

EGYPT, EMPIRE AND JUDAISM, 650 BC–AD 650

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The very title of this volume reminds us that in Egypt (and not only there) religious identities were linked to and shaped by political formations and imperial projects, not separate from them. Nor is this a linkage confined to Roman and post-Roman times, as anyone can attest who wandered among the treasures of the British Museum's 'Egypt: Faith after the Pharaohs' exhibition that inspired this volume, many of which precede by centuries any nesting of Roman eagles on the Nile, and which include precious papyri from periods of Persian and Hellenistic rule over pharaonic lands.

This linkage suggests something we might find disconcerting had we not imbibed, *nolens volens*, so much Foucault in our youth: that the representations of any religion produced at any given point in time are not, or not only, the product of any essential attribute of that religion, but rather (or also) the product of political processes of power and resistance. Many historians today are inclined to accept such a view—despite its implication that, since historians only have access to representations produced in the past, and are moreover also subject to the politics of their own present, every history they write would be doubly structured by power.

Epistemology is above my pay grade. But what I would like to do in this essay is push towards its more radical implications this linkage between empire and religious identity, power and representation. If we take this linkage with imperial power seriously, what are the consequences for what we thought we knew about 'religious identity' in Egypt? (I put the term in scare-quotes because it is not one I would choose, in part for the reason just mentioned, in part for others best left to a different essay.)

In pursuit of that question I will focus on one case, and summarize how Judaism, across its very long

history in the lands of the Nile, provided Egyptians of many different periods, polities and faiths—among them pharaonic, Hellenistic, Roman, Christian and Muslim—with ways of thinking about themselves and their relationship to power. (To this list I should of course add 'Jewish' as well, but my emphasis here will be more on the work that non-Jews did with 'Judaism', than what Judaism might have meant to a self-identified Jew.) I will suggest that this 'thinking with Judaism' in the context of imperial power was so important that it has, in fact, shaped much of what we think we know about Judaism in Egypt. The ways in which Egypt's inhabitants put 'Judaism' to work in their thinking about power and piety affected the possibilities of existence for Judaism in Egypt to such a degree that even in cases where there had for long been no living Jews to be found—as in my concluding examples—Egyptians were capable of creating figures of Judaism from, so to speak, the entrails of their own traditions.

Already in some of our earliest sources we can see Egyptians and Jews (both words are anachronistic) making sense of themselves in terms of each other. Starting sometime around 650 BC, we find an Israelite garrison and an Egyptian one defending the frontier side by side on the island of Elephantine, at the southern limits of ancient Egypt (Grelot 1986; Porten 2003; Kahn 2007). There they worshipped in close proximity, with a 'Temple of the Jewish God YHW' near that of the local Egyptian deity, the ram-god Khnum.¹ Though their collaboration began earlier, it comes most sharply into our documentary field of vision after the Persian king Cambyses conquered Egypt in 525 BC.² It is this period of Persian imperial rule that is illuminated by an extraordinary 'archive' of documents written in Aramaic by or for the Jews of Elephantine, roughly from the years 495 until 400 BC.

¹ On religious practices in Elephantine see Alyoueny 1981; Bolin 1995; Dion 2002; Kottsieper 2003.

² On Cambyses' conquest, see Sternberg-El Hotabi 2003 and Yamauchi 1996. For discussion of the chronology see Devauchelle 1998.

Among the more famous of those documents is one of the very few attesting to friction between Egyptians and Jews: a letter (included in the exhibition) that a man called Hananiah wrote to the Jewish garrison of Elephantine in the fifth year of King Darius' rule (419 BC). The letter is known as the 'Passover letter' because in it King Darius apparently instructs his governor or satrap, Arsames, to tell the Egyptians of Elephantine to stay away from their Jewish neighbours during Passover: 'it has been sent from the king to Arsames the prince, saying: keep away from the Jewish garrison' (C21/B13/TAD A4.1).³ From two other papyri we learn that nine years later, when Arsames was absent from Egypt, the Egyptians destroyed the Jewish Temple:

In the month of Tammuz, year 14 of Darius the king, when Arsames had departed and gone to the king, the priests of Khnum the god..., in agreement with Vidranga, who was chief here, (said), saying: 'The Temple of YHW the God which is in Elephantine the fortress let them remove from there.' ... [They] broke into that Temple, demolished it to the ground, ... But the basins of gold and silver and the (other) things which were in that Temple—all (of these) they took and made their own ... (C30/B19/TAD A4.7, ll. 14–43; see also C 31/B20/A4.8).⁴

The same document tells of how order was restored, and of the diplomatic missions sent by the Jews of Elephantine to the High Priest in Jerusalem, and to the governors of Judah and Samaria, in order to gain permission to rebuild the Temple. Permission was granted in 407 BC, but *without* the privilege of carrying out the animal sacrifices that the earlier Temple had enjoyed (Lindberger 2001). In 399 BC the Jewish garrison at Elephantine vanishes from the historical record.

Why did the Egyptians destroy the Temple of the God YHW? We can only hypothesize, but one answer might be that Egyptians resented the Jews as allies of the Persians, whom they viewed as their oppressors. In this interpretation, the Jews are attacked because they represent something else—in this case, imperial Persian power: a process we could already call 'Egyptians

thinking with Judaism'. Or we could relate the destruction to the 'Passover letter' King Darius had sent nine years before. Why Passover? Perhaps the traditional Jewish sacrifice of a paschal lamb offended the Egyptian priests who were acolytes of the ram-god Khnum, making the festival a special point of friction. For those attracted to biblical echoes, this explanation has the virtue of evoking Moses' objection in Exodus 8.26 to Pharaoh's request that the Hebrews remain in Egypt rather than go out into the desert to make their sacrifice: 'Lo, if we shall sacrifice the abomination [sacred animal] of the Egyptians, will they not stone us?'

But we could also imagine that the Egyptians were offended as much by the 'history' the sacrifice commemorated as by the species sacrificed: offended, that is, by the festival's ritual re-enactment of the defeat of Egypt and the drowning of its armies as described in Exodus. Perhaps the priests of Khnum, becoming aware (some two centuries before the Septuagint translations) of the negative roles played by figures of Egypt in the work of self-definition done by the Jews' Passover, began to develop their own commemorations interpreting 'the Exodus' in counter-dialogue with the Hebrews' version. From this perspective, the Passover attacks at Elephantine could be seen as symptoms not only of indirect protests against imperial power, but also of a developing Egyptian sense of history in which the Jews were beginning to be understood as figures inimical to Egyptian piety, sovereignty and prosperity.

The priests of Khnum have left us no papyri, no version of the events in their own words. But in the following century, after Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt in 332 BC, we do start to find evidence of precisely such Egyptian traditions about the Jews. Of course we should not naively treat these traditions as simply continuous with what came before. Greek empire brought with it new ways of thinking about governance and politics, new questions about the world, new tools with which to work on those questions, and even a new language (Greek) in which to ask them. These new questions and tools

³ C21/B13/TAD A4.1 refers to the three editions and translations of this text: C=Cowley 1923, no. 21; B=Porten 2011, no. 13; TAD=Porten and Yardeni 1986–1989, no. A4.1. On the status of this text, see Gass 1999. The reconstruction of line 3 given here is from Porten 1968, 129 and 311–12, following suggestions in Grelot 1954 and Galling 1964. The phrase was an attempt to fill in a lacuna, and Porten later abandoned this

reconstruction (Porten 2011, 127, n. 13). This does not, to my mind, remove the possibility that the ensuing conflict had ritual roots. See also Schäfer 1997, 124–26. Briant 2002, 603–7, on the other hand, sees here simply a land dispute with the priests of Khnum. My thanks to Bezalel Porten for his personal communication on this subject.

⁴ For abbreviations, see n. 3 above.

transformed the kinds of thinking that Egyptians could do with Judaism.

But neither should we be in too much of a hurry to treat ideas about Jews that we discover in Hellenistic Egypt as entirely discontinuous from those of previous centuries. Certainly Egypt's own inhabitants did not do so. Indeed, history was itself an important tool of Hellenistic empire: the many peoples that Alexander's arms brought under Greek rule needed to be intertwined, not just by conquest, but also by a shared sense of origins and destiny capable of supporting newly cosmopolitan visions of the polity.⁵ This need to re-deploy the past in order to produce the present generated histories of Egypt such as the one written c. 320 BC by a Greek historian called Hecataeus of Abdera, which survives only as excerpts quoted in the works of later historians. One of these excerpts preserves the earliest non-biblical version of the Exodus story we possess. In it Hecataeus described a time in the long distant past, before the Greeks had even been dreamed of, when Egypt was afflicted by a terrible plague:

The common people ascribed their troubles to the workings of a divine agency; for indeed, with many strangers of all sorts dwelling in their midst and practicing different rites... their own traditional observances in honor of the gods had fallen into disuse. ... At once, therefore, the aliens were driven from the country. The most outstanding and active among them banded together and, as some say, were cast ashore in Greece and certain other regions.... But the greater number were driven into what is now called Judaea, which is not far distant from Egypt and was at that time utterly uninhabited. The colony was headed by a man called Moses, outstanding both for his wisdom and for his courage (Hecataeus of Abdera, *Aegyptiaca*, excerpts in Diodorus, *Library of History*, 40.3.1–3; Walton and Geer 1967, 279–83; cf. Bar-Kochva 2010, 100–3).

Moses, Hecataeus tells us, also founded a new religion, distinguished by its ban on the worship of images, and especially noteworthy for the misanthropy or a-sociality of its adherents, 'for as a result of their own expulsion from Egypt he [Moses] introduced an unsocial [separate from men] and intolerant mode of life (*ἀπάνθρωπὸν τινα καὶ μισόξενον βίον*)'.⁶

This brief account provides a beautiful example of how Hellenistic historians turned to Egyptian history in order to provide an account of the origins of their own world: in this case, an account of the origins of the Greeks (and elsewhere the Babylonians), as well as of the Jews. But given that Hecataeus tells us that he drew on some version of Egyptian sources in crafting this account (Bar-Kochva 2010, 109–10, and see below), it also provides the earliest window we have into how *Egyptians could draw upon their past in order to create historical representations of Jews and Judaism with which to make sense of their present place in the world*.⁷

Roughly a generation after Hecataeus we find a native Egyptian version of precisely such a history. Its author was Manetho, a priest of Heliopolis during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (282–246 BC).⁸ As an ethnic Egyptian and a priest, Manetho had greater access than Hecataeus to the physical and textual remnants of Egyptian history. But from both accounts it becomes clear that these Egyptian histories of the origins of the Jews drew upon a number of traditional themes that were much older still, themes that had long shaped the ways in which Egyptians thought about the ups and downs of their history.

One of these themes was that of foreign invasion by a people known as the Shepherds or Hyksos, who swept into Egypt and dominated it for more than a hundred years circa the seventeenth century BC.⁹ After

⁵ For multicultural history, see Hartog 1996, 73–75. On Hecataeus specifically, see also Redford 1986, 281–82.

⁶ On the complexities of this fragment see Mendels 1983; Albertz 2001; Grabbe 2008; Bar-Kochva 2010, 90–135.

⁷ Hecataeus dismissed the validity of Egyptian traditions about the origins of the Athenians, but he seems to have accepted their traditions concerning the Babylonians, the Colchi, and the Jews (Bar-Kochva 2010, 113, 115–16). He also drew on biblical material, although he wrote before the translation of the Torah into Greek. There is a debate about the valence of Hecataeus' representation of Jews and Judaism. J. Gager argues that Hecataeus' 'non-condemnatory' rhetoric was transmuted into anti-Judaism by subsequent Greek writers (Gager 1983, esp. 39–40, 69–76). Against this, P. Schäfer contends that the basic elements of anti-Judaic rhetoric can already be found in Hecataeus and Manetho (Schäfer 1997, 15–39). See also Berthelot 2008.

Bar-Kochva contrasts Hecataeus' critical comments about the Jews and their way of life with his 'determination to justify or explain away every deplorable or strange aspect of Egyptian life' (Bar-Kochva 2010, 132–35).

⁸ Quotes from Manetho are given by fragment number from Waddell 1948, followed by the passage of Josephus that cites them. On Josephus' Manetho see Raspe 1998 and Pucci ben Zeev 1993. On Manetho as ethnic historian in an imperial age see Moyer 2011, 84–141, and Dillery 2015, *passim*. On Manetho's sources, and his adaptation of 'proto-apocalyptic' narratives, including the *Oracle of the Lamb*, see Dillery 2015, 301–3.

⁹ On the Hyksos, see Goharghi 1999. The association of Hyksos ('rulers of foreign lands') with 'shepherds' is a false etymology. See Bietak 2001. The etymology is Manetho's, fr. 42; Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.82–83.

their defeat and expulsion (c. 1555 BC), retrospective stories about the Hyksos became an important motif in Egyptian political and historical thought.¹⁰ (A famous example of this type of 'historical propaganda' comes from an inscription known as the Tutankhamun Restoration Stela today in the Cairo Museum.) The point of such stories was to demonstrate how, through careful attention to the proper maintenance of temples and their cult, the good king regains divine favour, and catastrophe becomes prosperity.¹¹

Many centuries later, as we have just seen in the examples of Hecataeus and Manetho, Egyptians could draw upon these traditions to cast the Jews as the degenerate descendants of defeated invaders from the distant past.¹² But we should not forget that this strategy towards the Jews was itself part of a broader Egyptian discourse of historical theodicy that re-deployed ancient traditions in order to address a series of foreign imperial conquerors: Assyrian, Persian, Greek, Roman. The stories were used to emphasize the dangers 'aliens' posed to Egypt, to rally resistance to them, and even to cast contemporary invaders as descendants of those expelled by Egypt long ago, and therefore doomed to a similar fate.¹³ The histories produced by Hecataeus, Manetho, Chaeremon, and others (including Jews, such as Artapanus Judaeus¹⁴) could be understood as part of this process, in which the traditional

tools with which Egyptians had fashioned images of enemies now long forgotten (such as the Shepherds) were applied in the service of new struggles taking place in a multicultural Hellenistic court in which native Egyptians deployed their history in competition with Jews, Greeks, and others for prestige.

The Jewish translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek—the Septuagint—can itself be understood as a product of this same competition. It was undertaken, according to ancient tradition, in Alexandria at the behest of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (282–246 BC): that is, at more or less the same time as Manetho was writing his summation of the glories of Egyptian history (Hermann and Baumgärtel 1923, 48–50; *CPJ* 1.1, pp. 32, 42).¹⁵ We might see both projects as (among other things) products of a competition among the elites of subject peoples for prestige in the eyes of their historically minded overlords. The Jews, like the Egyptians, were translating the chronicles of their heroic past into a language that their Greek sovereigns could understand. The process of translation may even have given new edge to the competition. The increasing availability of Jewish scriptures in Greek may have made Egyptians more aware of (and more offended by) the Hebrew Bible's negative representations of their country and their ancestors, further inspiring the production of Egyptian narratives about Jews.¹⁶

¹⁰ The Hyksos retreated to Palestine c. 1555 BC, but remained a threat for another half-century or more. The New Kingdom in Egypt (Dynasties 18–20) lasted from roughly 1569 BC (shortly before the expulsion of the Hyksos) to around 1076 BC (Spalinger 2001; Murnane 2001).

¹¹ Redford 1986, 260–61, 264–65. A very early example of such a lamentation is found in the fragments from the palace at Tod, celebrating the achievements of Senwosret I, of Dynasty 12 (1971–1928 or 1958–1913 BC).

¹² J. J. Collins (2000) explores this association of the Jews with the Hyksos, drawing out the political implications of the retelling of exodus narratives by both Jews and Egyptians. See also Davies 2001.

¹³ In the Graeco-Roman period, for example, we hear echoes of these analogies in works of prophetic literature such as the *Oracle of the Lamb*, works that 'foretold' invasion and promised liberation. The prophecy of the Lamb is edited by K. Th. Zauzich (1983). It is a composite-text and difficult to date, but the extant demotic version was put together at least two centuries after Manetho's *floruit*. For a survey of the scholarship, see Ritner 2003, 445–49; Gozzoli 2006, 293–97. On the genre of prophecy in Egyptian/demotic literature, see Koenen 1968. See also Fragment 1 of the first-century Egyptian priest Chaeremon (Van der Horst 1984, 8–9, 49–50). In this tradition the conflict

was understood as an enduring confrontation between the followers of Isis and Osiris, and worshippers of Seth (= Baal). On this tradition's place in Egyptian anti-Judaism see van Henten and Abusch 1996.

¹⁴ Like Hecataeus and Manetho, we know of Artapanus only because fragments of his work are preserved in later histories, in Artapanus' case those of the Greek historian Alexander Polyhistor. For the fragments, see Jacoby 1954, no. 726, pp. 680–86. On Artapanus, see Koskenniemi 2002; Kugler 2005; Jacobson 2006.

¹⁵ *CPJ* = Tcherikova and Fuks 1957. An Egyptian Jewish account of the tradition is provided by the second-century BC *Letter of Aristaeas* (trans. Hadas 1973; ed. Pelletier 1962), but scholarship is sharply divided about its reliability. A. van der Kooij (2008), for example, preserves the hope that the letter can tell us something about the Septuagint and its Alexandrian context. Against that hope, see Carbonaro 2008. T. Rajak (2008) attempts a mediation. See also in the same volume Gruen 2008, and, more generally, Wasserstein and Wasserstein 2006. But see now especially Wright 2015.

¹⁶ Kasher (1985) argued, somewhat implausibly, that Manetho was himself motivated by the Septuagint to counter the humiliating picture of Egypt in the Hebrew Bible. Cf. Schäfer 1997; Gruen 1998; and especially Borgeaud 2007.

Over the course of the next three centuries of Greek and then Roman rule in Egypt, the 'Manethine' negative image of Moses and the Jews was put to many uses. Rather than making sense of their vicissitudes by telling stories about the Hyksos or about general neglect of the gods, Egyptians could use Jews to do the work of these earlier motifs, as when a prophetic papyrus from the Roman period warns Egyptians of impending disaster, when 'impious people will destroy your temples', 'your largest temple will become sand for the horses' and Jews will inhabit the sacred city of Helios. The solution? 'Attack the Jews', 'lawbreakers' who have already been 'once expelled from Egypt by the wrath of Isis' (*CPJ* 3.520, late second–early third century AD, as quoted in Frankfurter 1993, 189–91).¹⁷

I will not attempt to explain how and why this shift occurred—that is, how it began to make sense to many Egyptians, both native and Greek, to understand their past history and their present circumstances under Greek or Roman rule in terms of Judaism. Instead, let me simply offer an example of how powerful that sense could be, and how separated it could become from what we might want to call 'reality'. The 'Acts of the Alexandrine Martyrs' are stories of heroic citizens risking death to defend their city's freedoms from the tyrannical power of Rome and its malicious agents, 'usually the Jewish community resident in Alexandria' (Harker 2008, 1). Isidorus, for example, came before the emperor Claudius (r. AD 41–54) to complain of 'my native city's sufferings' and proclaimed 'I am... the gymnasiarch of the glorious city of Alexandria. But you [Claudius] are the cast off son of the Jewess Salome!' The emperor was not amused: Isidorus was executed (Musurillo 1954, 18–26).¹⁸

A delegate in a later embassy sometime between AD 105 and 112 deployed similar terms to the emperor Trajan:

Hermaiscus: 'Why, it grieves us to see your Privy Council filled with impious Jews.' Caesar said: '... I am telling you Hermaiscus: you are answering me insolently, taking advantage of your birth.' Hermaiscus said: 'What do you mean, I answer you insolently, greatest Emperor? Explain this to me.' Caesar said: 'Pretending that my Privy Council is filled with Jews.' Hermaiscus said: 'So then, the word 'Jew' is offensive to you? In that case you ought rather to help your own people and not play the advocate for the impious Jews.'¹⁹

Some historians have wondered which Salome could have been Claudius' mother (Salome I would be too old, while Salome II, famous from the story of John the Baptist, was born a generation after Claudius), or whether the Roman Senate of Trajan's day might indeed have been full of Jews. (It was not.) (Musurillo 1954, 168–72). But the search for a Roman reality behind the charges misses the point of these texts: they are the product of a discourse that represented the struggle against a foreign and imperial tyranny in terms of a struggle against the Jews.

Representation and reality are here mutually constitutive. The earliest texts of the Alexandrian martyr genre presented themselves as accounts of embassies sent to negotiate with the emperor the consequences of the lethal Alexandrian riots against the Jews in the year AD 38, events made famous to posterity through the writings of Philo (who lived through the riots and participated in the embassies) and later Josephus.²⁰ Those riots were themselves to some extent the product of existing Graeco-Egyptian discourses about Jews as enemies of the polity. The accounts of Alexandrian martyrdom produced in the wake of those riots and their attendant embassies became in turn powerful vehicles for discourses representing the Jews as enemies of Egypt, the Romans (if they protected or supported the Jews) as 'Jewish' tyrants, and the

¹⁷ On this papyrus, known as the Oracle of the Potter, see Bohak 1995 and Koenen 2002. Other versions of the oracle mention other enemies, such as the Alexandrians and Greeks.

¹⁸ The dating is debated, but almost certainly falls between AD 41 and 53. If after 43/44, the case was against Agrippa II. If earlier, it was against Agrippa I, whose visit to Alexandria had sparked the riots of AD 38. On the political context of this story and the difficulties of its dating, see Harker 2008, 10–24.

¹⁹ Hermaiscus was saved from death when the bust of Serapis that he was carrying began to sweat, an event interpreted by the

emperor as an omen. Jewish privy council: *Acta Hermaisci* 3.41–53, in Musurillo 1954, 45. Sweating statues were a standard type of marvel in Antiquity. See, for example, Plutarch, *Coriolanus* 38.1 and *Alexander*, 14.8–9. Some centuries later John Lydus states that weeping or sweating statues portend internal disorder and civil strife; see his *De ostentis*, proem. 8 (Wachsmuth 1897, 16).

²⁰ Although a number of Philo's and Josephus' writings are relevant here, a good starting place is the introduction, commentary and appendices to Barclay 2007.

Egyptians as martyrs to both. We know from the surviving papyrological evidence that these texts circulated widely, and continued for centuries to be 'read in Egypt wherever people could read' (Harker 2008, 2), thereby presumably shaping future possibilities of coexistence.

For example, in AD 66 when the citizen body of Alexandria met to elect delegates for a mission to Rome, the crowd spotted three Jews, assailed them with cries of 'spies' and 'enemies', and burned them to death. During the ensuing riot Roman legions and Alexandrines entered the Jewish quarter and killed thousands. Josephus says 50,000 (Josephus, *War* 2.490–97; see also Feldman 1993, esp. 117–18). In AD 115 the citizens of Alexandria again attacked the Jews and called in the Roman legions, claiming that 'impious Jews' were planning to invade the city (*CPJ* 2.158a, col. VI; Fuks 1953; Pucci Ben Zeev 1981, 1982 and 1983; Smallwood 1981; Barnes 1989). The Jewish population of Alexandria was virtually eliminated (*CPJ* 2.158a, col. I; Eusebius, *Church History* 4.2–3).

In the rest of Egypt the Jews revolted. According to our sources, Jews slaughtered their Egyptian neighbours, tore down Egyptian temples and destroyed statues of the gods: a list of horrors suspiciously akin to those attributed to Moses and his followers by Manetho and the Egyptian Exodus tradition.²¹ Papyri preserve mothers' prayers to the gods, begging them to protect their children from being defeated by the Jews (*P.Giss.* 24 = *CPJ* 2.437).²² Native Egyptian priests mobilized peasant armies, Greek citizens formed militias, and an expeditionary army reinforced the regular Roman legions. By AD 117 the Jews of Egypt, city and countryside, were destroyed.

With these victories 'real' Jews more or less disappear from Roman Egypt. From the following three centuries scholars have identified no more than forty-four papyri that *may* refer to Jews, and in most of those the identification seems improbable. But these papyri do show that even in the absence of Jews, their memory

could still be put to work. A petition from the town of Oxyrhynchus in 199/200 invoked the goodwill the city had shown to the Romans during the 'war against the Jews', and added that 'even now they [are] keeping the day of victory as a festival every year'. In other words, the Oxyrhynchites (and perhaps other towns as well) were celebrating the defeat of the Jews some eighty years after the fact, much as we today might celebrate the end of the First or the Second World War (*CPJ* 2.450; see also Modrzejewski 1995, 224). If we are to believe a critique of theatrical and athletic spectacles written at about the same time, some places staged representations of Jews in some sort of subjection: a funny sight, judging from the papyrus' description of a mime imitating a 'man bearing a Jewish burden (Ἰουδαϊκὸν φορτίον)'. 'Why do you laugh? Why are some of you disgusted at what was said or at the man you see?' (What this Jewish burden was we do not know: the most likely options are either a religious object such as Torah or tefillin, or a representation of the special Jewish tax burden that had been paid by the Jews before their destruction [*CPJ* 3.519, late second–third century AD].)²³ The *Acta Alexandrinorum* hit the height of their popularity (or at least, of their survival in the papyrological record) in this same period as well (Harker 2008, 2). And as late as the third century we still find Egyptian oracles and prophetic texts, such as a version of the 'Oracle of the Potter', that explain the miseries of Egypt in terms of Isis' anger at impurity, and urge readers to 'go against the Jews', though it does not seem that there were many (or indeed any) Jews to go against.

The point bears stressing: Jews could remain useful, even as they became impossible to find. Egypt provides a particularly stark example of this curious phenomenon, because the (near?) elimination of the Jews there in the early second century coincided with a new religion's rapid rise along the Nile. Christianity placed figures of Judaism at the centre of its imagination more than any cult of Isis or Osiris ever had. We need

²¹ Appian, *Civil Wars* 2.90; *Historia Augusta*, *Life of Hadrian* 5; Dio Cassius 68.32, 69.8; and Eusebius, *Church History*, 4.2–3. Cf. the papyri in *CPJ* 2.435–3.500, as well as Tcherikover's comments in *CPJ* 1.86–93, and Barclay 1996, 79, n. 69.

²² The edition has 'roasted' rather than 'defeated', but see Bagnall and Criboire 2006, 157–58.

²³ A reading of Jewish texts such as *Lamentations Rabbah* might yield a rabbinic perspective on this ritual representation of defeat. Allen Kerkeslager attempts to assign the text a much earlier date (c. AD 40), in order to interpret it as referring to the ridicule suffered by a naked Jewish athlete in a Greek gymnasium, the burden being a circumcised penis (Kerkeslager 1997).

not rehearse here what everyone already knows: that Christianity emerged from Judaism, a New Israel (as Christians would come to understand it) from an Old. Indeed the earliest writings of the followers of Jesus—some of which were later gathered into what came to be called the canonical New Testament, others not—are full of concern about the relationship between their movement and Judaism, and about how to distinguish between the two. Already in their earliest writings, such as the letters of Paul, we can see that concern expressed in terms of the danger of falling from the one to the other: a danger that Paul distilled very early into the concept of ‘Judaizing’, that is, of Gentile converts to Christ acting or believing in an inappropriately ‘Jewish’ way (Gal. 2.14).²⁴

As a result of the importance of Judaism and Judaizing as a term of criticism in the thought and writings of the earliest followers of Jesus, the terms remained central to the Christian imagination long after Christianity had separated from Judaism, grown far larger than its ‘parent’, and indeed become the official religion of the Roman empire, capable of mobilizing the full force of imperial law and power against its rivals, whether pagan or Jewish. Volumes have been and continue to be penned about the place of Jews and Judaism in the thought of theologians such as Sts Augustine, Chrysostom and Jerome. And while it is clear that this place was a large one, there is an ongoing debate about whether or not that importance reflects a concomitant importance of ‘real’, living Jews in the society of those authors. Some scholars continue to insist (implausibly to my mind), that St John Chrysostom’s dialogues against the Jews were motivated by the real threat that the Jews of Damascus posed to the Christian community there. Of Augustine, we can say that in all of his voluminous writings he speaks only once of having met a living Jew: a plaintiff who came to his court to complain of having been illegally dispossessed by another bishop.

In the particularly well-documented case of Egypt, we should expect that if there were an important Jewish presence there it would have left some trace in the plentiful ostraca or papyri produced by the rapacious

Roman administrative apparatus. It does not. Where it frequently appears is in the preaching of those who, like the aforementioned Chrysostom or Augustine, criticized the behaviour of their fellow Christians in terms of Judaism. I very much doubt that the famed Egyptian monk Shenoute (AD 347–465) ever met a Jew, but he certainly understood the utility of ‘Judaizing’ as an accusation, and (like many other early Christians) did not hesitate to cast Christians who resisted his teachings as ‘Jews’. In the sermon known today as A26, for example, Shenoute likened his (Christian ‘crypto-pagan’) opponent Gesios to the Jews, ‘so that the destruction that came upon those people will come doubled upon the crown of his head’. And in the sermon *I am amazed*, he did the same to those Christians who did not pray as he advocated: ‘O you faithless Jewish hearts and other heretics of this sort, who are like you and you like them in this same deceptive spirit?’ (Brakke and Crislip 2015, 248 and 81 respectively; see also Brakke 2016).

The utility of this concept of Judaizing, combined with the widespread tendency to interpret the Old Testament as a figuration of the New, meant that Christians could fill Egypt with figurative Jews even in the total absence of living ones. (Just as, for example, English writing of the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries overflows with figures of Judaism—think of Shylock—and accusations of Judaism and Judaizing, despite the absence of any living Jews in the British Isles.) Put in other words, imperial Christian languages of power were just as capable of producing figures of Judaism as the earlier Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman ones had been.

This poses difficulties for historians seeking to assess the survival of ‘real’ Jews in Christian Egypt, for there is always the danger of confusing figures of thought and figures of flesh. How, for example, to interpret the so-called Exodus Chapel in the Bagawat Necropolis at the Kharga Oasis, near the ancient town of Hibis, the capital of the Great Oasis in Antiquity? The decorative programme of this late fourth- or early fifth-century Christian chapel is rich with Old Testament images, such as the ‘Parting of the Red Sea’, or

²⁴ For a treatment of the meaning of Galatians 2.14 in its Pauline context, and of the long future of the logic of Judaizing, see Nirenberg 2013, 59–60, and *passim*.

'Three Hebrews in the Oven'. It might be tempting to move from the figural to the real, and hypothesize that the chapel's congregation was made up of a Late Antique Egyptian Jewish community that converted to Christianity. But such a deduction would be as improbable as it is unnecessary. We have virtually no evidence of any Jews in that area for the previous 300 years, and these Old Testament themes can all be found in both pre- and post-Constantinian Christian art from 'Gentile' congregations.²⁵

Many centuries would pass before the reappearance of documentary evidence for living Jews in Egypt, now under Muslim, rather than Roman or Christian, rule. (On that evidence see Petra Sijpesteijn's important contribution to this volume.) We might want to assume that this later community implies a continuous settlement of Jews along the Nile, a population submerged and silent from the second century that suddenly appears once more on the surface of our documentary record in the ninth century AD. That explanation is possible, although 700 years is a long time for a community to hold its breath, so to speak. It is also possible that, as happened in other areas (such as the Iberian peninsula), the first centuries of Muslim rule produced widespread migration of Jewish populations to Egypt, as they adapted to and were transformed by the new possibilities potentiated by Islamic empire, much as had occurred under previous empires, and would in those yet to come.

We should not forget that those possibilities remained just as complex as they had been before. Islam, like Christianity, claimed to share a common history and scripture with Judaism and therefore had to spend a great deal of time thinking about and differentiating itself from 'Judaism'. Relations between power and representation, and between the figural and the real, were no simpler under Islamic empire than they had been under Christian, Roman, or Greek, though of course there is much that was highly distinctive about the spaces available for Judaism in Egypt under Islam. Let me conclude with just one example of the relationship between representation and what we can know

about 'religious identity' in Islamic Egypt, an example that reverses the optic insofar as it is not so much about how representation shapes what we think we know about 'Judaism', but rather about 'Islam'.

It is a curious irony that much of our knowledge about Islamic Egypt comes from 'Jewish' rather than 'Islamic' sources, that is, from the hands of a subordinate community rather than from those of the dominant religion. The thousands of manuscripts discovered in the book cemeteries of Cairo's synagogues (the Cairo Genizah) remain a vital source for large swathes of 'everyday life' under Islam. Historians of Medieval Islamic trade, for example, can look to Islamic law books and notarial manuals for the formal rules of business and trade, but to trace its actual practice they must often turn to the Genizah. As a result we often find historians asking themselves whether a business practice documented in 'Jewish' sources is Islamic (that is, borrowed from Islam), and conversely, reconstructing 'Islamic' business practices on the basis of 'Jewish sources', and similarly for other spheres of Medieval life on the Nile, in a kind of historical co-production of Judaism and Islam.²⁶

Co-production: perhaps that inelegant compound provides a serviceable conclusion for this essay. Egyptians of whatever religion (pagan, Jewish, Christian, Muslim), and living under a series of diverse empires (Persian, Ptolemaic, Roman, Islamic) made sense of their worlds and their histories by thinking about each other. I dare say that they are still doing so today. One result of this co-production is that it is both very important and very difficult for the historian to separate the figures of thought produced by that process in the distant past from whatever 'religious identity' any adherents of one of these communities might have recognized as their own. How do we distinguish between 'Jewish identity' in Egypt in the third century BC or the first century AD, or the first century after the *hijra*; and the images of 'Judaism' produced in those periods by pagan and later Christian Egyptians struggling to make space for themselves under Ptolemaic or Roman or Muslim rule?

²⁵ On the Bagawat chapel, see Martin 2006.

²⁶ For a critique of this tendency, see Ackerman-Lieberman 2014.

Translations into examples from our contemporary world are sometimes suggestive, though also of course misleading. Today, in Egypt, Muslim views of Judaism and Christianity, as well as of their own Islamic 'identities', are very much shaped by their experience of Western imperial, colonial and post-colonial domination. A critical historian would not want to confuse them with some essential attribute of the Jewish or Christian 'identities'. And yet, precisely because they have such a tremendous impact on the possibilities of life for Muslims, Christians and Jews alike, these figures of thought cannot be separated from the identities they claim to represent. The creation of an image of one group by another transforms the possibilities of existence for both, in different ways and depending upon countless variables, including asymmetries of power.

Returning to the distant past: already in Antiquity the historian Josephus noted that the figures of Judaism generated by Egyptians in their engagements with empire had been and would continue to be of great consequence for the future of 'Judaism'. Shortly after

Roman armies had obliterated many of his people and all of their political hopes, he wrote—with Manetho very much in mind—that 'the Egyptians are the originators of the calumnies against us'. I am not endorsing that claim. But I do hope to have convinced you that in the Egyptian case, at least, the images of 'Judaism' that Egyptians generated through the tools with which they thought about power and empire had such a profound effect on the possibilities of existence for what we might call real Jews that it becomes difficult for the student of the past to separate figures of thought from figures of flesh. I doubt it is much easier for the student of the present.

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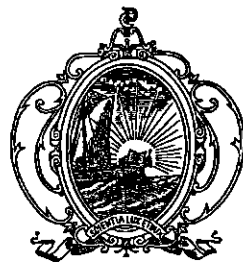
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EGYPT AND EMPIRE

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