Modern interpretations of the nature of Judaism in the Mediterranean diaspora in the late-Roman period have been based mainly on the evaluation of archeological and epigraphic data. Such interpretations are mostly quite possible, but all involve eisegesis and (often undeclared) assumptions which are here systematically questioned. In particular, evidence customarily used to reconstruct a picture of a liberal diaspora Judaism is scrutinized to see how much of it in fact may have been produced by pagan polytheists who revered the Jewish God. The evidence from Sardis is treated as a test case. In the final section a decrease in the variety within Judaism, and a decline in the numbers of pagan polytheists worshipping the Jewish God, are postulated for the period after 388 CE, when Roman emperors began to attack pagan shrines and to give state support to the Jewish patriarchs.

No one doubts that the population of the Mediterranean core of the Roman Empire at its height, from the first to the fifth century CE, contained a large proportion of Jews. Estimates of their number vary quite widely, but that they constituted a group of sufficient size to exercise considerable influence over Mediterranean society is generally agreed. What elicits much less agreement is the nature of their Judaism in the centuries which followed the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE.

It will be evident from the title of this article that I believe it to be helpful to study diaspora Judaism in this period separately from the religion of Jews in the land of Israel. This separation is desirable despite the similar geographical and economic constraints on Jewish communities in all parts of the Mediterranean world, despite the

comparative ease of transport between such communities in the first century CE because of the *pax Romana* and extensive inter-regional trade,\(^2\) and despite the common obeisance of all Mediterranean Jews to the same Torah by which God bound Israel in covenant on Mount Sinai.\(^3\) Despite all this, the special role of Israel as a holy land necessarily influenced religious behaviour, and may well have caused the religious outlook of Jews who lived there to be different from that of diaspora Jews. In Jews’ religious geography, the centre of the world, the core of purity, lay in the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. The rest of the world was relegated to spheres of decreasing purity in a series of concentric circles, from the Temple to the city of Jerusalem to the boundaries of the land of Israel and thence to the diaspora.\(^4\)

The probability that diaspora Judaism in the Mediterranean world differed from that of Jews in the homeland is strengthened by the fact that most evidence about Judaism in this period happens to derive either from the land of Israel or from the Jews of Mesopotamia who, since they lived outside the Roman empire, had little contact with the western diaspora. This same fact means that disagreement about the nature of Judaism in the Mediterranean diaspora begins from uncertainty about how much, if at all, to rely on the rabbinic evidence from late antiquity: some scholars assume that all Jews followed rabbinic norms until proved otherwise, others that none did until shown to have done so.\(^5\)

Both views are possible, but I should confess that my own preference is for skepticism about the applicability of rabbinic evidence outside the immediate circles for which it was composed.\(^6\) The preservation


\(^5\) Contrast the assumption by Schiiffman, *Who was a Jew?* (New York: Ktav, 1985), that rabbinic discussions in the land of Israel were capable of bringing about the split between Judaism and Christianity to the assertion by Kraabel, “Impact of the Discovery of the Sardis Synagogue” in *Sardis from Prehistoric to Roman Times*, ed. G.M.A. Hanfmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983) 178–193, that rabbis had no influence at all in Asia Minor.

of so much rabbinic literature by Jews of later generations encourages the impression that the rabbis predominated in Jewish society of the time when the literature was composed, but it is in principle not justified to take the survival of material as evidence of its original importance. Rabbinic texts from late antiquity are extant only because their contents interested enough Jews through the medieval to the early modern period for them to be continuously copied and eventually printed. In contrast, Jewish texts written in Greek were totally ignored by the later rabbinic tradition, which operated primarily in Hebrew and Aramaic. Thus it is entirely possible that diaspora Jews composed just as many literary works in Greek after 70 CE as before that date, but that all such literature has disappeared simply because the religious traditions which eventually triumphed had no interest in their preservation: on the one hand, the rabbis, who only preserved writing in Semitic languages, and on the other, the Christian Church, which treasured and appropriated Jewish texts written in Greek before c. 100 CE but which treated later Jewish compositions as the product of an alien faith.\(^7\)

The possibility of a misleading bias in the preservation of the evidence is not the only factor which complicates the use of rabbinic texts. The rabbis took it for granted that their view of the world was normative for all Israel, but such a view can quite well persist regardless of reality. It is entirely possible, even if in the final analysis unprovable, that, even within the communities in which they operated, the rabbis were sometimes met with indifference.\(^8\) If rabbinic literature can be used only with care to reconstruct the religious outlook of Jews in the land of Israel where it was composed, it will be all the more difficult to use it to understand the Judaism of Alexandria, Antioch, Sardis, Rome.

For some scholars the non-rabbinic nature of (some) diaspora Judaism in late antiquity is simply taken for granted,\(^9\) and over the past few decades many attempts have been made to construct a picture of an alternative Judaism based on different kinds of evidence.\(^10\)

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\(^8\) M. Goodman, *State and Society in Roman Galilee*, 93–111.


Such attempts are encouraged by the abundance of non-rabbinic material found in the diaspora. So, for instance, in the corpus of Jewish inscriptions from the diaspora the proportional increase in documents dated after 70 CE is quite striking, and not simply part of any general increase in epigraphic evidence in the late-Roman period. Archeological evidence is similarly much more abundant than in earlier times, especially from excavations of buildings at Dura-Europos, Sardis and elsewhere, and from investigation of Jewish catacombs at Rome. These material remains are supplemented by a considerable corpus of comments about Jews by pagan and (more especially) Christian writers. Of these, the most illuminating are often the Roman laws about Jews, which repay close study.

This non-rabbinic evidence has been used in the past to produce dramatically disparate pictures of diaspora Judaism. In earlier generations the standard stereotype, molded perhaps by a Christian perspective and the assumption that right-thinking Jews ought really to have joined the Church, portrayed diaspora Judaism as the religion of small, embattled groups who adopted syncretistic ideas in order to ingratiate themselves with their gentile neighbours. A more recent stereotype reverses many of these judgments. It is now commonly claimed that diaspora Judaism was the religion of prosperous, self-confident, outgoing people, who were fully accepted as Jews by their gentile neighbours, unconcerned by surrounding idolatry, uninclined to syncretise, and keen to proselytise.

It is worth stressing that this revised picture is almost entirely, and quite overtly, dependent on analysis of archeological evidence and

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inscriptions, and especially the material from Sardis.\textsuperscript{17} It is claimed, for instance, that the size of the Sardis synagogue, its position at the centre of the city, and the presence in it of inscriptions set up by gentile Godworshippers show the important role of Jews in the civic community and the acceptance of that role by their gentile neighbours.\textsuperscript{18} Such an interpretation is of course possible, but it is hardly necessary. The great synagogue of Alexandria was also huge, according to Tosefta Sukkah 4:6, but this fact can hardly have signified good relations with the local Greeks since the Jews and Greeks of Alexandria were more or less openly hostile to each other throughout the first and early second centuries CE.\textsuperscript{19} It is quite possible that in both Alexandria and Sardis the erection of a large, prominent synagogue may have signified bravado by an embattled minority in a hostile environment. Similarly, gentile Godworshippers who gave money to Jewish institutions may have done so for a variety of reasons, without approving of either Judaism or Jews: so, for instance, if Jews were indeed rich and powerful, it might have seemed sensible for a gentile politician to donate money to their synagogue, regardless of his real view about them or their religion.\textsuperscript{20} From the point of view of a polytheist, the term \textit{theosebes} (“God-worshipper”) was sufficiently anodyne for any pagan to accept it as a title.

I raise these other possible interpretations not to advocate them but simply to show the vulnerability of archeological and epigraphic material of this kind to imaginative exegesis. In the rest of this paper I intend to sketch more fully the limitations of the evidence for Judaism in the Mediterranean diaspora in the period, with an epilogue to suggest why and how the radical uncertainty which I shall advocate in interpreting the remains from earlier periods may be inappropriate in the fifth century CE and after.

Radical uncertainty in interpreting Jewish-type material down to c. 390 CE is based on two factors which in principle bear no relation to each other. First, there may have been much variety within

\textsuperscript{17} Kraabel, “The Disappearance of the ‘God-Fearer’”; \textit{Idem}, “Impact of the Discovery of the Sardis Synagogue.”

\textsuperscript{18} Trebilco, \textit{Jewish Communities in Asia Minor}, 57.


diaspora Judaism, to the extent that it may be more accurate to talk of Judaisms in the plural. Second, and even allowing for great variety and for different definitions of who was a Jew, some material commonly ascribed to Jews and Judaism may not reflect Jews of any kind, by any definition in antiquity or today. The first issue has been much discussed, and I shall consider it here only briefly. The second issue, which I believe is undeservedly overlooked in much of the scholarly literature, I shall tackle at greater length.

Variety in Diaspora Judaism

Any individual type of Judaism consists of a single religious system, encompassing most aspects of life. Unlike most other ancient cults, Judaism could be contrasted in antiquity not just to other religions but to other cultures in the broad sense: the first use of the term ioudaismos (2 Macc. 2:21) specifically compared Judaism to Hellenism, and both gentile and Jewish Greek writers sometimes described the Jewish way of life as a philosophy. Thus, when they viewed their own lifestyles from within their systems, Jewish writers tended to assume that there was only one Judaism. So, for example, to the rabbis Jewish identity was defined in rabbinic terms, in what Sacha Stern has described as a solipsistic sense of Jewishness, to the extent that only adult male rabbinic Jews were thought of as fully part of Israel, and the Judaism of women and children, let alone proselytes and slaves, was left ill-defined.

It is notoriously unwise to rely on a group’s self-description to produce an accurate picture of that group, but in the study of the late-antique diaspora the non-Jewish evidence, plentiful though it is, is not entirely helpful in balancing out the picture. Greek and Latin pagans after the early second century CE seem largely to have fallen into literary clichés when writing about Jews, and little that they

wrote sheds any light on the Jews of their own day; in any case, they lacked any interest in differentiating between one sort of Jew and another, simply lumping them all together as one despicable *superstition*.\(^\text{25}\)

The evidence of Christian authors about Jews is almost equally unsatisfactory, but for rather different reasons.\(^\text{26}\) In the early Church the term “Jew” was generally applied to one of three groups: either to the Israel of the Old Testament (usually on occasions when they disobeyed divine commands, since the positive aspects of Israel’s heritage were appropriated by the Christians themselves);\(^\text{27}\) or to the Pharisees who opposed Jesus according to the Gospels’ narrative, with whom Jews as a whole were often identified;\(^\text{28}\) or to Christian literalists, since in the internal debate within the early Church about the correct way to interpret the Old Testament, those who took the biblical commands to apply to themselves were readily attacked by their opponents as Jews.\(^\text{29}\) Since in all these cases the terms “Jews” and “Judaism” were more or less terms of abuse, there was no incentive to distinguish between one kind of Jew and another. Those Christians like Hippolytus (c. 170–c. 236 CE) who referred to the different sects of Judaism culled their information from earlier sources, which normally described the Judaism of the land of Israel before 70 CE.\(^\text{30}\)

But despite this lack of direct evidence for diversity in the Judaism of the late-Roman diaspora, there remain good grounds for believing variety to be probable. First is the direct evidence of Josephus that one and the same individual could claim the perfect unity of Judaism


\(^{30}\) Miriam Taylor, “The Jews in the Writings of the Early Church Fathers (150–312),” points out that Simon, *Verus Israel*, may be wrong to assume that because Christian writers came up against real Jews, they therefore described them as they really were. It is almost as easy to impose a stereotype on real people as on imaginary ones.
while also being aware of considerable variety. Thus Josephus wrote in *Contra Apionem* 2.179–180, a work composed in Rome in the nineties CE, that one remarkable fact about Jews was their unity on all matters of theology and worship: one God, one Law, one Temple. Nor was this a passing remark, since Jewish unity constituted an important element of his proof in *Contra Apionem* of the superiority of Jews over Greeks, whose cults, myths and beliefs he characterized as hopelessly jumbled. But the same Josephus could write in three other works about the three (or sometimes four) distinctive philosophies of the Jews (Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and the “Fourth Philosophy”), whose tenets he was at pains to delineate. It appears that for Josephus these two opinions, which he proffered as part of two different arguments, were quite easily correlated. Variety within Judaism presumably lay in his eyes on a different level from its unity: all Jews accepted the one Torah, even if they disagreed about its significance.

If someone like Josephus could write about diversity within Judaism in his histories of the land of Israel before 70 CE, it is clearly at least possible that such diversity continued in the late-Roman diaspora. When Josephus was writing he was living in the diaspora in Rome and after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, but he wrote about the varied philosophies of Judaism not as a past but as a present fact. The factors which had encouraged a diaspora Jew in the mid-first century like Philo of Alexandria to evolve his curious blend of Platonic philosophy and allegorical exegesis of the Bible were just as potent after the destruction of the Temple as before; indeed, since Philonic types of theology were to become popular among some Christians during the late-Roman period, it was evidently possible for Jews also to continue thinking in such ways.

So far as is known, no authority existed within diaspora Judaism to impose rules of practice and belief. Such a role has often been claimed for the rabbinic patriarch (*nasi*) in the land of Israel whose formal jurisdiction under the auspices of the state over Jews throughout the Roman empire I shall discuss in the epilogue (below). But

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31 *B.J.* 2.119–166; *A.J.* 18.11–25; *Vita* 10–12.


I believe not only that the evidence that he had any such authority before the late fourth century is not compelling, but also that there are positive reasons to deny that he had such a role at any earlier date: first, it was contrary to normal Roman practice in the high empire for a single spokesman to be appointed or recognized either for an ethnic group such as Spaniards or Gauls, or for a religious movement such as Mithraists or Isisacs; secondly, the fact that the third-century Christian writer Origen referred to the nasi by the title “ethnarch,” whereas fourth-century Roman sources consistently call him “patriarch,” suggests that the nasi in his time was not a Roman official at all, since the Roman state was normally very careful and precise in the conferring of titles.

If there was no authority to impose uniformity, there was also no incentive to suppress variety. Opinions might vary wildly between one community and another on crucial questions of Jewish status such as the validity of conversions and the status of the offspring of mixed marriages, let alone less public aspects of Judaism, from domestic liturgy and behaviour to philosophical speculation on the hidden meanings of Torah. After 70 CE there did not even exist any more the Temple as the symbolic focus of unity to which all Jews could show their solidarity by contributing their annual offerings, as the Jews of Asia Minor had done in the mid first century BCE. Nor was there any more a high priest to act as ruler and leader of the nation, as Josephus had claimed he should.

It would be reasonable to expect Judaism in the Mediterranean diaspora to have become more varied after 70 CE, not less.

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34 The only extant inscription from the diaspora which may show the rabbinic patriarch exercising some authority in the diaspora is a text from Stobi in Macedonia, of the second or third century CE. Cf. M. Hengel, “Die Synagogeninschrift von Stobi,” Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 57 (1966) 145–83, but the huge fine payable to the patriarch according to the inscription would have been unenforceable (cf. Schürer, History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ, 3:67).
38 Cf. Cicero, Flac. 66.
Jews, non-Jews and “Jewish” evidence

Whatever their divergences, one common denominator for all Jews was that each thought of himself or herself as belonging within a system defined as Judaism. Outsiders may have been uncertain whether any particular individual should be considered a Jew, but the individual himself would always know whether he was bound by the covenant between God and Israel.

This was not just a matter of theological logic. I have argued in detail elsewhere that when the emperor Nerva in 96 CE reformed the collection of the fiscus Judaicus, the special poll tax imposed by the Roman state on all Jews within the empire after the Judean revolt of 66–70 CE, he exempted Jewish apostates, thereby ensuring that the selection of those liable to the tax should be by religious self-definition: those who professed Judaism (whether native-born or proselytes) were required to pay two denarii a year towards the temple of Jupiter on the Capitol in Rome. In return for this tax, self-professed Jews were exempted from the normal requirement to take part in the pagan ceremonials of the state.

If this theory is correct, in practice any Jew will have been quite clear about the distinction between himself and the gentiles. Conversely, non-Jews who were interested in worshipping the Jewish God would be entirely clear that their devotion to this divinity did not in itself make them into Jews unless they also wished to embrace the (or a) whole system of Judaism (including exclusive monotheism) and, as a corollary, to pay the fiscus Judaicus to Rome.

The best evidence up to now that some polytheistic gentiles were indeed interested in worshipping the Jewish God has emerged only comparatively recently, with the publication in 1987 of a long inscription from Aphrodisias in Caria, in modern Turkey. This inscription, tentatively dated by its editors to the early third century CE, contains a long list of names of donors to a Jewish institution whose precise nature is obscure. The names on side A and at the

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42 Ibid., 19–22.
top of side B of the list are most distinctively Jewish and include three individuals specifically designated as proselytos.\(^{43}\) In contrast, on side B, under a separate heading entitled “and these [are] the god-reverers,”\(^{44}\) are found fifty-three non-Jewish names, of whom the first nine are described as bouleutes, city councillor.\(^{45}\)

It is clear that these latter individuals were gentiles honoured by the Jewish community in Aphrodisias. It is likely that they were polytheists, since all city councillors could normally expect to take part in civic cults, unless, like Jews, they were specifically exempt.\(^{46}\) It is also likely that the appearance of their names on the list reflected their interest in Judaism and not just in Jews in their locality: the inscription starts with an invocation to the helping God \((\text{theos boethos})\),\(^{47}\) and their designation as “God-reverers” \((\text{theosebeis})\) suggests that they were devoted in some way to the Jewish God.

Over the past twenty years or so the problem of these pious gentiles, usually designated as “Godfearers”\(^{48}\) has attracted a huge literature,\(^{49}\) but I believe that more can and should be said. Most scholars have been primarily interested in the role of Godfearers in the Acts of the Apostles as the recipients of Christian mission in the interlude between the rejection of the Gospel by the Jews and the full-blooded mission to the gentiles.\(^{50}\) The scholars who have approached the topic primarily through the epigraphic evidence, including the Aphrodisias inscription, have tended to portray such gentiles from the Jewish point of view, describing them as on the fringes of Judaism, “of but not in.”\(^{51}\)

I do not doubt that ancient Christians and Jews may indeed have taken such a view of gentiles, but I wonder whether these depictions also reflect the self-perception of the gentiles themselves. City councillors in Aphrodisias who became Godfearers did so voluntarily, presumably because they found religious meaning in the act. They

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\(^{43}\) A, lines 13, 17, 22.

\(^{44}\) B, line 34.

\(^{45}\) B, lines 34–38.


\(^{47}\) A, line 1.


\(^{50}\) Cf. critique by Kraabel, “The Disappearance of the ‘God-Fearer’.”

could have become full proselytes and part of the covenant if they had wanted to do so, as the open designation of individuals as proselytes at Aphrodisias shows, but since they chose not to, it may be that worshipping the Jewish God as a gentile had a meaning for them as polytheists quite different from that experienced by those who entered the exclusive covenant of Judaism.

For a pagan polytheist there were many reasons to worship the Jewish God. The main reasons, as with any deity, lay in his power: he was the Lord of the Universe, the highest god (theos hypsistos). A deity’s power could be divined from his activity in the world: as Josephus put it, in a curious reversal of the arguments of later theologians, only God could have created the irregularities of the heavenly bodies. The aura of the divinity was not necessarily diminished by the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, for pagans could presumably accept (if they wished to) the claim addressed to them by Josephus that the outcome of the Jewish revolt had been God’s will, since it was through God’s support alone that the Romans held their empire. The lack of a single cult centre might even have been a positive attraction to polytheists, who devoted themselves in increasing numbers in the high Roman empire to divinities such as Isis, Mithras or Jupiter Dolichenus, who had been displaced from their actual or alleged place of origin; it may be that lack of local roots made more plausible each god’s claims to universal significance. It is likely also that knowledge of the existence of Jewish communities throughout much of the Empire, full of initiates devoted to God to such an extent that his laws shaped their entire lives, would encourage interested polytheists to believe that this must be a divinity worth cultivation. Large public temples dedicated by non-initiates to divinities like Isis to whom initiates were also known to be devoted are found in many cities in the Roman empire.

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52 If there was indeed a prohibition by the Roman state on conversion to Judaism, it seems to have been blatantly ignored by some, cf. ibid., 43–44.
54 *A.J.* 1.155–156.
56 *B.J.* 2.390.
How would such a polytheist convinced of God’s power normally be expected to worship? It can be said immediately that it would not be at all obvious to carry out part, but not all, of the lifestyle of a full Jewish initiate, as in the standard picture of Godfearers as gentiles who chose to follow an arbitrary selection of some of the injunctions of the Torah.\(^5\) Of course, a polytheist might behave in such a way, perhaps keeping the sabbath but not the dietary laws or the requirement to circumcise sons,\(^6\) but if such behaviour was intended to mark devotion to the Jewish God, rather than just imitation of attractive Jewish customs, it suggests an individual on the way to becoming a Jew\(^6\) rather than a pagan polytheist simply honouring a powerful divinity. At any rate, for most pagans there might seem to be no religious advantage in listening to synagogue services run by Jews: they might hope to derive some philosophical insights from readings from the Bible,\(^6\) but it would not be very uplifting to listen to catalogues of legal injunctions which, as non-Jews, they believed did not apply to them.

The standard way for ancient polytheists to worship a divinity was through offerings on altars. This form of worship, hallowed by antiquity, was still widespread and popular in the second and third centuries CE, as numerous inscriptions attest.\(^6\) Among such inscriptions are some which are more plausibly ascribed to gentiles devoted to the Jewish God. An inscription on a small altar from Pamphylia dated to the first or second century CE and published in 1992 reads: “For the truthful god who is not made with hands (in fulfillment of) a vow;” since the most striking aspect of the Jewish God in the eyes of outsiders was the remarkable fact that he has no image, it is most likely that the inscription was addressed to him. Similarly, an altar of the second century CE from Pergamon, with an inscription which reads at the top: “God, Lord, who is One for ever,” and on the bottom: “Zopyros [dedicated] to the Lord the

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\(^5\) E.g. Siegert, “Gottersfürchtigen und Sympathisanten”; Reynolds and Tannenbaum, Jews and God-Fearers at Aphrodisias, 65.


\(^6\) R. Lane Fox, Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World from the Second Century AD to the Conversion of Constantine (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1986) 69–72.

altar and the support with the lamp,” is most plausibly ascribed to a pagan worshipper of the Jewish God.65

The general attitude of Jews to such gentiles’ worship can only be suggested through the logic of a somewhat complex argument, as follows. There is good evidence in Palestinian rabbinic texts, from the Tosefta66 and Sifra,67 both probably redacted in the third century CE, to the Jerusalem Talmud,68 redacted probably in the late fourth century, that some rabbis sometimes assumed that gentiles (unlike Jews) were permitted to make offerings to God outside Jerusalem; the debate in the Jerusalem Talmud text was only over whether Jews should allow themselves to help gentiles to do this. Such approval by rabbis quoted in these texts is particularly significant because in these same texts can also be found strong disapproval of gentiles’ worship of other gods; the prohibition of alien worship (avodah zarah) was a consistent element in the so-called Noachide laws considered by the rabbis to be incumbent on all humans, gentiles as much as Jews, and first attested in the Tosefta.69 Unlike these rabbis, some Jews in the diaspora apparently did not object to the pagan practices of gentile God-worshippers, for they honoured gentile city-councillors who almost certainly took part in civic cults,70 so it will have been comparatively easy for them to accept the much less obviously objectionable practices of gentiles who made offerings not to idols but to the Jewish God.

If gentiles did regularly make such offerings, what would one expect the archeological evidence to look like from the buildings in which they worshipped? First, and most obvious, there could be no cult statue: pagans knew that what distinguished the Jewish God from other deities was the lack of any image.71 To indicate the

66 Zevakhim 13:1, which refers even to Samaritans.
67 83c., ed. Weiss.
70 See supra.
Jewishness of the divinity, therefore, one might expect characteristic Jewish iconography on mosaics or wall paintings: as the reliefs on the Arch of Titus in Rome demonstrate, pagans were aware of such Jewish images as the candelabrum (menorah) and incense shovels of the Jerusalem Temple. One might also expect to find in the shrines of such gentiles fragments of Hebrew words and letters, since, regardless of its incomprehensibility, the divinity’s special language might be thought to have an intrinsic power, as can be seen from the use of Hebrew in non-Jewish magical papyri. In all other respects the building might be expected to look like any other pagan temple—a fact, however, of dubious advantage in identification, since such temples varied greatly in plan from one place to another and from one shrine to another.

Such gentile worshippers would not necessarily have any collective name for themselves, any more than (for example) worshippers of Apollo or Jupiter Dolichenus did. Since they were not Jews (or, as they might think of it, ‘initiates of the Jewish God’), their worship of the divinity formed only one part of their religious lives, let alone their political and social identity; Jews, Christians, Mithraists and Isiaci were unusual in ancient religious history in their adoption of a group name to describe themselves. Nor did such gentiles necessarily espouse common myths or uniform rituals: each shrine might quite well follow its own local rules, as was common in ancient paganism.

This variation and anonymity will, of course, make such gentiles difficult to identify in the surviving evidence from late antiquity. Nonetheless, it is not just an entirely theoretical hypothesis that such people may have existed, nor that they may have set up altars and special buildings.

In 407 CE the emperors Theodosius, Arcadius and Honorius issued a law against a ‘new crime of superstition’, which has ‘claimed the unheard name of heaven-worshippers (caelicolae),’ ordering that

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73 Cf. Lane Fox, Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World, 64–101.

74 The assertion by the emperor in each reference to the caelicolae that he has never heard of them before (cf. Linder, The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation, 256) may show only his ignorance or their adoption of a new name, and not necessarily that they were a new religious phenomenon.
their buildings (aedificia), ‘which contain meetings of some new dogma,’ should be vindicated to the churches, i.e. confiscated. The evidence about the caelicolae, found in this law, in another similar law issued in 409 CE, and in a few remarks by Latin patristic writers, is strangely ignored in the standard modern discussions of Godfearers, but it seems very likely that the term describes individuals of the same type as those called theosebes (“God-worshippers”) in Greek. In the law of 409 CE the emperors moved straight from condemning the caelicolae to condemning those who dare to convert Christians to Judaism. The caelicolae were included in the heading of a title of the Theodosian Code along with Jews and Samaritans; despite this link with Jews, they seem to have been pagan polytheists. The term caelicolae (“heaven-worshippers”) seems to be a direct analogue to the Hebrew yir’ei shamayim (“heaven-fearers”) used in rabbinic texts of the third to fifth century CE to refer to gentiles who respect the Jewish God. At any rate, if the caelicolae were indeed pagans who revered the Jewish God, the most significant datum to emerge from the Roman legal texts is the fact that they possessed buildings for worship, in which case modern scholars might be thought to have every reason to hunt for evidence of such buildings in the archaeological remains of the late-Roman period.

75 Codex Justinianus 1.9.12.
76 Cf. Juster, Les Juifs dans l’Empire romain, vol. 1, 175, n. 3.
77 E.g. Siebert, “Gottersfürchtigen und Sympathisanten;” contrast Linder, The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation.
78 Codex Theodosianus 16.8.19.
79 Linder (The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation I, 257) takes the caelicolae to be Christian renegades, oddly translating “ nisi ad….venerationem….Christianam conversi fuerint” as “unless they return to…the Christian veneration.” This interpretation seems to go back to Juster (Les Juifs dans l’Empire romain, vol. 1, 175, n. 3). Juster was (rightly) keen to counter claims by previous scholars that caelicolae were Jews, but he did so by a misinterpretation of Codex Theodosianus 16.5.43. He took quamvis Christianos esse se simulent (“although they pretend that they are Christians”) at the end of that decree to refer to all previously mentioned groups, which included the caelicolae. But this is not plausible, since another group mentioned previously in the same law were the gentiles (“pagans”), who by definition did not claim to be Christian. The words at the end of the decree (“pretend to be Christians”) most obviously refer to the group mentioned in the final sentence of the law, immediately preceding this phrase—that is, the Donatists, who were indeed a Christian heresy. The Christian writer Philastrius (Haer. 15, CSEL 38, 6–7) thought that the caelicolae were Jews, who worshipped with sacrifices the goddess Caelestis, who personified the heavens.
80 Reynolds and Tannenbaum, Jews and God-Fearers at Aphrodisias, 52–53.
81 Codex Theodosianus 16.8.19.
It is time to make explicit the relevance of such questions to the study of Jews and Judaism in the late-Roman diaspora. How much evidence customarily ascribed by scholars to Jews and used to reconstruct “Judaisms” might actually reflect gentiles of this kind, who may have worshipped the Jewish God without any contact at all with Jews? I stress the word “might.” My aim is not to estimate the most plausible explanation of the surviving archeological and epigraphic evidence, but to illustrate the fragility of the scholarly assumptions which lie behind attempts to describe diaspora Judaism in the Mediterranean region. I shall concentrate on just one, celebrated, case study: the late-Roman “synagogue” at Sardis.

**Possible Re-interpretations of the Evidence**

It will be recalled that the modern re-evaluation of diaspora, and especially Asia Minor, Judaism has been based to a considerable extent on the alleged implications of the huge building at Sardis which the excavators identified as a synagogue (see above). The building is a large basilica built originally in the early Roman period as part of the gymnasium complex in the centre of the city. The basilica was identified as a synagogue in its later phases on account of the discovery of fragmentary Hebrew inscriptions and the iconography of its decoration.\(^{82}\) Numerous mosaic depictions of candelabra (*menorot*) were discovered, and fragments of one actual, stone *menorah*. The mosaics included pictures of a ram’s horn (*shofar*) and other objects which have been discovered in a number of synagogue sites in the land of Israel.\(^{83}\) There were also two small fragments of Hebrew inscriptions, one beyond clear decipherment, one reading *shalom* (“peace”).

Since the building has been firmly decreed by the excavators in 1962 to be a synagogue on the basis of these finds, when the first inscriptions came to be published in 1964 the framework was already taken for granted.\(^{84}\) The mosaic inscription of a certain Aurelius

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Olympios from the tribe of the Leontii, unique among Jewish inscriptions according to its editor, was nonetheless presumed to be Jewish simply because it was known to come from what was believed to be a synagogue. A rough graffito incised on the neck of a jar found in a shop outside the building to the south, with the name “Jacob” and four other letters (πρων), was reconstructed to read “Jacob the elder” and ascribed to a “councillor of the Jewish community” mainly because a Jewish community could be expected to have such officials and because a shop next to a prominent Jewish public building was likely to be owned by a Jew.

All such interpretations may be entirely correct, but it may be worthwhile to consider briefly other, quite different, ways of explaining the same evidence. What factors might encourage the belief that the Sardis building might not have been a Jewish synagogue at all, but might rather have housed a cult of gentile, polytheist God-worshippers?

Negative reasons to suggest that the building might not have been a synagogue are easily enumerated. First, it is many times bigger than any other synagogue yet identified. Secondly, its size might seem to militate against its usefulness as a synagogue where the main focus of ritual was to hear the Law read and explained: in a throng of over a thousand people, the reader might sometimes be hard to hear. Third, the plan of the building is unparalleled among ancient synagogues. Fourth, the huge marble table in the centre of the hall is unique in Jewish buildings and the edifice lacks the stone benches standard in synagogues elsewhere. Fifth, at least one donor to the building came from outside Sardis (from nearby Hypaepa), which was odd for a communal synagogue intended for the use of Jews who lived close enough to come regularly to hear the Law read. Sixth, and in contrast to donors’ names in synagogues elsewhere, the

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85 Ibid., no. 6.
86 Ibid., 46.
87 Ibid., 57, on no. 22.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 Trebilco, Jewish Communities in Asia Minor, 46.
mosaic inscriptions in Sardis do not apparently stress rank, honour and prestige within the Jewish community; instead, they emphasize civic status, and in particular, for those who could boast it, the rank of bouleutes, city councillor.\(^92\) None of the inscriptions refers to Jews, Israel, Hebrews, synagogues, or anything else specifically Jewish.

Positive reasons to suggest that the building might have been a place for God-worshippers to reverence the Jewish God are rather less numerous, but not negligible. First is the designation on the mosaics of six donors as theosebeis, “God-worshippers;”\(^93\) none has a Jewish name and, in the light of the proximity of Sardis to Aphrodisias, it is much more plausible that the theosebeis here, as at Aphrodisias, were gentiles.\(^94\) The Jewish iconography (such as the shofar) will then have been taken over by these non-Jews as symbolic representations of their cult of the Jewish God. Such appropriation of the images of other faiths was common in late antiquity: Christians sometimes used Jewish images, just as Jews sometimes used pagan symbols, so it should not surprise if the pagans who revered the Jewish God borrowed Jewish motifs.

Whoever the worshippers were in the building in its last phase, they seem to have kept a scroll of the law, or something similar, in the formal niche designated by the archeologists as the “Torah shrine.” The evidence lies in the discovery around the niche of a marble inscription with the word nomophylakion (“guarding-place of [the] law”),\(^97\) and in the probable depiction of Torah scrolls in the form of two stylized spirals.\(^98\) Such appurtenances of worship might seem too obviously appropriate to Jewish synagogue liturgy for any other explanation to be worth considering, but in fact even Torah scrolls might have a function in pagan worship. There is good evidence that non-Jews sometimes treated Jews’ veneration for their scrolls as the direct equivalent of pagan veneration of idols.\(^99\)

\(^92\) Robert, Nouvelles inscriptions de Sardes, 54–57.
\(^93\) Ibid., 39–45; Trebilco, Jewish Communities in Asia Minor, 158–59.
\(^94\) Cf. ibid., 159.
\(^96\) Ibid., passim.
a soldier burnt a Torah scroll in first-century CE Judea, the Roman governor had him publicly executed, and in the triumph held by Titus and Vespasian in Rome to celebrate the suppression of the Jewish revolt, the procession of booty contained, after the impressive loot from the Temple itself, a scroll of the Jewish law. It would be easy for pagans to imagine that the scroll of the law embodied the divinity—and for those who worshipped the divinity to keep, in a wall oriented towards Jerusalem, a special copy of the scroll as the central focus of their worship, even if they did not actually read it, let alone understand the meaning of its contents.

Nor need the presence of a Hebrew inscription in the building signify that this was a synagogue: a word like “shalom” is just the sort of word non-Jews enthusiastic about the Jewish God might employ as a sort of talisman (see above).

If I push possibilities to their limit, I could even argue that the presence among the inscriptions of two characteristically Jewish names (out of thirty altogether), like a certain “Samoe, priest and wise teacher (sophodidaskalos),” does not necessarily bear any significance for the nature of the building as a whole. Jewish names appear in pagan contexts elsewhere, like those in an ephebe list from a gymnasium in Cyrene in the early first century CE. It would not be particularly strange if some Jews (albeit, in the eyes of some rabbis, bad ones) decided to show public support for a pagan shrine erected in honour of the Jewish God, just as some Jews nowadays will attend Christian services, making mental reservations during elements of the liturgy incompatible with Jewish theology—and just as some pagans in ancient times made offerings in synagogues (see above).

It will be recalled that my aim in discussing the Sardis building was only to push the possible explanation of the evidence to

100 B.J. 2.229–231.
101 Ibid., 7.150.
the limit of reasonableness—to see what might have been, and not to suggest what is more plausible. To balance the picture, and to avoid misleading readers, I should make it clear that the hypothesis I have just outlined is no more probable than the traditional suggestion that the building was a synagogue, and that some factors are difficult to explain on this view just as they are if the traditional view is taken.

So, for example, if the building was used by pagan polytheists, the emphasis by many donors on their enjoyment of the citizenship of Sardis[^106] is strange since it might be thought an attribute local pagans could take for granted. Again, the apparently deliberate hiding of the image of other deities when an ancient stone on which images of Cybele and Artemis were carved was re-used in the floor of the forecourt would be an odd thing for polytheists to do[^107]. If the latter behaviour took place in the fifth century, it could be argued that it marked a change of use of the building from pagan shrine to Jewish synagogue (below), along perhaps with the (undatable) decapitation of the eagles that flanked the marble table[^108], but I do not wish to press the issue, since I hope that in any case the methodological points I wish to make are sufficiently clear: the Sardis building, with its distinctive iconography and large number of donor inscriptions, might in the third and fourth century CE have housed a Jewish synagogue, in which case the Judaism of those who worshipped there may have been of a distinctive type, but it also might have housed a cult of non-Jews who revered the Jewish God without any intention of entering the fold of Judaism.

Explicitly Jewish identification in the epigraphical and archeological material from the late-Roman Mediterranean diaspora is much rarer than one would like. So, for instance, of the eighty-five inscriptions from the diaspora included in Lifshitz’s collection of donors and founders in synagogues[^109], only twenty-four contain any clearly Jewish reference, such as “Jew,” “synagogue,” or “Hebrew,” although the surmise that they were indeed set up by Jews is much stronger in some cases than in others.

[^108]: Ibid., 170.
[^109]: Lifshitz, *Donateurs et fondateurs dans les synagogues juives*. 
In the light of all this, it is worth asking what, if historians totally lacked the benefit of evidence from literary texts, they would deduce about Judaism from archeology and inscriptions. I doubt if they would ever discover that Judaism was distinguished from most other ancient religions by being a system, or a number of systems, with a complex mythology based on the covenant and revelation on Mount Sinai. It would be clear that there were indeed religious groups who identified themselves as Jews and set up communal buildings and hierarchies, but I suspect that few scholars would guess the significance of this fact: if they operated by analogy, I suspect that they would (probably quite wrongly) interpret hierarchical titles as evidence of grades of initiation like those in Mithraism, so that “Father of the synagogue” could be seen as parallel to the Mithraic pater.

Not much else could be deduced about Judaism from the vast majority of Jewish sites and inscriptions. The nature of Jewish religious beliefs would surely be totally obscure from the iconography of menoroth, lions, incense shovels, birds, lulavim, and so on. I doubt if we would even be able to recognize lulavim (palm branches) for what they are, or to distinguish the significant elements of the iconography (menoroth, lulavim) from the (probably) purely decorative (lions and birds); only with literary knowledge can such distinctions be made, and even then the significance of incense shovels remains obscure.

None of the archeological and epigraphic evidence gives any hint of the really distinctive traits of Judaism as it appears in late-antique Jewish and Christian sources: the centrality of a written scripture, and its proclamation and explanation in public assemblies. To deduce that, we would need more inscriptions affirming the status of liturgical readers, which are curiously rare. Nothing in the iconography would give a clue to the main Jewish identity markers as we know them from elsewhere: shabbat, kashrut (dietary laws), and circumcision.

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111 Cf. Vermaseren, Mithras, the Secret God; Schürer, The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ, 3:101, n. 51.
112 The great exception is the synagogue at Dura-Europos, with its remarkable frescoes, to which there is no parallel elsewhere (J. Gutmann, The Dura-Europos Synagogue, a Re-evaluation [Chambersburg, PA: American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, 1973]).
113 Cf. Levine, The Synagogue in Late Antiquity.
Inevitably, then, all interpretation of such archeological and epigraphic material carries with it a great burden of assumptions derived from the literary evidence which survives from antiquity through the Christian Church and rabbinic Judaism. The hope that archeological evidence can act as an objective, untainted corrective to those literary traditions is therefore in many cases over-optimistic.

**Epilogue: The End of Uncertainty**

Even for the most skeptical historian, the radical uncertainty I have been advocating in the study of Mediterranean Judaism will no longer seem even marginally plausible by the medieval period. By (say) the tenth century CE no one would seriously suggest that Jewish-type evidence is likely to have derived from pagan God-worshippers, nor that non-rabbinic Judaism was widespread in the region, apart from among those Jews like the Karaites who self-consciously broke away from the rabbinic mainstream. It is worth asking from what date, and for what reason, this increased certainty in the interpretation of Jewish-type material becomes overwhelmingly plausible. I suggest, tentatively, a fairly precise date: the late fourth century CE. If that date is correct, it will have been brought about by a specific agent, the Roman state, and, as often in Jewish history, change will have come about because of actions not by Jews, but by outsiders—in this case, the militantly Christian emperors of Rome and Constantinople from the time of Theodosius the Great.

All Roman emperors were Christian from the conversion of Constantine in 312 CE, with only a very brief interlude under Julian the Apostate in 361–363 CE, but the earliest Christian emperors, whatever their personal predilections, made no attempt to impose their faith upon their subjects. In the late 380s CE this liberal stance was to change quite dramatically. Theodosius the Great, impelled by personal conscience and zealous Christian clerics, began the systematic closure of pagan temples. By the end of the century most temples in the main cities of the Roman empire were either deserted.

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or converted into churches, and paganism, though not eradicated, was confined to the countryside.\footnote{115}{J. Geffcken, \textit{The Last Days of Greco-Roman Paganism} (Amsterdam and Oxford: North-Holland, 1978).}

Thus by the fifth century it is very unlikely that a large public building in a major city would be a pagan shrine, even to the Jewish God, and whatever the Sardis building was in its earlier stages, it is most likely that by the fifth century the Jewish motifs found on the mosaic floors do indeed show it to have been a synagogue. The attitude of Theodosius and his successors to the erection, repair and preservation of synagogues was not exactly favourable, but it was much more ambivalent than their thoroughgoing hostility to pagan temples.\footnote{116}{B.S. Bachrach, “The Jewish community of the Later Roman Empire as seen in the Codex Theodosianus” in \textit{“To See Ourselves as Others See Us:” Christians, Jews, “Others” in Late Antiquity}, 399–421.}

Furthermore, if in the fifth century the building was a synagogue, it is likely that by that time the Jews who worshipped there had come under the influence of the rabbis of the land of Israel. There is evidence in the Roman legal codes that from the 380s until at least the 420s the Jewish nasi (patriarch) in Palestine was accorded by the Roman state power and authority over the Jews throughout the empire. By this period, Roman emperors took for granted the backing of the Roman state for the patriarch’s collection of funds from the diaspora.\footnote{117}{Cf. \textit{Codex Theodosianus} 16.8.17.} They assumed that he had the right to excommunicate deviants from Jewish communities,\footnote{118}{Ibid., 16.8.8.} which presumably implied the right to define what is deviant. Finally, and of most significance for the Sardis building, they took for granted his power to found and dismantle synagogues throughout the empire.\footnote{119}{Cf. ibid., 16.8.22.} The patriarch by no means represented all rabbis, since the talmudic sources reveal conflict between individual nesiim and individual rabbis over questions of authority and halacha during many generations,\footnote{120}{L.I. Levine, \textit{The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine in Late Antiquity} (Jerusalem and New York: Yad Izhak ben Zvi and Jewish Theological Seminary, 1989).} but he did at least come from within the same type of Judaism that the rabbis

\footnote{115}{J. Geffcken, \textit{The Last Days of Greco-Roman Paganism} (Amsterdam and Oxford: North-Holland, 1978).}
\footnote{116}{B.S. Bachrach, “The Jewish community of the Later Roman Empire as seen in the Codex Theodosianus” in \textit{“To See Ourselves as Others See Us:” Christians, Jews, “Others” in Late Antiquity}, 399–421.}
\footnote{117}{Cf. \textit{Codex Theodosianus} 16.8.17.}
\footnote{118}{Ibid., 16.8.8.}
\footnote{119}{Cf. ibid., 16.8.22.}
\footnote{120}{L.I. Levine, \textit{The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine in Late Antiquity} (Jerusalem and New York: Yad Izhak ben Zvi and Jewish Theological Seminary, 1989).}
espoused. After all, the foundation document of rabbinic Judaism, the Mishnah, had been codified by R. Judah ha-Nasi, patriarch at the end of the second century CE and the beginning of the third, and it was descent from him that gave later patriarchs their authority.

It is possible, then, to end on a reassuring note. Whatever the nature of the building in Sardis in which gentile God-worshippers dedicated their mosaic inscriptions in the mid-fourth century or earlier, it seems likely that the individual called “Samoe, priest and wise teacher,” whose name was inserted into the floor of the hall in the late fifth century was a rabbinic Jew, and that the building which he honoured was a synagogue. There is, after all, something that can be asserted about Jews and Judaism in the Mediterranean diaspora in the late-Roman period.

**Postscript**

I am grateful to the editors of this volume and to the Mediterranean Institute of the University of Malta for the opportunity to republish here this article, which originally appeared in *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* in 1994. The central thesis of the article, that students of the religious history of late antiquity need to allow for the possibility that Jewish iconography on archaeological remains may reflect the activities not of Jews but of gentile worshippers of the Jewish God, has been cast in a new light by more recent studies. As a result, I think that the hypothesis presented so tentatively in the early 1990’s can reasonably be presented now with slightly more confidence, although I must stress that my purpose in elaborating the hypothesis is still only to stimulate consideration of what might be possible rather than to describe what was certainly the case.

In this brief discussion of relevant scholarship since 1994, two major advances in the presentation of the primary epigraphic evidence take

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122 Hanfmann and Bloom, “Samoe, Priest and Teacher of Wisdom.”
123 Trebilco (*Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, 50) argued that the fact that Samoe was not called a rabbi in the inscription may be evidence that he (and Jews in Sardis in general) was not under rabbinic influence, but I am not persuaded by this argument from silence.
pride of place. First is the full publication of the inscriptions from the Sardis ‘synagogue’. The helpful commentaries on the dossiers, completed in 1994, reflect the state of the debate in the early 1990s. Second is the brilliant reconsideration of the Aphrodisias ‘Godfearers’ stele by Angelos Chaniotis, in which he proposes a date in the second half of the fourth century or in the fifth century for the texts on both the inscribed faces.

This redating of the Aphrodisias texts, from the early third century to the mid fourth at earliest, coincides with a trend to redate on archaeological grounds the alteration of the Sardis gymnasium basilica into a religious building and the period of its use for that purpose: the debate continues, but it is fair to say that all reinvestigation of the archaeological record has so far pushed the date of the building’s use well away from the second century date originally favoured into the fourth century or later.

Other studies have mapped out a plausible historical context for the interpenetration of religious iconography, ideas and memberships, in which neutral religious phrases and ambiguous images were prudently favoured by public figures in the way they presented themselves to their fellow citizens and to the state. Jas Elsner has emphasised the use by both Jews and Christians of a common iconography shared also with their pagan contemporaries, stressing that the differences between religious groups will generally have lain less in the images they employed than in the meanings they gave to those images. Some scholars have even claimed that religious boundaries were so fluid that Judaism and Christianity were indistinguishable as

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separate religions until the fourth century, a rather extreme view which itself may not sufficiently distinguish between ancient attitudes to group identity and the different issue of the problems faced by modern scholars in assigning a text or artefact to one such group or another. What now seems generally agreed is the significance of the fourth century, after the edict of toleration of Christianity in 313 CE, as a tolerant religious arena, in which it was possible for an individual both to cross religious divides and to seek wider ecumenical acceptability by adoption of ambiguous language.

Of particular importance for study of the use of Jewish symbols has been the remarkable investigation by Stephen Mitchell of the cult of theos hypsistos (‘the highest god’). Mitchell suggests that the abundant epigraphic material referring to this god from all over the eastern Mediterranean world in the Roman imperial period should be attributed to a specific pagan cult, which he characterizes as an aspect of pagan monotheism. Not all have been persuaded that ‘highest god’ should always be understood as designating the divinity worshipped rather than as an adjective applied to another god, but even a modified form of Mitchell’s thesis would render it plausible both that Jews could easily identify their God with the divinity worshipped by such pagans (cf. Ps. Aristeas 16) and (importantly for the present study) that such pagans could identify their ‘highest god’ with the God of the Jews. The former possibility I have explored at some length in a discussion of the image of the sun god in the synagogue mosaics in late-Roman Palestine. The latter possibility would fit well with the suggestion in the current study about the role of the godfearers in the ‘synagogue’ in late-Roman Sardis.

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133 Cf., for example, Chaniotis, “The Jews of Aphrodisias,” 224, n. 49.