not to ask about the origin of the Jews, the world still has need of origin stories and is still developing them about the Jews. Precisely because some of these narratives invoke scholarship to give them an aura of authority, it is important to make an effort to assess the various theories, to weigh them against one another, and to factor in criticisms. According to modern scholarship, what Jews have long believed about themselves is based on a myth, but Jews have also suffered from origin myths imposed on them by secular scholarship. Is there a way to get to the bottom of how the Jews came to be?

Many decades ago, I chose to specialize in ancient Jewish history because I believed it would be through that field—by studying the formative era of the biblical period—that I would find answers about who I was and what connected me to the past, a belief I now recognize as naïve but which has shaped my professional life and which I can't quite let go of even now. In a certain sense this search to understand the origin of the Jews is really an attempt to examine that belief. Can scholarship, especially scholarship focused on ancient history and long-dead people, help us understand who we are—where our sense of identity comes from, how we have been shaped by the past, what connects us to other people? This book happens to focus on the Jews, but a similar question can be asked of any person whose sense of identity depends on a certain understanding of origin. Is not our sense of common humanity tied to a sense of shared origin? The focus of this inquiry is the origin of the Jews, but it can also be read as a case study of the origin of group identity, with lessons that can be applied to other religions, ethnicities, and nations.

Along the way I also reflect on a larger subject that goes beyond Jewish studies—our relationship to origins in a general sense. The last two centuries have seen tremendous strides in our ability to address questions of origin—cosmic origins, human origins, the origins of thought—but it has also been an era in which many scholars grew disenchanted with the search for origin, and with the very concept of origin itself. The problem from this perspective was not

just with particular origin accounts but with the underlying thinking that produces such accounts, the belief that one can understand a thing by grasping its origin. The most influential critiques of origin came from thinkers now identified with postmodernism, but the intellectual opposition to the search for origin goes beyond a particular school of thought, arising as a kind of generalized reaction against the preoccupation with origin that marked earlier generations of scholarship. By no means has scholarship today abandoned the search for origins, but for those who have absorbed the lessons of late twentieth-century intellectual history, a search of the sort we are embarking on here will seem naïve, suspect, a chasing after a chimera, as one historian puts it.

If I nonetheless persist in this quest, it is not because I wish to ignore those lessons or do not think they are important; it is because, for all their influence, they have not stopped the scholarly search for the origin of the Jews. The suspicion of origin that characterizes so much of late twentieth-century historiographical and literary theory has waned in influence—in fact, it has provoked a backlash, for there is now a resurgence of interest in questions of origin under way, a renewed curiosity about ancestry, inheritance, and what some now refer to as “deep history”: the tracing of the origin of human behavior in the remote past. Much of this book is devoted to tracing the history of the search for the origin of the Jews, but the ultimate objective is to assess the future of this search, to determine whether it has any chance of leading anywhere; and that future will be shaped by how scholars balance the promise of new discoveries from fields like archaeology and genetics against the antiorigin skepticism bequeathed by postmodernism.

The Elusiveness of Origin

I cannot recall when exactly it occurred to me to undertake this inquiry, but if I had to single out a particular moment of origin, it was a bout of writer’s block, my struggle to begin an earlier book about the history of the Jews. My portion of the book, which was written with three other scholars, was the initial section that covered the beginnings of Jewish history. All the material was familiar to me, and yet for some reason, I could not figure out how to begin. Like so many

would-be authors, I find it very difficult to start a book, and that was part of the struggle, but there was an additional problem that went beyond ordinary writer's block. I realized that, despite years of research into ancient Judaism, I really had no idea how the Jews originated, and that all the scholarly theories I had digested had made things only more puzzling. It proved so difficult to commit myself to a particular theory of the Jews' origin that the only way I could begin the book was to simply acknowledge the problem without solving it, and I have been troubled ever since by the fact that this was the best all my years of learning and reading allowed me to do.

But my interest in the question of Jewish origin goes beyond the questions of geography and chronology, where and when to start Jewish history. An origin is not just a beginning; it is a "beginning that explains," not just the first point in a sequence of events but the answer to a question about how something came to be or why it exists. What really bothered me about not knowing where to start Jewish history was that I could not answer this most fundamental of questions. It is not that scholarship hasn't tried to address it—in fact, it offers an excess of answers—but those answers are inconsistent and conjectural, and it isn't hard to challenge them. I did not presume to think I could answer a question so many previous scholars have failed to resolve, but I at least wanted to have a better understanding of why it had proven so difficult to answer. This is what led me to undertake the present book, which is not an attempt to answer the question I struggled to address in the earlier book but an effort to explore and reflect on the history of the search and the directions it is now taking.

Why is it so difficult to pinpoint an origin for the Jews? I have already mentioned one reason. As I have noted, for most of their history—and to this day for many—Jews looked to the Five Books of Moses to understand where they came from, but the authority of its narrative came into question in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the onset of a critical scholarship that treats the biblical text as a humanly authored document. One of the most consequential accomplishments of this scholarship (and a major reason many reject its findings) is its successful challenge to the Bible as a description of how things originated, and that challenge includes not just the Bible's creation account but its explanation for the origin

of people, including the Israelites to whom later Jews would trace their ancestry. I could spend the better part of this book elaborating all the reasons scholars are now skeptical of the Bible as a historical source. Suffice it to say for now that it is not the secure starting point for Jewish history that it is often assumed to be. To this day we do not know the circumstances in which biblical literature was composed, though it is clear that the story told in the Five Books of Moses was not written by an eyewitness to the events it describes. While we certainly cannot dismiss its testimony out of hand, scholars are especially skeptical of how the Bible depicts the earliest history of the Israelites, the age of Abraham and Moses. To embrace the testimony of Genesis and other biblical books as the narrative of how the Jews originated is not only to accept events that are implausible by the standards of modern historiography but to risk missing what is not registered in its text, the part of the story unknown to its authors.

If the problem was simply one of how to reach beyond our sources, however, that by itself does not distinguish the question of Jewish origin from any other question we might ask about ancient Jewish history. Among the particular challenges posed by a search for the origin of the Jews, there are two I would highlight. The first is the difficulty of defining what we mean by the Jews. Do we have in mind a group of people united by a common lineage, an extended tribe that descends from the same small set of ancestors? Are we referring to a community constituted through a shared religious experience or a common set of beliefs and ritual practices? The Jews have been defined by scholars in many different ways—as a nation, a race, a religion, an ethnicity—and polling suggests that Jews themselves differ in how they would define themselves, some emphasizing their religious observance, others indicating their parentage, still others defining Jewishness as a set of cultural characteristics. The problem these differences pose for us is that each of these definitions connotes something different about the origin of the Jews. If the Jews are to be defined by their ancestry, a search for their origin might involve a quest to identify those ancestors. If we are focused on Judaism as a faith, we might focus instead on trying to understand the origin of the beliefs and practices that shape Jewish religious life. If we take seriously how people define their own identity, it is not clear even that the word “Jew” is the right

label for this people. In certain periods of history, the Jews referred to themselves as “Israel” or used other self-designations like “Hebrew,” terms that imply different things about their origin in their own right. There is no clear way for a scholar to decide among these different conceptions of Jewishness without arbitrarily or anachronistically privileging one definition over the others, and that builds into our quest an irresolvable ambiguity about when and where to begin, what evidence to look for, and what will count as an answer.

A second major challenge is the difficulty of pinpointing what we mean by an origin. The dictionary defines an origin as a point or place where something begins, and that is sometimes what scholars are referring to when they talk about the origin of the Jews—an origin in a particular period or part of the world. But the meaning of an origin runs much deeper than that, and the concept is perplexing in ways that continue to confound well-trained philosophers. Sometimes we use the word “origin” to mean roots—the things or conditions out of which something grows or emerges. With that conception of origin, we would investigate what happened prior to a thing’s emergence: the ancestry from which it descends, for example. Often, however, we use the word “origin” to refer to a breaking free from the past: something originates at the point at which it becomes discontinuous with what has gone before. In that case we are looking not to trace continuity but to understand what happens after a moment of discontinuity or rupture. By the origin of the Jews do we mean how Jews developed out of what preceded them or the process that distinguished them from that which existed before? The concept of origin encompasses both possibilities.

Many of us who use the term “origin” may not think very carefully about what we mean by the term—I know I did not prior to taking on this project—and our confusion about the concept is part of what makes origins so difficult to pin down. Since everything is rooted in what precedes it, going back to the beginning of the universe, it is always possible to push an origin further and further in the past, and there is no clear-cut rule for how to distinguish an origin from a mere transitional moment—that decision is always going to depend on our starting point as interpreters of the past. Some of us are looking to understand what a thing was like in its initial or earliest form. Others are trying to understand a process

by which something becomes something else. Some treat origins as little more than a departure gate, as a point from which something begins but ultimately is to be left behind. For Charles Darwin the origin of life was this kind of origin; what interested in him was not the question of how life first appeared but the ongoing process of natural selection that began after this moment of origin. For others origins predetermine what originates from them. A thing's origin exerts an influence over it, and remains a part of it, for the duration of its existence; and knowing that origin is therefore essential for understanding what that thing is or is capable of becoming. There is no way to reach a definitive understanding of origin because the concept itself is so hazy, so hard to pin down, and has been understood in so many different ways. This is why we cannot begin this study with a definition of origin. It would certainly be nice to begin with a clear understanding of what we are talking about, but scholarship has never been clear or consistent about what it means by origin, and we would be artificially narrowing our search if we decided that only certain ways of thinking about the topic deserve attention. We will therefore have to try to sort out what we mean by origin as we go along.

But maybe this is a reason not to undertake a study like this. The search for origins poses so many evidentiary and philosophical problems that there have long been scholars who have rejected the search for origin as a futile or misguided quest. Already in 1866, for example, the Société de Linguistique de Paris, one of the first great academic societies devoted to the scientific study of language, prohibited further discussion about the origin of language because the question had led so many scholars on a wild goose chase in pursuit of an original mother tongue, and linguists were not the only ones fed up with excessive conjecture. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, published in 1912, the sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) dismissed the search for the origin of religion as a non-scientific pursuit that “should be resolutely discarded.” “There was no given moment when religion began to exist,” he observed, “and there is consequently no need of finding ourselves a means to transport ourselves thither in thought.” The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) was similarly dismissive of the search for origin in his field—in his words, “a search in the nebulous realms of

the undocumented, unrecorded historic past . . . [where] speculation can roam freely, unhampered by fact.” By the early twentieth century, there were also historians dismissive of the search for origin as a delusional quest, an “embryogenic obsession” in the words of the early twentieth-century historian Marc Bloch, and one can find a similar attitude in fields ranging from psychology (William James’s preference for understanding the fruits of religious experience as opposed to its roots) to philosophy (Friedrich Nietzsche’s rejection of the search for the origin of values) to literary studies (W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe Beardsley’s notion of the “intentional fallacy,” judging a work in light of conjectures about the authorial intentions that motivated its composition).

It bothered many of these scholars that the search for origin was hopelessly speculative, but that was not the only issue. Scholars like Durkheim and Malinowski also rejected the search for origin as beside the point for understanding social, religious, and cultural life. The primitive societies Malinowski studied were preoccupied with origins, producing various kinds of mythology to explain and justify the institutions of the present. In his view scholarship should have a different focus, explaining social institutions not by turning to an imagined origin but by seeking to understand their function and meaning in the context of living communities. Bloch’s objection to “the idol of origin” had to do with its confusion of beginnings with causes, ancestry with explanation, which he thought had to be more clearly distinguished. Later generations of scholars—I have in mind figures like Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Jean Baudrillard, Judith Butler, and many other thinkers active in the second half of the twentieth century—went further in their critique, arguing variations of the idea of origin as something that isn’t really there, an illusion or an errant form of thought in need of correction. For these and other scholars, the search to understand origins represents scholarly thinking gone astray. The curiosity at work seems deeply wired into how people think about things, and yet there is something misconceived or futile about it: it can never find what it is looking for; its vision is distorted by delusion.

According to some of this kind of scholarship, origins elude detection not because they are hidden or remote but because they do not really exist in the world out there. It is a mistake to think of an

origin as something that can be recovered, tracked down, or dug up, they argue, because it arises from the mind and how it grasps reality. The description of origin as a chimera or an obsession implies that it is a mental projection, and the only way to illumine an origin in this sense is to turn inward to understand what impels the mind to think in this way. As we will see over the course of this book, in fact, some scholars today, drawing on psychology or cognitive science, focus on the mental or cognitive mechanisms at work in the human attachment to origins, tracing people's desire for information about their ancestors or their place of origin to prerational psychological need. Others treat origin as an act of imagination, posing questions drawn from literary studies or folklore analysis: What cultural and social functions do origin stories play? What meanings do they superimpose on reality? From these kinds of perspective, it makes no sense to investigate origins empirically, to look for them as if they were events that happened in the past: the subject requires inquiry into the workings of consciousness, reason, or imagination.

It is one thing for scholars to apply this kind of perspective to Genesis or the creation accounts that have survived from other ancient cultures. Scholarship has long been accustomed to treating such narratives as "myths," false or fictive accounts of origin, which means that it no longer treats them as sources of information about origin and instead focuses on what they reveal about their authors and their perceptions of origin. It is another thing to apply a similar approach to the origin narratives produced by modern scholarship itself, narratives that claim to be an accurate representation of reality, that are grounded in facts, that adhere to the critical or scientific standards we now rely on to distinguish truth from falsehood. One of the great ambitions of reason is to illumine the origin of things—the origin of the world, the origin of species, the origin of language, the origin of understanding itself. Think of all the prodigious works of scholarship that have emanated from the scholarly ambition to understand the origin of things: Darwin's theory of evolution, Alfred Wegener's effort to account for the origin of continents and ocean basins, Georges Lemaître's notion of the Big Bang, and on and on. The quest to understand the world by going back to the moment of origins goes back to ancient Greek philosophy, and it would seem self-defeating for scholars to renounce their power to

offer that kind of insight. And yet scholars in recent years have been doing precisely that by treating the origin accounts emerging from scholarship as fictions or secular creation myths.

An example is a book that made a lot of waves in the field of paleontology when it was originally published in French in 1994, *Explaining Human Origins* by Wiktor Stoczkowski. The main thesis of the book is that *all* scholarly accounts of human origin, no matter how scientific they might be, are fictionalized. To draw disjointed pieces of evidence into a meaningful account, they enlist common-sense ideas of causality devoid of empirical support and draw the structure of their narratives from preexisting storylines. They do enlist data, but those data can support many different kinds of narrative, which is why, in Enlightenment-era accounts, the origin of humanity is a story of technological progress; in Soviet-era accounts, a story of communal cooperation; and in feminist narratives, a story of matriarchal rule. In Stoczkowski's view, there is no way to determine the origin of humanity; the questions that drive the search for human origin can be addressed only through myth or theology, not by appeal to reason or to the data.

The intellectual trend I am describing here has influenced a number of fields—anthropology, history, art history, linguistics, even archaeology—and so it should not be a surprise that there are scholars of Jewish studies who have developed a similar aversion to the search for origin. An example of what I have in mind is an argument developed by the historian Amos Funkenstein in an essay titled “The Dialectics of Assimilation,” published in 1995. On the surface the essay is an attempt to correct how scholars understand the process of assimilation, but it is also an attempt to disabuse the field of a certain concept of origin that Funkenstein finds implicit in the thinking of some of the founding figures of the field—Heinrich Graetz, Yitzhak Baer, and even the great scholar of mysticism Gershom Scholem. According to these scholars, a clear separation can be made between what is original in Judaism and what is secondary and superficial, between what was there in its earliest form and what developed later on as a result of interactions with other cultures. The original dimension of Judaism refers to qualities emerging organically from within its culture or religion. These qualities were there from the beginning, which makes them

a source of authenticity, and without them, Judaism ceases to be Judaism. Secondary characteristics, by contrast, are acquired characteristics that Judaism has picked up from external sources, the foreign cultures with which the Jews have interacted over the course of their history. Original components of Judaism include the monotheistic idea and the Hebrew language, enduring qualities that persist throughout its history; secondary characteristics include the use of German, in the form of Yiddish, by Jews in Eastern Europe. Funkenstein rejects any distinction between original and secondary; that is, he rejects the idea that there was a period at the beginning of Jewish history when the Jews existed in an original form uncontaminated by external influences.

Whether or not Funkenstein is fairly describing his predecessors is less important for our argument than the fact that his critique reflects the broader suspicion of origin that had taken root by the time he wrote this essay. According to Funkenstein, this perspective on Jewish history suffers from the “fallacy of origin,” something like Bloch’s notion of the “idol of origins”—the idea that, by uncovering the origin of a nation, you lay bare its nature, essence, and true character over against less authentic aspects of its culture picked up later through borrowing and imitation. Any idea of a discrete origin for the Jews assumes that their culture once existed in some form separate from its environment, and Funkenstein rejects such an idea, which may explain why he does not offer his own account of the origin of the Jews. To understand Jewish culture, he argued, one should treat it as the result of an ongoing process rather than interpreting it in light of an imagined beginning that cannot be shown to have existed to begin with.

If this critique of the “fallacy of origin” is correct, is there any point to a search like this? This is the question that drives this book. On the one hand, scholars have not ceased trying to understand the origin of the Jews, and have proven remarkably perseverant and resourceful in their search for new insights. They may have gone astray, but they have learned from their mistakes, acknowledging their biases, adopting new tools and methods from other fields, amassing additional evidence, and proposing more sophisticated hypotheses. Simply disregarding all that research would represent a form of self-imposed ignorance. On the other hand, critics like Funkenstein

cannot be ignored when they argue for something misguided about the search for the origin of the Jews.

What are we to make of the contradiction between these different kinds of scholarship? Is the search for the origin of the Jews a mistake? Are the skeptics too quick to dismiss what such a search can reveal? One of the central problems I wrestle with in this book is the idea that origins might be a fallacy. In scholarship today there are basically two approaches to origin that are in conflict with one another, what we can think of as an objective and a subjective approach to the question. The objective approach treats origin ontologically and empirically, as a real thing in the world—something that happened long ago or that involves processes that are difficult to observe and comprehend but that can be treated as an object of knowledge, as something to be understood about the world. The subjective approach treats origin from a psychological, phenomenological, or postmodern perspective, approaching it as a product of how the mind thinks about reality. The mind might feel impelled to seek out origins, but there is nothing to be discovered, not at least in the world beyond the thinking self. Most of the approaches we survey in this book fall under the objective category of origin—they treat the origin of the Jews as a hidden truth that can be uncovered—but they all come up against critiques that reject the premise that there is an origin hidden somewhere in the past to be uncovered. To search for the origin of the Jews in a way that embraces the full range of scholarly perspectives, modern and postmodern, means we will have to contend with the differences between these perspectives, and that is no mean challenge given that one is a direct rejection of the other.

The Politics of Origin

The conceptual slipperiness of origin is not the only challenge we will face in our search for the origin of the Jews. We will also have to reckon with an aspect of this subject that goes beyond the kind of problem that scholarship is in a position to resolve through inquiry and reasoned debate, a political dimension that makes the subject highly emotional, ethically fraught, irresolvably contentious, and sometimes very hurtful for many people. The scholarly search for

the origin of the Jews is more than two centuries old, and for the entirety of that history, it has been tied to the political status of the Jews—to their status within European society and, more recently, to the legitimacy of the State of Israel. The politics has produced competing origin accounts of the Jews that mirror the conflicts between the Jews and their enemies. Some would turn to scholarship in the hope of overcoming the partisanship and prejudice at work in these conflicts, putting their trust in historical inquiry or the scientific method, but others would argue that scholarship itself is a part of these conflicts, that there is no way even for scholars to be politically neutral about the origin of the Jews no matter what method they use or how many facts they marshal.

The particular search described in this book was shaped by political debates in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. This was the age when today's nation-states emerged from the empires and kingdoms that had ruled much of Europe in earlier centuries, and those new nation-states often defined themselves by an appeal to genealogy, a shared ancestry: the French understood themselves to be the descendants of the ancient Gauls; the Italians were successors to the ancient Romans; the Germans traced their roots back to Aryan invaders from Persia. The nation being revived was usually an ancient or prehistoric people, distant ancestors who had always lived in the land or migrated there thousands of years ago; and scholarship's role, accomplished through philology, historical inquiry, archaeology, and other approaches, was to reconnect to the past, to resuscitate the ancient identity of the nation by ferreting out information about its ancestors, uncovering what they were like, and thereby reminding the nation who it truly was or was meant to be.

Scholarly interest in the origin of the Jews was a part of this process of national identity construction—in fact, the question of Jewish origin was at the center of this scholarship because of the Jews' role as a kind of foil for the Germans and other national groups. The various theories that scholars developed to account for the origin of the Jews were often tied to the “Jewish question” that emerged in the wake of the Enlightenment and its call for the modernization, emancipation, and integration of the Jews—the question of how exactly to fit the Jews into the European political system and social

order. Prior to the Enlightenment and the onset of the modern nation-state, Jews in Europe were treated as a separate population by the Christian majority, and Jews saw and governed themselves in this way as well. The rise of modernity brought with it the question of what to do with these semiautonomous communities—whether to leave the Jews as a separate minority governed by its own laws or to try to assimilate them into the larger society. The political debate over the Jews' role in society is part of what motivated scholars of the period to investigate their origin, with the goal of understanding what had made the Jews so different from non-Jews. Was such difference an inherent and enduring racial characteristic, an indelible quality that could not be changed, or was it more recent and reversible—a consequence of social conditions like anti-Semitism that could be changed if those conditions were changed? The scholarship we are focused on is pretty much coterminous with the modern nation-state, and what was at stake in it in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the political question of how the Jews fit into the emerging political structure of the European nation-state system: whether there was a place for them within that structure, whether they could be assimilated into it or had to be treated as a separate community within the European state, or whether they needed to develop a state of their own.

The political dimensions of the study of Jewish origin remained central in European intellectual culture throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially in Germany, where the debate culminated horrifically, in the 1940s, when the Nazis implemented their “final solution” to the Jewish question. The way this scholarship abetted or allied itself with the Nazis is yet another reason that scholars today have misgivings about the search for Jewish origin, but the search itself did not end after World War II. Scholars revised their approaches in a way meant to overcome the distorting effects of political allegiance and prejudice, and they developed new approaches—new forms of textual, archaeological, and biological study—that were much more refined from a methodological and factual perspective than what earlier scholars had relied on. According to critics, however, the scholarly search for origin remained just as political as it had been before the war. The chief issue, as the reader might guess, is the establishment of the State of Israel in

1948 and its conflict with the Palestinians, a conflict that involves competing claims about the geographic origin of the Jews and their relationship to the ancient inhabitants of Judea, and whether those ancestors or the ancestors of the Palestinians were there first. The driving force is still nationalism, but late twentieth-century nationalism, and the question is no longer how the Jews fit into Europe but how the Jewish state and Palestinians fit into the global political order that has been in place since World War II.

One of the differences between the situation today and the situation prior to World War II is the rise of the notion of “indigenous people,” a legal status that entails certain rights. In a process that began at the beginning of the twentieth century but has taken off since the 1970s, the world (in the form of the United Nations) has come to recognize that indigenous communities—communities with a historical connection to precolonial or presettler societies—have rights that need to be recognized. What sometimes engenders conflict is the fact that the term “indigenous” is extremely hard to pin down—it can refer to descendants of the earliest inhabitants of the land and also to the most recent inhabitants prior to European colonization—and its ambiguity has led to differences over who should be counted as an indigenous people. The Jews who live in Israel have some of the attributes of an indigenous people. They can claim an ancestral connection to ancient inhabitants of Judea, and they have suffered the kinds of experiences that other indigenous peoples have suffered. But from a legal perspective, they do not fall clearly into the category because, with the exception of the small Jewish population present in Palestine prior to the nineteenth century, they were not present in the land at the time of its colonization—in fact, they are the ones accused of being the European colonizers. The challenge of defining who counts as indigenous is not limited to the conflict between Jews and Palestinians. Groups like the Marsh Dwellers of Iraq have gone on and off official listings of indigenous groups for no apparent reason, and many groups who see themselves as indigenous must struggle to have the rights that come with that status respected. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, now about a century old, predates the rise of indigenousness as an officially recognized status, but the question of who counts as a native and who is an outsider, who was there

first and who came later, has long been one of the historical issues at the core of the conflict.

This is where scholarship has been drawn into the fray: the question of whether a given people were the original occupants of the land or have some direct connection to such occupants would seem to be a historical one, and people on each side of the conflict have turned to scholarship to affirm their self-perceptions. Many Israelis in the 1950s and 1960s became interested in archaeology as a way to connect to their history, seeing in its discoveries confirmation of their ancestors' presence in the land in ancient times; and while archaeology has much less significance in contemporary Israeli society, it has been embraced by some settlers to establish their primacy in the West Bank, serving to uncover the presence of biblical ancestors who were there prior to the region's Palestinian population. A corresponding field of Palestinian archaeology never developed in the same way, but there did emerge other kinds of scholarship, including biblical studies like Keith Whitelam's *The Invention of Ancient Israel* from 1996, which asserted the Palestinians' status of original or first inhabitants of the land by arguing against the historical existence of a biblical Israel in Iron Age Canaan. Just as nineteenth-century scholars theorized about the origin of the Jews in support of different positions on the Jewish question, scholarship today is marshaled in support of different positions in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Indeed, the influence of the conflict may have seeped into how scholars think about the concept of origin itself. One of the most influential works to reflect in a deep way on the concept of beginnings and origins is a book by Edward Said (1935–2003), *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, which he published in 1975 prior to his more famous study, *Orientalism*. Said's argument depends on an opposition he draws between the concepts of origin and beginning. For Said an origin is a kind of metaphysical starting point, an initial state beyond history from which a later reality derives. The most famous articulation of origin in this sense is Genesis, but it can take a secular form in the guise of any philosophical or political system that purports to derive reality from a foundational moment, a founding figure, a first principle, or an inaugural state. In contrast a "beginning," according to Said, does not arise from an established

starting point. There is no one way to begin, as the history of fiction demonstrates: one can start in the middle of things if one likes or begin in one way and then start over at a later point. Said detects something authoritarian in origins: they dictate the way reality is supposed to be, hold sway over what comes after them, and impose a distinction between the chosen and the unchosen. Beginnings, by contrast, are secular, modern, and self-determining, born of a mind that embraces its power to create its own reality and chooses how its story will unfold.

Although Said was one of the world's most prominent Palestinian activists, nowhere in *Beginnings* is there any reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the work seems on the surface at least to be very detached from the conflict and from Said's identity as a Palestinian, and yet some of his commentators see a connection. This was how Said's work was read by his disciple Joseph Massad, for example, a professor of modern Arab intellectual history at Columbia University, where Said taught for forty years. Although Said was born in Jerusalem, Massad argues, he had no interest in Palestine as a point of origin in a Saidian sense, since that idea was tainted for him, and he preferred to think of Palestine as a "beginning," a point of departure for the creation of something new. By reading Said's biography into his distinction between origins and beginnings, Massad suggests that a description of origin that seems to have nothing to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was actually born of that conflict, reflecting Said's opposition to Zionism and his aspiration to develop an alternative Palestinian identity that rejected not only the Jews' historical claims but also what he took to be the origin-centeredness of Zionism. Massad's analysis suggests that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict not only is influencing how scholars think about the question of Jewish origin but also has shaped one of the most important works of relevant academic theory from the past fifty years, a book routinely cited in contemporary discussions of origins and beginnings. We will see other examples where the concept of origin has become entangled with Zionism and where resistance to origin is allied with resistance to Israel.

If the scholarly search for the origin of the Jews is unavoidably political, if it played a role in anti-Semitism, and if it is helping to feed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict today, does that mean there

is something inherently corrupted or even harmful about such a search? Are its results always going to be skewed by the prejudices and allegiances of the scholars doing the research, or is there some way to depoliticize the topic and to pursue it in a way that isn't serving the interest of either the Jews or their enemies? The answers to these questions depend on one's underlying conception of scholarship. Especially since the 1960s many scholars have become very conscious of the political dimensions of their guild: every society has its "general politics of truth," argued Michel Foucault, and scholarship is a kind of technique by which it controls the difference between the true and the false. From this perspective we could never hope to discover the origin of the Jews in an absolute sense: we can understand it only as conceived within a particular "regime of truth." But it should be noted that only some scholars are persuaded by this view. Others are pursuing the question of Jewish origin in earnest, uncovering new evidence and proposing new theories. They put their faith in the methodologies of modern scholarship, empirical evidence, and the checks and balances of peer review; and they reject the idea that the results of such scholarship are irredeemably tainted by politics, ideology, or the scholar's self-interest.

I find it impossible to dismiss the argument that the scholarship of Jewish origin, certainly as practiced in the past but also as it is being pursued today, is really at its core a form of political self-positioning. But then again if the search for the origin of the Jews is political, so too, one presumes, is the decision not to undertake the search. One of the reasons I am pursuing this quest is because it has given me a way to reflect on scholarship's rejection of origin as a politicized form of inquiry. Why is it that a question once seen as capable of being answered by scholars in an illuminating way—a question that drew me to the kind of scholarship I practice—now feels too contentious to pose? And does acknowledging the political dimensions of the question mean that we should give up trying to answer it? Maybe it is best in the end to treat the question of Jewish origin as a taboo subject, a field of inquiry too politically heated to pursue in a constructive way; but from my perspective ruling a question out of bounds for political reasons is significant—a renunciation of forms of reasoning used to understand not only the origin of the Jews but the origin of other peoples as well. If we are

to give up on this search, we should at least understand as best we can why we are closing that door.

After Origin

Given all the reasons there are *not* to investigate the origin of the Jews, what is there to learn by revisiting the question? More than two centuries of research have not yielded certain conclusions or even a stable consensus. Over the course of its history, the scholarship has been skewed by theological bias and anti-Semitism and has become entangled in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Funkenstein and other scholars have argued that ascertaining the origin of the Jews does not tell us anything important about the Jews anyways. Why pursue a quest that has proven so irresolvable and quixotic, that has been used to validate prejudice, that is arguably beside the point for understanding the Jews?

One reason is that there is still a lot of curiosity about the origin of the Jews. There are many different kinds of people interested in the origin of the Jews—Jews themselves seeking to better understand the origin of their own identity or culture; Christians and Muslims seeking to understand the prehistory of their own religious traditions; Palestinians and others whose own sense of origin is tied in some way to that of the Jews despite the antagonism, not to mention anti-Semites who think the origin of the Jews validates their prejudices. Of course, many people could not care less what scholarship has to say on the subject, or reject its conclusions on religious or political grounds, but many look to scholarship for answers, and the scholarship would seem to support many different and contradictory accounts. Whether scholarship can provide the kind of insight that people seek from it is an open question, but it may at least be helpful to clarify what it has been able to uncover about the subject, why scholars reconstruct the origin of the Jews in such different ways, and why it has proven so difficult to get to the bottom of things.

What's more, there is no reason to completely despair of scholarship's potential to illumine the origin of the Jews. There has been continued research and reflection on the subject, scholarship that has expanded the evidence, introduced new perspectives, and

refined the picture. There now exists a robust critique of the search for the origin of the Jews, scholarship that questions the motives and objectivity of those who have tried to address the question, but even that critique advances the search in a way, introducing alternative conceptions of origin that should be factored into the equation if our goal is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject, and often proposing its own alternative origin accounts of the Jews. A good portion of what follows is an attempt to sketch in a history of the scholarly search for the origin of the Jews as it has unfolded over the past two centuries, but that search is by no means over, and indeed, in some respects, it has been reenergized in the past two decades, and some of this scholarship is very cutting-edge, intriguing, and provocative. It seems worth asking what this continued research is revealing even as we wrestle with all the reasons there are to be skeptical of it. What has it uncovered about the origin of the Jews? Have scholars found a way to overcome the kind of obstacles and objections described earlier in this chapter? Where is the search going?

The following book is an exploration of what we know or think we know about the origin of the Jews. Scholars have literally written hundreds of books on the topic and come up with scores of explanations, theories, and historical reconstructions, but this book is a first-of-its-kind effort to trace the history of the different approaches that have been applied to the question, including genealogy, linguistics, archaeology, psychology, sociology, and genetics. I cannot offer the reader definitive conclusions, but I do see what follows as an attempt to push our understanding forward, to deepen how we think about the question.

Beyond wanting to illumine the history of the Jews, however, I must confess to having another reason to pursue this inquiry, one that is tied more to the concept of origin than to the Jews *per se*. My own perspective as a scholar was formed in an academic culture influenced by Michel Foucault (1926–1984), Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), and other thinkers associated with postmodernism: scholars who treated the search for origin as a false, restrictive, irrelevant, or even dangerous way of thinking and who developed alternative forms of inquiry that were premised on the absence of origin, the denial of anything that might count as a starting point,

a foundation, or a source. While I could not decipher all their arguments at the time, the message came through loud and clear that it was a kind of intellectual sin to be wondering about origins in the way I was inclined to do. Almost twenty-five years later, I see that graduate students in my field are still highly distrustful of origins. As I was completing the first draft of this book in 2015, there appeared a volume edited by the scholar of religion Russell McCutcheon, *Fabricating Origins*, that was born of this distrust. As the title of the volume suggests, many of the essays featured in it, written by young scholars fresh out of graduate school, treat origins as fictions, as something the imagination makes up. By no means has academia in general given up on the search for origins as a way of understanding why things are the way they are, but an attitude of dismissal—and a disdain for or distrust of the kind of scholarship that seeks to recover origins—remains ingrained in much of humanistic scholarship.

Beyond wanting to explore what we know about the origin of the Jews, this book is an attempt to wrestle with the distrust of origins that I have inherited from earlier scholars and that is being passed on to the next generation. The most basic question I am posing in this book is this: can scholarship today answer people's questions about origins—can it satisfy their curiosity—or are the skeptics right to dismiss this kind of inquiry as a chasing after a chimera? Many scholars see the value of this kind of intellectual quest, pursuing it through archaeology, genetics, and other fields; many other scholars are highly critical of such inquiry; and I happen to be one of those torn between these perspectives. This book is an attempt to think aloud about the contradiction between these approaches, to look at a question of origin from the vantage point of those hoping to illumine it *and* from the perspective of those dismissive of the question in as balanced a way as I know how to develop, and to see what we might learn by juxtaposing them. I am not proposing to revive the search for origin; neither am I giving it up. My hope is to help readers better understand the different ways that scholars today frame the origin of social identity, not just of the Jews but of other religious and ethnic groups as well. Whether there is any way beyond those differences is something we will wrestle with in the conclusion, but the point of our quest is not to reach a definitive

answer but to better understand what it is that we are asking—to situate present-day efforts to address the question of Jewish origin in light of the history of scholarship, to compare and contrast different approaches and theories, and to examine the motives, premises, and prejudices that color how scholars think about this subject. I certainly cannot promise that we will figure out once and for all how to begin the story of the Jews, but I will feel that I have succeeded to some extent if this book leads readers' thinking about questions of origin to a different place from where it started.