Preface

Human communities seem always to have looked to their past to understand their lives together in the present, and to project their lives into the future. Sometimes they have done so by (re) inventing that past by means of story, myth, and chronicle, focusing on "historical" or, more properly, "historic" moments deemed to be of seminal importance and special meaning for the group.

In the modern academy, in the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, we often seek to understand our present social, cultural, economic, and political states of affairs in the light of their antecedents as well. Our contemporary societies and civilizations are, in very real terms, significantly the outcomes of seminal moments of earlier societies and civilizations. The latter are part of how we got here and who we are today, as people living with other people in the organized human communities that we have created. And so, the modern, academically informed study of past societies and civilizations is (or ought to be) of interest to a general, interested, and well-read audience, just as much as it is for academics. And it is in this light that I have written the book you are about to read about what the early rabbis were.

This book, then, (1) is intended for and written to be read by a general audience, although my academic colleagues and particularly their students will, I hope, find it useful. The book (2) concerns a particular group, the early cadre of rabbis, that first (self-) formed in the Jewish communities of the southern Levant early in (3) a historical era—no, a historic era—that many academics and many general readers would readily

identify as a seminal period for so-called Western society, culture, and civilization. I refer to the first eight or so centuries CE. Permit me to say more about these points in reverse order.

In the West, the first eight or so centuries CE is a period bookended by Jesus' birth, on one end, and the production of the canonical text of the Quran as a consolidation of Mohammed's teaching, on the other end. Immediately before this period, the inhabitants of the Near East and of the lands of the Mediterranean basin worshipped a plethora of local gods, although, as a result of Alexander the Great's conquests, Hellenistic (Greek-like) social, cultural, linguistic, political, and religious norms had made considerable inroads eastward, from Greece and Macedonia across the eastern Mediterranean and into the westernmost parts of the Near East. And from the eastern side of the Near East, Persian rule with its culture and religious movements also had previously made inroads into, while accommodating itself to, Mesopotamian society and civilization of the Babylonian and Assyrian peoples. So, for example, in the year of Jesus' birth, the inhabitants of southwestern Syria might worship Baal and his consort Asherah, Adonis, or Zeus, Aphrodite, and Apollo, or all of them. The inhabitants of Mesopotamia might worship Marduk/Bel and Sarpanit/Zarpanitu, or Zeus, or Ahura Mazda.

Simultaneously, both in their homeland, the land of Israel (aka Judea, Judah, Yehud) in the southern Levant, and as minority, ethno-national, diaspora communities scattered around the Mediterranean and Near East, the Jews of Jesus' time adhered to social norms and religious practices, sometimes in a somewhat hellenized mode, that many of their contemporary neighbours considered both stubbornly persistent and overly exclusive. Why? Jews not only tended to shun "the gods," in favor of their one, universal, and imageless deity, YHWH, the God of Israel, but they also denied altogether the very existence of "the gods." Jews, furthermore, adhered to a body of norms and rituals they claimed to be YHWH's will, as represented especially in a document, the Torah, attributed to someone that they deemed to be an ancient prophet without peer, Moses. And as a result, Jews both in the homeland and in the diaspora sought to socially distance themselves from others, when those others among whom or beside whom they lived honored the gods in any fashion.

If, now, we were to fast-forward eight hundred years or so after Jesus' birth, society and culture in the lands around the Mediterranean basin and in the Near East would appear quite changed, and in some respects unrecognizable. True, the legacy of Roman rule (particularly in the areas of law, and civic governance and administration) would be evident throughout much of that landmass. But more startling, after the passage of these

approximately eight centuries, the God of Israel, YHWH, was *exclusively* worshipped by the vast majority of the inhabitants of this extensive geography—in cities as far flung as Cadiz, Marseille, Paris, London, Constantinople, Kairouan, Alexandria, Antioch, Damascus, Baghdad, and Susa (today, Shush). The God of Israel was as much revered by Visigothic kings in early medieval Spain as YHWH (aka Allah) alone was extoled by the caliph of Baghdad. The Roman-based law code and Christian teachings of Visigothic Spain as well as Islamic law and theology in Baghdad would equally reflect the influence of the Jewish biblical and postbiblical tradition. And the texts of Islamic prayers and Christian prayers alike would reflect not only themes but sometimes the very language of Jewish hymns. Astounding, when you think about it, is it not?!

Of course, this transformation did not happen because all these peoples had (previously) converted to Judaism and joined the Jewish people. Eight centuries after Jesus' birth, Jews were, at the best of times, treated as second-class residents by both Muslim and Christian authorities. But the fact remains that the founders and leadership of early Christianity, on the one hand, and of Islam, on the other, had quite effectively adopted and adapted the religious culture of the Jews and had used it (in part) to unite the peoples of the Mediterranean basin and the Near East under either the cross of Christianity or the banner of Islam. The early caliphs, ruling as successors to Mohammed, held both political and religious sway in the name of the Jews' God. And the Visigothic kings could be set upon their thrones or deposed by the decision of a national council upon which Christian clerics sat among the nobles, and over which these clerics had undisputed sway in the name of the same God. In the process, the worship of the gods as well as many forms of social and cultural authority associated with the worship of the gods were wiped away in these regions, not just avoided, as the Jews had done. And, at the risk of belaboring the point, our contemporary Western society and civilization is to a very significant degree the long-term results of these transformations.

How may I otherwise characterize this change, if not as the "judaizing" of these non-Jewish populations by the followers of Jesus and Mohammed?! And so, one of the compelling questions that is drawn in the wake of the foregoing account ought, in my view, to be this: What was going on in Judaism and among the Jews over this same, roughly eight-hundred-year period, during which time first Christianity and then Islam was judaizing non-Jews and thereby significantly modifying the society and culture of the West? To begin, let me compare one particularly salient feature of Jewish society around the time of Jesus' birth with comparable institutions of Jewish communal life a century or two after the initial efforts to produce

and promulgate a standardized text of the Quran (which Muslim tradition dates to the mid-seventh century CE).

When Jesus was born in the land of Israel, Judea/Yehud had for much of the previous half-millennium been ruled by a hereditary caste of priests operating, and operating out of, a temple in Jerusalem dedicated to the cult of YHWH. This temple was, at one and the same time, the highest religious and civil authority in Judea, and the chief officer and religious officiant of the temple and of all of its associated institutions and administration was its high priest. Admittedly, from the late sixth to mid-fourth centuries BCE, the then-Persian imperial power appointed a Jewish governor to oversee Judea's administration, and again for an almost century-long period, from the mid-second century BCE until the Roman conquest in the first century BCE, a priestly family, the Hasmoneans, usurped both the high priest's office and crowned themselves kings of the Jews. Nonetheless, from the late sixth century BCE to 70 CE, the Jerusalem temple, its hereditary priesthood, its institutions and administration, and its chief officer, the high priest, constituted the most important, enduring, and authoritative religious and civil-administrative force for Jews in the land of Israel, and the most important moral and religious force for Jews in the diaspora.

Let us fast-forward again to the early eighth century CE. There has been no Jerusalem temple to YHWH for more than six hundred years, and no functioning temple to the God of Israel operates anywhere else either. Gone, too, are all of the institutions, offices, and officers of religious and civil administration associated with the temple. There is no high priest. And while Jews who claim priestly descent are accorded vestigial honors, they may claim no significant authority over religious or civil aspects of Jewish life by reason of their alleged priestly bloodlines. Individual Jewish communities, usually operating as minority "assemblies" (the literal meaning of the Greek term *synagogue*) among a majority population of Christians or Muslims, are administered by local Jewish councils on which sat representatives usually chosen from among the most prosperous local Jewish families. Since prosperity tended to be hereditary, these officers of the community constituted a local Jewish "nobility" (for lack of a better term). But increasingly over the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries, all Jews, all local Jewish "assemblies," all of their council members and officers, and all of their associated local institutions are subject to a set of norms, over which a local cadre of Jewish "sages" (*hakham*, sg.; *hakhamim*, pl.), the members of the rabbinic "guild" (if I may use that term), have nearly monopolistic sway. On what grounds? Because these Jewish sages have certified one another's mastery of a shared, normative curriculum of study based on specific texts and traditions of their own choosing and/or authorship. (A self-assembled,

monopolistic guild of sorts, is it not?) This curriculum of study of a given body of texts was the same for members of this cadre in Cadiz (Spain) and in Susa, and everywhere in between. Yet, each local sage was the assumed/presumed "master" of his—yes, they were virtually all male—own Jewish community, although they consulted one another in frequent correspondence from one end of this extensive geography to the other.[1]

These Jewish sages addressed one another, and were addressed by others, using the honorific title "rabbi" (a Hebrew term meaning "my master" that connoted "my teacher"). The rabbis were not Jewish priests. They were not Jewish nobility. Nor were they a hereditary caste (although, as was common in the medieval world generally, sons of rabbis often entered the "profession" of their fathers). What rabbis needed to have was the requisite intellectual capacity to master and to constantly revisit their core curriculum, and they had to be able to afford the time to do so. So, they tended not to be paupers. Nor, per se, was rabbi necessarily a salaried profession. And this state of affairs in Jewish communities endured, generally speaking, until the early modern period, when it began to morph.

The cadre of the rabbis as a quasi-guild-like group did not appear *ex nihilo* in the eighth century. Rather, the rabbinic (the English adjective formed from "rabbi") group first formed in the second and third centuries CE. The recognition of their authority over norms of the "Way" (*halakhah*, anglicized as "halakha") to live one's life as a Jew in a community of other Jews built slowly. Only in the medieval period did the rabbis achieve a level of authority that was nearly monopolistic. But inch by inch, step by step, the rabbis' Judaism became all Jews' Judaism—"rabbinic" Judaism.

This, then, was what was transpiring among the Jews *at the very same time* as the Jewish and Gentile associates of the Jesus movement(s) morphed into early Christian assemblies and then into "Christendom," thereby judaizing the Mediterranean lands. And as the rabbis' Way (the halakha) achieved not only greater definition, but greater influence among Jews, it exerted undeniable influence on the development of the Way (Arabic: *sharia*) a Muslim was to live his/her life, when Islam was (re) judaizing

1. All this said, it is the case that at least until sometime in the ninth century CE, the principal rabbinic sages, entitled *gaon* (sg.) and *geonim* (pl.), who headed Mesopotamia's several major rabbinic academies enjoyed preeminence in two respects: (1) the interpretation of the texts of the sages' shared curriculum; and (2) the interpretation of the behavioral and ritual norms derived from these texts. Even so, the *geonim* were viewed as first among equals, and local rabbinic sages were the undisputed final authorities in these matters in their communities. Moreover, beginning in the ninth century, the prestige of the *geonim* began steadily to dwindle, until it was all but extinguished several centuries later. See Boyarin, *Traveling Homeland*, chs. 1–2.

the Near East, North Africa, and southern Spain (in many of these regions after Christianity had already done so).

And so, this volume, as its title indicates, seeks to elucidate what the early rabbis were, focusing on *the earliest point at which evidence allows us meaningfully to discern their emergence as a distinctive social formation*, that is, as an organized cadre of sages shaped principally (a) by social interactions with one another structured especially around the study of a common curriculum that they were initially to master and thereafter to continuously study, and (b) by an associated, shared "myth" about the core elements of that curriculum. In my view, that point is sometime in the (late) second century CE and the (first half of the) third century in the land of Israel. This is a period in which, all around the "early rabbis," both in the land of Israel and in adjacent territories, the early Christian assemblies (Greek: *ekklesia*, sg.), in many locales still significantly intertwined with local Jews and Jewish assemblies, rapidly developed. It is the period and region in which (as popular chaos theory likes to say) the flap of the wings of the butterfly caused the whirlwind that several and more centuries later changed the nature of Jewish communal authority, on the one hand, and that "judaized" the Western world via Christianity and Islam, on the other.

I hope that I have now piqued your interest in the choice of topic conveyed in this book's title, *What Were the Early Rabbis?* Of course, I shall have much more to say about this choice in chapter 1. But I should now like to say something about the subtitle of this volume.

This book is billed as an introduction. I mean by this that I did not write this volume for specialists, although the scholarship of many specialists stands behind it (including my own). What follows in these several hundred pages assumes no prior knowledge about the early rabbis, their literature or history, or about rabbinic Judaism. If I assume anything at all, it is a general interest in the historical, social, or religious developments of the first several centuries CE in the lands of the Mediterranean basin and the Near East. As to which specific audiences may find this book of particular interest and why—I have spelled this out in chapter 1 as well. Let me say here, however, that a general readership interested in the history of Judaism, or in the development of early Christianity in context, or in the antecedents of Islam, or in Greco-Roman, Near Eastern culture and society, or (more generally) in the nature of religious institutions and their social formation and transformation should find reading this book a welcome addition to their knowledge.

Because the book is intended as an introduction for nonspecialists, I have written it in a style that is more pedagogical and (at times) even colloquial than scholarly and academic. I use metaphors, and I ask leading and

sometimes rhetorical questions to highlight points and to make the writing more conversational. I tell (always historically based) stories, at first glance seemingly tangential in nature, to draw the reader into important topics. (One may think of them as "shaggy-dog" accounts, that is, the telling of a story that seems to wanders far from its principal focus, only to find its way back.) Nor have I exhaustively footnoted this volume, as one would an academic monograph. I have used footnotes to clarify, edify, and to indicate where the reader might find further readings on particular points, as well as to indicate my specific dependence on others' ideas. By contrast, I have only sparingly, but not generally, used footnotes to register the scholarly debates about this or that matter, or to reference the fulsome body of scholarly literature on a subject. Such a level of footnoting is expected in an specialist's publication for specialists, which this book is not. And in a similar vein, the bibliography at the end of this book serves primarily to provide accurate references for publications mentioned in "shorthand" only in the footnotes; so the bibliography is not meant to be exhaustive of the book's subject matter.

And now, the last clause of the subtitle: *from a Sociocultural Perspective*. Why? For several reasons. First, in my own academic work over the course of more than forty-six years, I have melded the perspectives and methods of history, literary history, and literary analysis, on the one hand, with sociological and anthropological perspectives and approaches, on the other. Throughout my career, these approaches have all complemented one another in dealing with the arcane and often historically problematic evidence for the ancient world generally, for the first several centuries CE specifically, and for the early rabbis especially. In other words, unapologetically stated, this is who I am, and that is reflected in this book. That is the first point.

Second, and closely related to the foregoing, I am convinced that what one observes as historical, organized religions (their established belief systems, their institutions, and their associated religious authorities) are not only embedded in their respective societies and cultures, but are constructs of the latter and influence one another's development over time. If you, by contrast, maintain that historical, organized religions as we observe them are revealed, or static, or are sui generis (that is, a thing/realm apart from others), then reading this volume will expose you to another way of looking at these matters.

My third reason is this. As I will indicate more fully in chapter 1, the evidence at hand makes it notoriously difficult to sort out reliably the developmental history of the early rabbinic group and the roles of its principal, early leaders in that development in the first several centuries

CE. That is not to say that it is impossible to do so.[2] But it is an exercise extensively fraught with methodological hurdles to overcome, and would require a very academically styled book with all of the "ifs, ands, or buts" demanded by the problems inherent in the surviving evidence. So I have chosen another path in this book. I have tried not to present a "movie" of the early rabbinic movement in its first several centuries of development, but more of a "snapshot" of it as close to its inception as available, fulsome, and unproblematic evidence allows. That snapshot is of a group already reasonably well formed socially by the end of the second and mid-third centuries CE. For the rabbis in this snapshot, we may with confidence say what their core, shared curriculum of study was. We have the very document(s) they subjected to lifelong, devoted analysis as rabbis and would-be rabbis, and so we may build a profile of competencies expected of bona fide members of this early rabbinic cadre. Furthermore, we may inquire why this profile "made sense" to members of the cadre, and why it might have made sense (or why the rabbis hoped it might make sense) to the people of the Jewish communities of the land of Israel near the end of the second and in the third centuries CE. These are all issues for which perspectives and approaches of sociology and anthropology are particularly well suited. Why? Because these issues deal with matters of social or group formation and identity, and their sustainability or durability in a larger social and cultural context. Therefore, any reader of this volume who has ever taken an introductory sociology or anthropology course (and I make absolutely no assumptions that any of this book's readers have) will recognize underneath and in between this book's lines a number of fairly standard sociological and anthropological concepts—such as group identity formation, socialization, internalization, routinization, rationalization, legitimation, mythologization, plausibility, authority structures, reference groups, social stratification, elites, etc.[3] That said, I have made every effort *not* to distract the reader with the jargon and technical terminology of the disciplines of sociology or anthropology. Instead I have tried to couch this book's claims, discussions, analyses, and arguments in the most colloquial, conversational, and accessible language that I can muster, given the content of this volume and the concepts that underpin it.

2. Moreover, I have tried to write a (short) history of the early rabbinic movement for a general readership of nonspecialists, to the degree that our evidence reasonably allows. That account may be found in Lightstone, *In Seat of Moses*, ch. 2, extracts of which are presented for your convenience as the appendix to this volume.

3. For those who are interested, a very short, now more than fifty-year-old textbook by Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology*, deftly introduces novice students of sociology to most of these concepts.