Jews, Semites and their Cultures in Fergus Millar’s ‘Roman Near East’

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Jewish territory is a tiny part of the vast area explored in Millar’s Roman Near East 31 BC–AD 337 (henceforward RNE). The subject of this monumental study is defined as a ‘series of linked regions between the Taurus Mountains and the Red Sea which were progressively subjected to Roman rule’, or again as ‘the western and northern tip of the Fertile Crescent, the area of cultivable land closely tied to mountain-chains which linked the Mediterranean and Egypt with Babylonia, Iran and the head of the Persian Gulf’, and yet again ‘approximately, as that part of the Near East which fell to the Islamic invaders of the seventh century’. This geographical scope is wider than might be expected from the title, for it is often overlooked that, during the too-little studied years of the second century AD, a renewed bout of Roman imperial expansion took in first (in the 160s) a large territory going south along the Euphrates and then (in the 190s) a tract running north east along the river Chabur in the direction of Nisibis. Judaea and Syria-Palaestina add up to less than a half of one out of twelve of the sketch maps accompanying the text.

Yet that marginal and unimpressive territory is in many ways at the heart of the book, emerging as crucial to Millar’s conceptual understanding of the whole region. There also existed, of course, a significant Jewish presence in many of the other territories under discussion, notably Babylonia, Adiabene (the Assyria of former ages), Antioch and other important cities on the Syrian coast, Roman Arabia. The Jews of those regions do not have much part to play in Millar’s study, with the exception of those inhabitants of Arabia whose lives are illuminated by the Babatha archive, and of some brief remarks on the subject matter of the Dura Europus synagogue paintings. Even the revolt under Trajan falls outside its scope. Probably because the book is in essence a search for local ethnicities and a discussion of the possibility of finding long-standing continuities, as well as of the Graeco-Roman attrition of such continuities as there were, there is little advantage in looking at minority communities within the ethnic areas. The interaction of the major players is


2 In Appendix B, Millar offers a chronological handlist of all the then-available documentary material (including coins) from the area controlled by the Jewish rebels under Bar-Kokhba. This remains very useful, alongside the relevant section of a wider, more recent survey, by the author together with H. M. Cotton and W. E. H. Cockle, published as ‘The Papyrology of the Roman Near East: A Survey’, JRS 85 (1995), pp. 214–35. See also now the subsequent full publication of the Nahal Hever material in H. M. Cotton and A. Yardeni, Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek Documentary Texts from Nahal Hever and Other Sites, Discoveries in the Judaean Desert XXVII (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997).
quite complicated enough in itself. By contrast, however, and almost paradoxically, Jewish life in the Jewish spheres of dominance is analysed meticulously and invoked as a point of reference.

In its ‘take’ on Jewish history, the picture which emerges is a healthily un-fashionable one. For the result of placing the Jewry of Palestine in a highly localized setting is to reinstate a disjunction from the Diaspora which recent scholarship has been keen to minimize. On the other hand, it is equally against the background of this localized setting that the remarkable particularity of Jewish society and culture emerges. After reading Millar, one will never again be able to sink back into comfortable generalizations about Semitic ways of doing things—firstly, because he goes a long way towards persuading us that there was no such general category, except in the linguistic sphere and secondly because of the many ways in which the Jews do turn out to be in so many respects *sui generis*. This is a point of view to which Millar has long been attached, sometimes in explicit argument, as in his influential ‘Reflections on the Maccabaean Revolt’ published in this journal,3 and often implicitly. For those of us who may have been a little reluctant to follow down this path, there is now much food for thought. The modest purpose of my discussion here is to open a debate on the key arguments in *RNE* about the particularity of the Jews in their Middle Eastern environment. It is fair to say that these have scarcely yet been taken on board, although the book belongs to the early nineties.

One might mention, however, that the issue of the distinctiveness or otherwise of Judaism in the Classical context was the connecting thread in a recent collective volume which considers Palestine and the Diaspora together.4 There the cumulative evidence is organized so as to point, perhaps unsurprisingly, in both directions, towards both differences and similarities between Jews and non-Jews. That necessitated a nuanced editorial conclusion but also generated, as a sort of tie-breaker, the editor’s thought-provoking hypothesis that the Jews were no more nor less peculiar than other ethnic groups in the Graeco-Roman world, such as Idumaeans, Celts or Numidians, but that they *appear* to have greater ‘oddities’ purely because of the weight of our evidence about them, yielded above all by the survival of their own literature. What, he asks, would they look like if that literature were lost? We need not concern ourselves here with the major difficulties for this hypothesis arising from the simple fact that those other peoples simply did not produce literatures on any significant scale, while the Jews (like the Christians) did, and were *ipso facto* ‘odd’. What is relevant, however, is to note the worrying absence of any real *comparandum* when the question is put in such broad terms. There is no general statement of who the Jews are supposed to be like or unlike.

This is one way in which *RNE*, the product of immersion in the history and geography of a defined, if extensive, region together with prolonged reflection, offers something distinctly new and why the perspectives offered there deserve

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to be noticed by historians of Judaism as much as by historians of Rome. Here we can look at the Jews of Palestine against a perfectly concrete background. That this background is, and must remain, very imperfectly known, is made abundantly clear throughout the book: indeed the limitations of our evidence and the insurmountable gaps in our knowledge are in themselves a theme of this—as ever—resolutely empirical scholar. Yet in spite of the gaps, as the story unfolds, we see the divergences shaping up and we are able to perceive many areas in which fuller knowledge would make no difference at all to the overall assessment of where the Jews stand in relation to their neighbours. In fact, once we leave the Second Temple period, the Jews, like their neighbours, are studied in the main from the archaeological evidence (including under this heading the various kinds of documentary material); in particular: the author announces at an early stage a methodological rejection of the resources of Talmudic literature. In this way Millar might be said to have anticipated Goodman’s proposal and dealt with it.

The underlying theme of RNE is the confrontation of a range of peoples with Graeco-Roman ‘civilization’ and the near-submersion of their own cultures. The discussion operates with a fairly precise and rather inclusive definition of a culture, as ‘a tradition, an educational system, a set of customs and above all a collective understanding of the past’ (p. 517). Cultural traffic, it is argued, went almost exclusively one way, and that was Eastwards (p. 332). Hellenization was therefore the dominant process through most of this extensive period. By the end of the second century AD, a fair number of once significant cultures were profoundly attenuated, among them that of the Nabataeans who had produced fairly elaborate legal texts (pp. 507–508, 521). In the Decapolis, East of the Jordan, once a bilingual Greek-Aramaic zone, Semitic-language inscriptions die out in the second century, while Greek texts are abundant (p. 413). Deities of renown, such as Hadad of Damascus who cannot be reliably located inside the well-known later Damascene cult of Zeus, were on their way to being forgotten (pp. 314–16). To that near-submersion the Jews are the great exception. A major discovery in the book is the surprisingly dim presence of any general Syrian cultural identity: an exhaustive search reveals little in common between the different smaller ethnicities, although there is some basis to the commonly held view that aniconic cults, with stones as the cult objects, were characteristic of the entire area, and it is indeed on this theme that Millar’s study opens (pp. 12–14, 522). Syriac literature, when it emerged within the Christian ambit, developed not, as it happens, in Syria but further east, for it originated in Mesopotamia before the Roman occupation and spread in Persian territory as much as in Roman (p. 520). Indeed, in Millar’s view, no link is demonstrable between Syrian culture and the emergence of Christianity. Again, then, the Jews, with their indubitably unbroken traditions, form an exception.

There were no clear boundaries to the Jewish region, North, South or East, and Jews were often interspersed among others, perhaps living the village existence which was characteristic of the region and described as its most important social formation (p. 350), or perhaps inhabitants of mixed cities, of which only a few, such as Lydda, contained Jewish majorities. Like all other
peoples, the Jews were exposed to the massive impact of the Roman legions’ ever-growing presence in the area, a process which is easily underestimated (chapter 3). After the suppression of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135, they were subjected to the imposition of two *coloniae* of which one occupied Jerusalem and the Temple site itself, to a high-status consular governor, and to a security force of two entire legions together with a substantial number of auxiliary cohorts. And yet, when assembled, the dossier of Jewish cultural resilience is striking, as it emerges from both the broad sweep of the chronological narratives at the start of the book and from the richly detailed geographical and cultural surveys which follow. A few of the points in this dossier are unfamiliar. Many are not. It is the authority with which Millar can judge them against their background which gives them all a new resonance and which lends power to the cumulative argument.

1. The long retention of Aramaic as a written and spoken language, continuing into a period when many other users have seemingly abandoned it (p. 521).

2. Widespread bilingualism or even, where Hebrew was included, trilingualism. The Syrian town of Palmyra is found to be the other great exception in this respect, and presented as the only other society to produce a large corpus of genuinely bilingual inscriptions testifying to a ‘fully tangible Graeco-Syrian or Graeco-Aramaic culture’ (pp. 319–36).

3. The persistence, in the shape of the Bible, of a communally protected text, more lasting, distinct and political than any other (p. 340). This offered a continuing frame of reference and a repertoire of meanings for current events, in a way in which the Jewish literature of the Hellenistic period seemed not to do in the Roman imperial era.

4. A virtually unique sense of historical continuity, contrasted with the apparent ‘amnesia’ elsewhere (p. 6). The Dura Europus synagogue paintings are viewed in this light, as expressing a link with a distant past, which is reinforced by their Greek and Aramaic labelling, and which appears to be locally unparallelled in the town except in the modest decorations of the house church of Dura (p. 470). Here, the only possible exception might be Phoenicia, where Philo of Byblos’s scholarly production contains real elements of an inherited national tradition in the shape of some local history, myths, names, and knowledge of deities.

5. The role of Jerusalem, until AD 70, as a focal point, the object, for those in the region (as contrasted with the far-flung communities of the Diaspora) of frequent regular visits and the natural place for the celebration of the festivals by all classes of people (pp. 364–65).

6. The leadership role of the high priests down to AD 70, even conceding, as Millar seems to, Martin Goodman’s claim that this *arriviste* aristocracy lacked real roots in Jewish society (pp. 361, 365–66).

What happened after 70 is more problematic. Millar’s observations on the role of the Tem-
7. Herod’s role as proponent of Hellenism through the Roman empire: contrary to the common assumption, this is not paralleled by the activities of other oriental ‘client kings’ under Rome (p. 354). Thus, from a Jewish kingdom there emerged a significant innovation in this manner of paying homage to Roman power and to Greek culture while demonstrating continued respect for the home institutions.

8. Two major and unparallelled popular revolts against Rome, taken as a manifestation of national spirit (pp. 69, 352–53).

9. The distinctive socio-religious phenomenon in the post-70 period of rabbinic status, with the use of the title ‘rabbi’, attested archaeologically if we follow Millar’s understanding of several Beth She’arim texts (pp. 381–82).6

10. The erection of the peculiar oblong monumental structures which we identify as synagogues—although only rarely do these carry inscriptions identifying what they are, as in Rabbi Eliezer ha Qappar’s Beth-Midrash at Dabbura on the Golan and probably in the Greek inscription from the Qasyon synagogue near Zefat (pp. 381–82).

And yet, it cannot be denied that this is a mixed bag. Thus catalogued, these are phenomena which bear witness as much to change in Jewish circumstances as to continuity, especially the last five points, and one is led to think that it is perhaps the adaptability of the Jews that deserves further examination. Do these features add up to a ‘culture’? In Millar’s terms, the fit is neat, yet the nagging question arises as to whether this result might not be due to the shape of the enquiry, whether perhaps the specific Jewish case has not, in a sense, set the terms for the rest of the investigation, rather than the other way round. In other words, where others appear to have lacked what the Jews had, their culture is seen as incomplete. The chosen definition of culture fits the Jews so very well that other groups may perhaps be expected to fail at the first hurdle. We might ask, therefore, whether an independent educational system is a sine qua non, given that levels of literacy vary greatly between one culture and another, as anthropologists are well aware. Furthermore, we do well to reflect, in passing, on how far any education can be traced, even in Jewish society until well after the first century. Even the importance of group memory, so crucial to Judaism as we understand it, may be cautiously questioned. There are societies where family and individual memory is considerably stronger than it has been in many Jewish environments, but group

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6 There is some recent support for the title ther as designating more than just ‘gentleman’, in the arguments of Catherine Heszer, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 66; Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 1997), pp. 60–61, 119–22, with the proviso that rabbinic circles were not necessarily closed or Torah scholars confined to those who figure in Talmudic literature.
memory weaker. Might the other kinds of memory not serve in their own way as a force conducive to group preservation? The necessary dominance of Greek values in the whole discussion and the inevitability of hindsight are additional factors which make it hard for us to conceive of alternative structures and ways of doing things, but that is what this enquiry is seeking.

Millar shows himself highly conscious of the hazards of ‘orientalism’, in the sense of ascribing to eastern peoples common, stereotypic characteristics. This sensitivity has surely encouraged his caution over grouping together disparate ‘Semitic’ phenomena or forms of religious behaviour visible in different parts of Syria at different times. Yet it is perhaps not unfair to suggest that he has not succeeded entirely in the enterprise of taking the Near East on its own terms. RNE conjures up much of the magic of the region’s geography. But perhaps there remains, if one may be permitted to say so, an oriental mystery in its evolution, which still eludes us. The paradigm of Jewish society takes us only so far.