

Introduction: Approaching the History of Judaism

At the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai . . . Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called him from the mountain, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.’ . . . On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder . . .

This dramatic account of the divine revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai is preserved in the biblical book of Exodus. The history of Judaism comprises the continued and varied history of interpretation of this covenant by this ‘holy nation’ over some three millennia.¹

Over a thousand years after Moses is believed to have been vouchsafed this revelation, the Jerusalem priest and historian Josephus inserted the earliest surviving theology of Judaism composed for a non-Jewish readership into his book *Against Apion*, a defence of Jewish traditions against the calumnies of gentile authors. Josephus ascribed to Moses the creation of a new and perfect constitution for humankind, asserting that this constitution was so different from all others known in his time, such as

monarchy, democracy and oligarchy, that it could properly be encapsulated only by inventing a new term in Greek, *theokratia*, ‘theocracy’, because Moses had insisted that God should be in charge of everything: ‘He did not make piety a part of virtue, but recognized and established the others as parts of it . . . All practices and occupations, and all speech, have reference to our piety towards God.’²

By the time of Josephus, in the later first century CE, Moses was already a heroic figure shrouded in myth. Josephus reckoned Moses had actually lived some 2,000 years before his time, asserting robustly, ‘I maintain that our legislator exceeds in antiquity the legislators referred to anywhere else.’ Views about Moses among the non-Jews for whom Josephus wrote his theology were markedly less enthusiastic. That he was regarded by the Jews as their legislator was widely known among both Greeks and Romans, and in the late fourth century BCE Hecataeus of Abdera considered him ‘outstanding both for his wisdom and for his courage’. But others attacked him as a charlatan and impostor – Josephus’ contemporary Quintilian, a Roman expert on rhetoric, could even use Moses as an example of the way that ‘founders of cities are detested for concentrating on a race which is a curse to others’ without even needing to name the person he called ‘the founder of the Jewish superstition’. The more outsiders attacked Judaism, the more a pious Jew like Josephus would claim the excellence of his tradition, which has ‘made God governor of the universe’. As Josephus asked rhetorically, ‘What regime could be more holy than this? What honour could be more fitting to God, where the whole mass [of people] is equipped for piety . . . and the whole constitution is organised like some rite of consecration?’³

The contrast to other peoples was also what led Josephus to his assertion that, because all Jews are taught the laws which govern their way of life, so that ‘we have them, as it were, engraved on our souls’, they therefore agree in everything to do with their religion:

It is this above all that has created our remarkable concord. For holding one and the same conception of God, and not differing at all in life-style or customs, produces a very beautiful harmony in [people’s] characters. Among us alone one will hear no contradictory statements about God, such as is common among others – and not just what is spoken by ordinary people as the emotion grips them individually, but also in what has been boldly pronounced among certain philosophers, some of whom have attempted to do away with the very existence of God by their arguments,

while others eliminate his providence on behalf of humankind. Nor will one see any difference in our living-habits: we all share common practices, and all make the same affirmation about God, in harmony with the law, that he watches over everything.⁴

As will become apparent in the course of this book, the ‘unity’ and ‘uniformity’ in practice and belief which distinguished Jews from Greeks and other polytheists in the ancient world, with their multitude of deities, cults, myths and customs, left plenty of room for variety and diversity within Judaism, not only then but throughout its history.

A history of Judaism is not a history of the Jews, but Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people, and this book must therefore trace the political and cultural history of the Jews in so far as it impinged on their religious ideas and practices. At the same time, Judaism is a world religion – and not just in the sense that, through force of circumstance, the Jewish people had been widely scattered for millennia, so that their religious ideas have often reflected, by either adoption or rejection, the wider non-Jewish world within which Jews have found themselves living. Even if Judaism is not as divorced from ethnicity as some other world religions such as Christianity, Islam or Buddhism (although, within these religions also, religious identity can sometimes be an ethnic or cultural marker), Jewish identity was defined by religion as well as by birth long before Josephus wrote about the excellence of the special constitution ascribed to Moses. By the second century BCE at the latest, almost all Jews had come to accept as Jews those proselytes who wished to adopt Jewish customs and define themselves as Jews. Throughout most of the history discussed in this book, Judaism has had the potential to be a universal religion, and Jews have believed that their religion has universal significance, even if (unlike some Christians) Jews have never pursued a universal mission to convert others to their religion.⁵

Attempting to isolate, describe and explain the religious aspects of Jewish culture over some three millennia is a daunting task, and not only because of the abundance of material and the weight of scholarship. The past 2,000 years have witnessed a great variety of expressions of Judaism. It would be straightforward to define the essence of Judaism in light of the characteristics valued by one or another of its branches in the present day, and to trace the development of those characteristics over the centuries, and such histories have indeed been written in past centuries. But it is evidently unsatisfactory to assume that what now

seems essential was always seen as such. In any case, it cannot be taken for granted that there was always a mainstream within Judaism and that other varieties of the religion were, and should be, seen as tributaries. The metaphors of a great river of tradition, or of a tree with numerous branches, are seductive but dangerous, for the most important aspects of Judaism now may have little connection with antiquity. It is self-evident, for instance, that the central liturgical concern of 2,000 years ago – the performance of sacrificial worship in the Jerusalem Temple – has little to do with most forms of Judaism today.⁶

One way to avoid imposing on the history of Judaism an invented narrative to justify the concerns of the present day is to describe as objectively as possible the various forms of Judaism which have flourished at specific times, allowing the family resemblance between these different forms to justify discussing them all within a single history. There is much to be said for this pluralist approach, but by itself it may seem rather unsatisfactory, since outsiders have always tended to see Judaism as a single religion, however diverse it may appear from within, and rhetoric about the virtue of unity within the Jewish community has been a commonplace of Jewish religious literature since the Bible. If all the historian could achieve was to describe the host of strange expressions of Judaism in past centuries without drawing out any connection between them, the result would be a gallery of curiosities to amuse and puzzle the reader, but there would be no story to explain why Judaism has evolved as it has, and is still now a religion with influence over the lives of millions.

The approach of this book is therefore a marriage between the unapologetically linear histories of earlier generations and the ‘polythetic’ descriptions favoured by contemporary scholars concerned to keep an open mind about the claims of all traditions. The book traces the different expressions of Judaism known to have flourished alongside each other at any one time and then examines – so far as evidence allows – the relations between those varieties. It tries to establish when and where different branches of Judaism competed with each other for legitimacy or for adherents, and when and where one tolerated the other, either in a spirit of open acceptance or with grudging animosity.⁷

Judaism has a rich history of rifts, sometimes over matters which may seem minor to the outsider, but, despite the rhetoric used against their opponents by religious enthusiasts, religiously motivated violence between Jews was not common. The biblical story of Pinchas, who took the law into his own hands to strike down immorality by summary

execution of a licentious Israelite and the idolatress he had brought into his family, provided a model for zealotry, but it was invoked only rarely. Nothing within Judaism was quite like the Christian wars of religion in Europe in the early modern period, or the deep hostility which has sometimes scarred relations between Sunni and Shia in Islam. Exploring the extent of toleration within Judaism is one of the themes of this book.⁸

At the same time, a history must seek to trace developments within Judaism from one period to another, and I try whenever possible to show how each variety of Judaism claimed to relate to that of previous generations and to identify the particular elements of the earlier tradition which they actually chose to emphasize. Since adherents of most manifestations of Judaism have made claims about their faithfulness to the past, it might seem strange that variety has abounded to the extent that it has. Evidently conservative claims often masked change and innovation. This history will note which of these innovations were to influence the religious lives of Jews in later periods and which were to prove dead ends.

It is rarely easy in discussion of any part of this history to establish firm boundaries for who was a Jew. It is an error to imagine that Jewish identity was secure and unproblematic before the complexities of the modern world. At all periods the self-perception of those who considered themselves Jews might not align with the perceptions of others. Uncertainty about the status of a child of one Jewish parent was already a concern when Josephus wrote, since it was around the first century CE that Jews began to take the status of the mother as decisive rather than that of the father. Then, as now, the conversion to Judaism of a gentile might be recognized by one set of Jews and not by another. The practical solution adopted in this book is to include any individuals or groups prepared to identify themselves by all three of the main names used by Jews to refer to themselves throughout their history. 'Israel', 'Hebrew' and 'Jew' had quite specific referents in origin but came to be used by Jews almost interchangeably, and the decision of some groups which separated themselves from Judaism, such as Samaritans and some early Christians, to call themselves 'Israel' in opposition to 'Jew' marked a definitive break.

Even for those Jews who remained in the fold the connotations of these different names could vary greatly. In English, the term 'Hebrew' was quite polite in reference to a Jew in the nineteenth century but would be mildly offensive now. French Jews in the nineteenth century

called themselves ‘Israélite’ and it is only recently that ‘juif’ has lost a derogatory overtone. Shifting terminology used by Jews in Hebrew and Greek to refer to themselves in times of political stress in the first century CE suggests that this was nothing new. All depends on context, and context will in turn explain much of the development within Judaism, so that the book touches on the general history of much of the Near East and Europe, and (for later periods) the Americas and further afield, in order to explain the religious changes which are its main concern.

The impact on Jews of events in the wider world have thus shaped the periods into which the history of Judaism is divided in this book, from the empires of the Near East, Greece and Rome to the Christianization of Europe, the huge impact of Islam and the creation of the modern world from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment to the complex Jewish world today, in which the fortunes of many diaspora Jews are intimately bound up with the nation state of Israel. Just one period is defined by an event specific to Jewish history. The destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE began a new era in the development of Judaism that has had profound effects on all the forms of Judaism which survive today. It is unlikely that any Jews appreciated at the time how much their religion was going to change as a result of the loss of the Temple, but treating 70 CE as a watershed in the history of Judaism is justified not least in order to correct Christian theological conceptions of Judaism as the religion of the Old Testament superseded and rendered redundant by the advent of Christianity. The Judaism of the rabbis which has shaped the religion of all Jews in the modern world in fact evolved over the first millennium CE in parallel with the Christian Church. Rabbinic Judaism is indeed based on the collection of texts which Christians call the Old Testament and Jews call the Hebrew Bible. In particular, the rabbis designated the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, as the Torah (‘teaching’), the same term they applied more widely to all the guidance imparted to the Jewish people by divine revelation. But the rabbis did not just read the Bible literally. Through development of techniques of *midrash* (‘didactic exposition’), they incorporated into halakhah (‘law’) their interpretations of the biblical texts in conjunction with legal rulings transmitted through custom and oral tradition. In practice, the halakhah, especially as preserved in the Babylonian Talmud, is as fundamental to rabbinic Judaism as the Bible.

Over the centuries Judaism has been expressed in a wide variety of languages, reflecting these surrounding cultures. The national language

of the Jews is Hebrew, but Aramaic (the vernacular of the Near East in the first millennium BCE) is found in the Bible, most of the Jewish writings preserved from the first century CE are in Greek, and fundamental works of Jewish philosophy from the Middle Ages are in Arabic. In a book written in English it is hard to convey adequately the nuances inherent in the varied linguistic and cultural worlds from which these writings emerged, or the extent to which terminology of quite distinct origins might come to be understood by Jews as referring to the same thing. The strip of land by the eastern coast of the Mediterranean said in the Bible to have been promised to the Jewish people is identified in the earliest narratives in the Bible as Canaan but elsewhere in the biblical texts as the Land of Israel. Known in the Persian empire as the province of Yehud and under Greek rule as Judaea, the same region was designated the province of Syria Palaestina by the Roman state in 135 CE. The result can be confusing for the modern reader, but the choice of terminology was often significant, and I have allowed the sources to speak for themselves as much as possible.

My attempt to present an objective history of Judaism may strike some readers as naive. Many of the great scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, who began the scientific study of Jewish history in nineteenth-century Europe, wrote in the hope that their attempts to evaluate the ancient Jewish sources critically, unencumbered by traditional rabbinic interpretations, would serve to strengthen claims to authenticity by one or another trend within Judaism in their time. With the establishment of Jewish studies as a recognized academic discipline in western universities, particularly from the 1960s, such links with current religious polemics have become rare. Within Europe, many professors of Jewish studies are not Jewish and can claim with some credibility to approach their subject dispassionately, although Christian or atheist assumptions will of course import their own biases. This is not my position. I was born into a family of English Jews who took their Jewish identity seriously. My father's study was full of books on Judaism inherited from his father, who had been secretary of the London congregation of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews for many years and wrote books of his own, including a history of the Jews. The family practised little beyond a Sabbath-evening dinner each Friday, an annual family Seder and occasional attendance at services in Bevis Marks synagogue. My own decision as a teenager to adopt a more observant lifestyle was a form of mild rebellion (with which the rest of the family coped with admirable patience). It is probably significant that I have found a home in the Oxford Jewish

Congregation, which is unusual in the United Kingdom for housing Progressive and Masorti as well as orthodox services within a single community. How much this background has affected my perception of what was central and what was marginal in the development of Judaism will be for readers to judge.

The distinction between a history of Jewish religion and Jewish history more broadly has not always been easy to draw. The concept of 'religion' as a separate sphere of life has been a product of western Christian culture since the Enlightenment and had no precise equivalent in the ancient world, since the relation of humans to the divine was fully integrated into the rest of life. The closest equivalent to 'religion' in the ancient Hebrew language was *torah* ('teaching'), the guidance given to Israel by divine revelation encompassing areas of life which in other societies might be considered secular, such as civil and matrimonial law. As a result, this book will include discussion of practices and customs as much as theology. Systematic theology has only sporadically featured in Judaism, generally under the influence of external stimuli such as Greek philosophy, Islam or the European Enlightenment, but this does not mean that Judaism can be defined by orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy, and one of the objectives of the book will be to assert the significance of ideas at many junctions in the history of the Jews and their religion. At root, certain religious ideas percolate through the history of Judaism and render contemporary notions such as Secular Judaism, an affiliation divorced from any belief in God, problematic. Most important of these is the notion of a covenant which binds God specifically to the Jewish people and lays special duties on them in return. Throughout its history Judaism has claimed that its universal significance is encapsulated in the relationship to God of one divinely chosen group.

This book thus discusses beliefs and ideas as much as practices, institutions and communal structures. I have tried as much as possible to describe the lived religion of the mass of ordinary Jews over the centuries alongside the accounts of innovation and exotic careers of mavericks which are encountered most often in the historical record. I have tried also to allow for the possibility that movements and ideas which can only be faintly glimpsed in the surviving sources may at the time have been far more important than appeared to the later tradition. The chance discovery in 1947 of the Dead Sea scrolls in caves near Qumran revealed types of Judaism about which all knowledge had been lost for two millennia. When the early rabbis of the first two centuries CE, whose

legal teachings were preserved in the Mishnah and Tosefta in the third century, or their successors whose commentaries were incorporated into the Babylonian Talmud in *c.* 600 CE, looked back at the biblical period of the development of Judaism, the lessons which struck them most already differed greatly from the preoccupations of their ancestors.

When to begin the history? With Abraham, the patriarch, as the first to recognize that there is only one God? With Moses, receiving the law from this God on Mount Sinai? Centuries later perhaps, with the establishment by Ezra of a Jewish nation focused on the worship of the same God in the Temple in Jerusalem? Or with the completion of most books of the Bible in the second century BCE? There is something to be said for each of these options but I have chosen to start later still, in the first century CE, when Judaism was described as a distinctive form of religious life and Josephus looked back, into what he perceived as the mists of antiquity, to explain the theology, codified texts, practices and institutions of the fully fledged religion he proudly claimed as his own. We shall see that the long process through which this religion had formed over the previous centuries was sometimes faltering, and our knowledge of this process remains tantalizingly partial. At the heart of the Bible lies a story of the emergence of the distinctive religion of the Jews, but uncertainty about the dating and process of composition of key biblical texts and about the significance of archaeological evidence from the biblical period has sustained remarkably divergent interpretations of the historicity of these narratives. The rabbis inherited the biblical tradition but treated it, for the most part, ahistorically. We are therefore fortunate to have an extensive account from the first century CE, soon after the Bible had begun to be treated as sacred scripture, in which the history of the Jews and the development of their religion were explained by a learned insider versed both in the traditions of the Jews and in the most advanced techniques in his time of scientific investigation into the past. The author of that account was Josephus, and it is with his *Antiquities* that we shall start.