he does not argue for a causal relationship between the two patterns. This is partly because he dates the separation of the Christians very early, soon after the expulsion edict of Claudius in 49 CE, and consequently he has limited interest in the continuing history of the Jewish communities; despite the author’s revisions for the English translation, more recent studies of the Roman Jewish community, such as those of Leonard Rutgers, do not appear in his bibliography. It is, perhaps, in this treatment of the boundaries between and definition of the communities (and, for this reviewer, in his treatment of women), that some may feel the age of the book is betrayed; a modern study would also, one feels, be more suspicious of the strategies of some of the literary sources. Yet this should not detract from the importance of the book, which must continue to occupy a central place for all interested in the task of uncovering the local history of ancient religious communities, Jewish and Christian.

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This most impressive study has already found its place as an invaluable guide and companion to scholars of every aspect of Second Temple and rabbinic Palestine and of early Christianity. It will continue to do so for many years. It has much to offer also to social and intellectual historians of Graeco-Roman antiquity and, in addition, to students of other historical periods and of general cultural phenomena, whether concerned with literacy and orality, with text, textuality and documentation, with canons and canonisation, with language usage and bilingualism, with education, with libraries, with epistolarity, or even with the meaning and uses of magical material.

Its subject is not simply literacy but everything transmitted in the form of words, and the conditions and implications pertaining to its creation and its reception. The volume bears the hallmarks of Heszer’s writings: the wide sweep of learning (here over a broad time period), the comprehensive coverage of the field, the alertness to sociological approaches, the precise presentation of the primary sources, the assured handling of rabbinic texts (the centre of gravity of the study), and the meticulous in-depth engagement with earlier scholarship on virtually every issue treated. Within a modern framework, organised around the central issues, not only the primary sources but also a wealth of scholarship from the nineteenth century onwards have been presented, analysed and debated. The reader may be warned that many heads roll in the process, for the great and the good among historians of Judaism, together with other more popular writers perhaps less worthy of being singled out, may well come in for some harsh critiques. Thus an entire world of boys’ elementary education, an edifice built by others upon Wilhelm Bacher’s uncritical use of rabbinic material, simply bites the dust. These confrontations give the book individuality, though they do perhaps extend its length unduly. In the end, one is simply grateful for the thoroughness of the coverage. To find an item missing from the usefully sectionalised bibliography is a tall order. The book is not designed to be primarily a work of reference, but in most respects it is easy to find one’s way around it. Entries in the index of names and subjects could usefully have been subdivided.

The book has been carefully structured into an impressive piece of architecture. Part 1, ‘The Conditions for the Development of Literacy’, starts with a chapter reviewing the problematic evidence for primary and secondary education, both Jewish and Greek (and to a lesser extent Roman). There follows a long chapter investigating the material aspects of ancient production and the storage and distribution of texts.
We then move on to chapter-length studies which relate literacy to urbanism, to the conceptualisation of the written and oral Torah, to written magic, and to Jewish use of Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek and even Latin. Part 2 is divided according to types of text: letters, documents (notes, name tags, personal messages etc.), with six chapters and a summary. Here both much of the surviving material in these categories and the external literary evidence for it is explored. There is an extensive survey of the Babatha archive. Part 3 is about reading and writing, again from all angles. The English is on the whole excellent, with very occasional oddities or errors (e.g. on p. 503, ‘criterium’, and ‘complimentary’ for ‘complementary’).

A fundamental assumption of the study is that Jewish activity in Palestine is embedded in a Graeco-Roman context. Torah is an alternative to Homer (p. 70). While this is in broad terms an important and welcome development, some articulation and problematisation of the methodological underpinning would have strengthened it. Questions of sameness and difference could usefully be approached head-on, as for example in the introductory essay to Martin Goodman’s edited volume Jews in a Graeco-Roman World (1998). For Heszer, the basic conditions of literacy and education in the broader Mediterranean world are simply taken as obviously applicable. Thus detailed attention to the extensive recent work of Rosalind Thomas, William Harris, Greg Woolf, Mary Beard, Teresa Morgan and others is viewed as the natural starting-point for a number of her major discussions. The Jews will be placed somewhere along the same spectrum. In fact, a strikingly minimalistic view emerges of the extent of Jewish literacy in Palestine, which Heszer, following Meir Bar-Ilan, takes as having been probably lower than that of the Romans in Rome—though she wisely does not attempt numerical estimates. In this way, the conventional understanding, which of course rests upon later rabbinic prioritisation of learning, is stood right on its head.

Elsewhere too, Heszer’s turn of mind is drawn to scepticism, both that of the sociologist and that of the critical historian. The role of Torah in Palestinian society tends to be described as artefactual or iconic (e.g. p. 208). Power structures and practical advantage are at the heart of linguistic preferences (p. 240; pp. 494–95). Writing was cultivated at Rome because it established status (p. 499). Likewise, Greek learning was cultivated in the patriarch’s house to serve as a status symbol. The rabbis were a group constantly concerned, like all groups, with self-promotion. They controlled access to Torah in such a way as to virtually exclude from it anyone not subject to them. ‘The numinous atmosphere of the later synagogue may have had a greater religious impact on most of its visitors than the content of the Torah-reading...’ There is frequent argumentation from the absence of evidence, but where it exists, it may well be disbelieved. This reviewer remains, therefore, in some doubt as to whether the book has in the end entirely justified its (briefly expressed) conclusion, that the ‘rather large’ gap in all periods in Roman Palestine between a very small literate elite and the rest suggests that image and visual symbol may have counted much more in this society than text. The evolution of rabbinic literature is even explained, it is suggested by way of envoi, as an enterprise designed to counter the threat of the image. However this idea is viewed, the concluding assertion is certainly justified: there is indeed much work for scholars to do in reassessing the relationship between different modes of expression in Jewish society. We may hope that the author is already engaged in addressing this at least equally demanding topic in an equally monumental study.

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