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Poverty and Mass Education:  
the Jews in the Roman Empire

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## Poverty and Mass Education: the Jews in the Roman Empire

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11 November 2018

***Origins of mass education of the poor can be traced to the rabbinic tradition in 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE Galilee, in reaction to repeated defeats of Jewish revolts against Rome, though the extraordinary social mobility of literate European Jews occurred only with the rise of State secularization and mandatory secular education, and accompanying Jewish emancipation after 1789.***

### **Abstract:**

*Since 1789, mass education has been a key factor in development, enabling large numbers of people to escape at least the worst effects of poverty. This paper explores an ancient harbinger of mass education, among Jews in the Roman empire, the basis of Jewish religious education to modern times. Education became vital to Jewish survival after three disastrous wars against Rome (66-73, 115-117, and 132-135 CE), when the Jewish state was destroyed together with Jerusalem and its Temple, the centre of Jewish religion, as well as the Temple priesthood and Jewish aristocracy, leaving the authority of the Torah to its teachers. The sacred culture of education came to dominate the lives of most European Jews until 1789 and was instrumental in their ability to make use of educational systems created by newly emerging secular states, mostly in Western Europe after 1789 and in America after 1881, and in their consequent economic improvement.*

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## *The historic setting*

Education is essential in development, with significant correlations between educational levels and life chances, mortality, health and income.<sup>1</sup> Mass education in the ancient world began with the Greeks who developed a culture of literacy in which many, including slaves, were able to read. However, Greek education was essentially upper class, intended chiefly for the aristocratic minority who controlled government.<sup>2</sup> The first successful long-term educational system aimed mostly at the poor, and presenting education itself as a value greater than wealth and power, evolved among 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE Galilean Jews under Roman rule. After three disastrous wars against Rome (66-73, 115-117, 132-135 CE), Jewish education became vital for Jewish survival: it represented a form of cultural resistance to Roman rule, and independence from Roman rule, tolerated and even protected by Rome as a form of pacifistic accommodationism. While the Bible enjoins fathers to teach their children and gives precedents for public readings from the Torah, no schools or schoolchildren appear in the Bible, and the rabbinic view on education goes much further than the Bible in its emphasis on study and on communal responsibility for the establishment of schools and the education of children. Rabbinic Judaism raised literacy in Hebrew (the ‘Holy Tongue’) and Torah study to the status of a sacred task, for the impoverished common people as well as the priestly class. Representing an ideal of learning for its own sake, the Jewish educational tradition created a culture of literacy, chiefly in Hebrew, which dominated the lives of most European Jews until 1789 and greatly facilitated Jewish adaptation to increasingly secularized European countries after 1789. Hebrew, known to some extent at least by most Jews as the language of the Bible and the prayerbook (the *siddur*), was used increasingly after 1789 as a tool for secular education, and the elevated tradition of study was applied to newly-emerging school systems and universities, in gaining professional training of many kinds, enabling many, particularly in Western and Central Europe, and later, in America, to escape poverty. In the less developed Eastern European states, where the bulk of the world Jewish population was concentrated until 1939, the traditional rabbinic educational system survived largely intact, with relatively little competition from secular education, and the majority of Jews remained desperately impoverished until the Holocaust.

Rabbinic literature has evidence of a long struggle to create a viable international system of education based on Scripture and halakha (Jewish law), mostly in Hebrew, and aimed chiefly at the poor living in a subsistence-level agricultural society. Education was vital to Jewish survival after the wars against Rome, leading to the destruction of the Jewish state, including the Temple in Jerusalem, and the exile of large numbers of Jews. The Temple priesthood and Jewish aristocracy vanished, leaving the authority of the Torah to its teachers. Rabbinic education was effectively a new, pacifist form of Judaism, rejecting a State-based militancy which had lasted over a thousand years. Galilee, previously regarded as a centre of ignoramuses, replaced Jerusalem as an educational centre. This was a milestone in educational history, aiming to give, evidently for the first time, free elementary education to all male children, but also affecting the education of girls. Jews were raised to value literacy in Hebrew and learning at all educational levels, but particularly in talmudic dialectics. Education involved great untold sacrifice on the part of impoverished communities in a subsistence-level agricultural society, and families whose children were often needed for essential labor. Historically, most Jews, including most talmudic rabbis and certainly the *melamdin*, the schoolteachers, were among the working class poor.

This paper explores the struggle after centuries of failure or only-partial success to create under Roman rule a viable international system of Jewish education - a harbinger for the later expansion of education, both religious and secular - and the many forces which stood in the way: the hostility of the Roman empire, the allure of Hellenization, the messianism leading to frequent war and economic breakdown in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, the rise of Christianity, the poverty and ignorance of a subsistence-level agricultural society, and anti-rabbinic elements in the land of Israel and the diaspora.

After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, rabbinic education preserved strongly universalistic biblical elements. The importance attached to reading a sacred text entered the mainstream of civilization, first via the Hebrew Bible and its adoption as sacred Scripture by Christianity and Islam; the value attached to literacy affected the emergence of secular culture, religious schools being progenitors of secular schools. Though the Bible implicitly encourages the creation of schools with a clearly defined curriculum, the actual creation of these schools for the long term was not easy, and practically impossible as long as Judaea was at odds with Rome. Militant messianic Judaism could promote the ideal of Torah study, and martyrdom for the Torah, but was incapable of creating conditions of economic stability and Roman tolerance to create a viable long-term school system under Roman rule. In the best of circumstances, schools could not easily be built and maintained, and certainly not in conditions of constant war against Rome. Even prior to the wars, Judaism, with its religious ideology of equality in the eyes of God and a culture based on freedom from slavery and national-legal independence, was deeply problematic in a fissiparous empire seeking cultural unity and comprising the largest slave society in history.<sup>3</sup> From 66-135 CE, the Jews of the land of Israel, taking inspiration from the militancy of the Hebrew Bible, inflicted some of the worst defeats on Roman regular forces by a people of an established province. In 66 CE they routed the army of the Roman governor of Syria, Cestius Gallus and massacred the equivalent of a legion; and in the Bar-Kokhba war they evidently achieved a similar feat.<sup>4</sup> These Jewish victories had ideological implications threatening Roman society.<sup>5</sup> The Roman empire could not tolerate a loss of face on this scale, at the hands of an ancient people with a unique religious-national history, with beliefs conflicting with those of Rome, who could in theory spearhead revolt throughout the empire.<sup>6</sup> The succession of Jewish revolts made it imperative not just to defeat the Jews, but to make an object lesson of them, to humiliate and break them and deprive them totally of military capacity.<sup>7</sup> The Romans destroyed the Jewish state and the Temple, synagogues, schools, houses of study and libraries, tortured and executed teachers and scribes and enslaved or exiled many of

the survivors; they ploughed Jerusalem over, wiped many Jewish villages off the map, eliminated the Jewish presence in southern Palestine and replaced it with a gentile population.<sup>8</sup> When Rome was through with them, at the end of the reign of Hadrian, the Jews were ruthlessly crushed and demilitarized, a limping, bleeding emblem of the futility of war against the power of the empire. Jewish slaves, cripples, orphans, widows, and beggars thronged the empire. No other ancient people was so thoroughly defeated and humiliated as the Jews were by Rome, and with such tragic consequences.<sup>9</sup>

After 135 CE, pacifist education was increasingly accepted, among Jews in the land of Israel and in the diaspora, as the key to survival, continuity and economic well-being.<sup>10</sup> The wars created both the urgent need and some of the conditions for organized Jewish education for the long haul. This paper looks at some factors behind the evolution of Jewish education in the land of Israel and the diaspora: the breakdown of relations of Jews with Rome and with the Greek communities in Palestine and the diaspora, culminating in war; the retreat from Greek civilization and Greek education which in some ways were highly attractive and useful throughout the empire; and the destruction of the Jewish state and the Temple in Jerusalem, leaving the rabbis as sole leaders, and education divorced both from militant messianism and Jewish expansionism, as the only means by which Jewish survival could be assured.

### *The evolution of mass Jewish education: an aggadic history*

Rabbinic literature has no text on the history of Jewish education; yet, fragments relating to Jewish education float abundantly in the talmudic sea and build an historic picture. There are clearly-marked moments, summed up somewhat like Disraeli's career: failure, failure, failure, partial success, failure, total success - though it is questionable if the latter stage was ever reached, except in relative terms. The picture of education, considered as a Gestalt, is hardly reliable in factual detail

(particularly in numbers of schools and pupils), and is often veiled in *aggada* (Jewish legend). The rabbis treasure residual memories of historical crises - above all, the destruction of the Temple and the failed revolts - as triggers in the emergence of free Jewish education for children. They plausibly associate the vicissitudes of Jewish education with deteriorating Jewish/Greek relations from the time of the Hasmonean revolt (168-165 BCE) until the Bar-Kokhba revolt (132-135 CE). They also consistently link educational watersheds - whether accurately or not we do not know - with prestigious individuals and places, for example, Simeon ben Shetach, president of the Sanhedrin (the Supreme Court of ancient Israel) in the time of Alexander Jannaeus (late 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE); the high priest Joshua ben Gamla, around the time of the Jewish revolt in 66 CE; the influential rabbi, Yohanan ben Zakkai, at the time of the siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE; Bar-Kokhba, leader of the 132-135 CE revolt, at Betar, the last outpost; and Rabbi Judah Hanasi, editor of the Mishna, the first systematic compendium of Jewish law and basis of the Talmud, and his colleague, Rabbi Hiyya, in Galilee (early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE).<sup>11</sup> Thus, a few years before the Roman conquest of Judaea in 63 BCE, Simeon ben Shetach, reportedly issued the revolutionary decree that 'children should go to school'.<sup>12</sup> This decree probably applied chiefly to larger towns, particularly Jerusalem, not the countryside; the same was the case with the decree of Joshua ben Gamla in the years prior to the outbreak of war in 66 CE: 'It was ordained that teachers of children should be appointed in Jerusalem'.<sup>13</sup> Such decrees were evidently a point of pride, having the authority of a distinguished past, of the legendary Sanhedrin and, later (as Joshua ben Gamla was a high priest), the ruined Temple. It may be that these scintillating historic associations were preserved in the rabbinic tradition as the value and authority of Jewish education could not always be taken for granted.

It seems clear that Jews in the land of Israel, possibly influenced by Greek models, envisaged a strong and lasting school system long before one was created, and this ambition might underly the decrees on education ascribed to Simeon ben Shetach and Joshua ben Gamla. Yet, an educational system viable for the long term, with schools, paid teachers, and a set curriculum, came late to Judaism, after the Greeks, and probably influenced by the Greeks: by the end of the biblical era (c. 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE) most Jews lived in a Greek-speaking world and themselves spoke Greek. The



aim of mass school education may have entered Jewish life especially after the conquest of land of Israel by the Romans in 63 BCE, whether in imitation of or resistance against Hellenization.<sup>14</sup>

However, any ruling on education, amid vagaries of Roman rule and ongoing rivalry with Greeks and Hellenistic culture, could have only limited effectiveness. As long as it confronted a Jewish militant messianic threat, Rome could not encourage in the land of Israel economic and educational development that might be turned against it. Until after the Bar-Kokhba war, Rome could only view with suspicion a form of education which was not only un-Roman but also had anti-Roman militant tendencies and linked a population in the empire with groups living in enemy territory. In the *aggada*, the fate of Akiba, the outstanding Jewish educator of the 66-138 CE period, is death by Roman torture. The angels in heaven ask, in shocked incredulity: ‘Is this the reward of Torah?’<sup>15</sup> The elimination by Rome of many defining characteristics of Jewish national identity, the Temple above all, made all the more necessary the severance of education from messianism, war and martyrdom, historic forces of instability.

After the death of Hadrian and the accession of Antonius Pius in 138 CE, the economic conditions of the Jews improved as well as their political relations with Rome. Peace and relative prosperity allowed the Mishna, written in Hebrew, to be edited (c. 200 CE) in Galilee and increased numbers of synagogues to be built in lieu of the Temple. Synagogues could be used as houses of study and school buildings, and the basic curriculum could be established: the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Five Books of Moses, for young children, Mishna for older children, and Gemara for mostly older, more advanced students.<sup>16</sup> Under the leadership of the Patriarch, Judah Hanasi, editor of the Mishna, and his pupil and colleague Rabbi Hiyya, Jewish education was set up on a permanent basis, from generation to generation, to modern times.<sup>17</sup> The curriculum remained largely unchanged wherever Jews lived. The educational tradition defined the Jewish world as surely as the bath-house and stadium

defined the Graeco-Roman world. The religious teachings of Judaism were inseparable from its nationalist core, including loyalty to the unity of the Jewish people, based on monotheist ethics; love for fellow Jews, the Torah, the land of Israel and the Hebrew language; and the determination to learn and preserve sacred Hebrew Scripture and the Oral Law deriving from Scripture as well as related Hebrew texts such as the *siddur* (prayerbook) and, later, the *Shulkhan Arukh* (16<sup>th</sup> century code of Jewish law).

### *Hellenism and Jewish education: influences and conflicts*

Origins of exclusive Jewish school education may be found in the encounters of Judaism with Hellenism in the early Roman empire. Greek education was both dangerous rival and valuable model for Jewish education. Even before Judaea came under Roman rule, in 63 CE, most Jews lived in the diaspora in the Roman empire where their daily language was, as indicated earlier, mostly Greek. Prior to the destruction of the Jewish state, Judaism might often have seemed parochial and unattractive to the minority of wealthy Judaeans, alongside the riches of Hellenistic education, the empire-wide culture of the elite. Hellenization often meant neglect or rejection of Jewish education.<sup>18</sup> The idea of mass education originated with the Greeks at a time when elementary Jewish education was still largely undeveloped.<sup>19</sup> The Greeks gave the Jews the chief precedent for an educational system with a curriculum for children and, in their spectacular international culture, taught the value of education in surviving military defeat.

Yet, the idea of a Jewish school system grew against a background of bitter conflict - religious and political, cultural and educational - which dogged Greek-Jewish relations. A major turning point was reached when the Jews reacted against Hellenism during and after the Maccabean uprising in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE with a new religious nationalism centred on the study and dissemination of the Torah, often drawing on Greek educational methods, modes of reasoning and debate. The

pressure of Hellenism on Jews in the early Roman empire was the pressure of political conformity, requiring sacrifices to the gods and the emperor and, socially, the cult of the body in the gymnasia. Judaism and Jewish education often implied militant non-conformity. Graeco-Roman anti-Judaism limited Jewish opportunities in the Hellenistic world and dampened the wish to assimilate, forcing Jews at times to defend their own Jewish culture.<sup>20</sup> Roman imperial culture was Greek, but Judaism did not need active mission to spread.<sup>21</sup> Rivalry for the soul of the Roman empire polarized Greek and Jewish cultures. Greek-Jewish rivalry stimulated Jewish education, if only to know how to answer one's accusers.<sup>22</sup> The more Rome tried to force Hellenism and the emperor cult onto the Jews, the greater the political significance of Jewish education as an alternative, non-Roman culture. They adopted Greek educational ideas, not to become Hellenized but to serve the Jewish cause, guided by rabbinic education.<sup>23</sup> The struggle to establish mass Jewish education on a firm basis between the Hasmonean wars and the Bar-Kokhba war - between two bans on Judaism, with no precedent in the history of religions - is outlined in the following chronological framework:

1. By the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, the Hasmoneans heretically promoted Greek culture;<sup>24</sup>
2. Syrian-Greeks tried to suppress Judaism prior to the Maccabee revolt in 168-165 BCE;
3. Herod (37-4 BCE), client-ruler loyal to Augustus, instituted a program of forced Hellenization;
4. Anti-Jewish policies were instigated both in the local procuratorial government in Judaea and in the central government in Rome, which came increasingly under the influence of imperial Greek freedmen, who wielded much power in Rome in 41-66 CE;<sup>25</sup>
5. Greek/Jewish conflict became especially bitter in Judaea, which at the start of the Jewish revolt in 66 CE led to massacres of the Jewish population and Jewish retaliation;<sup>26</sup>

6. Greeks participated in the destruction of the Jewish state;<sup>27</sup>
7. Defeat brought further humiliating anti-Jewish Roman policies after the war and could not be separated from Greek anti-Judaism;
8. Greeks massacred diaspora Jewish communities in the Jewish revolt in c. 115-117 CE;
9. The failed Bar-Kokhba revolt and the Hadrianic ban on Judaism and persecution of its teachers (c. 132-138 CE) largely destroyed the militant, messianic spirit of Judaism and led to Jewish alienation from the Roman empire and ‘a wholesale retreat from Hellenism’.<sup>28</sup>

Efforts to develop a Jewish school system in the land of Israel were possibly triggered directly by the bans on Judaism, first by the Syrian-Greeks in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, then by Hadrian at the time of the Bar-Kokhba revolt. Jewish education was, in effect, an answer to forced Hellenization. Uneasy Jewish relations with Greek communities throughout the time between the two bans on Judaism created further suspicion of Greek culture. As the Greek population in the land of Israel and the diaspora and Greek auxiliary forces in the Roman army were heavily involved in the downfall of the Jewish state and in the massacres of Jews (these are described in detail by Josephus in his history of the 66-73 CE war), the attraction of ‘Hellenistic Judaism’ synthesizing the two cultures lost much of its lustre. Graeco-Roman anti-Judaism and Jewish disenchantment with the Graeco-Roman world raised the status of Jewish education. Rome, by destroying the Temple in Jerusalem, the priesthood and ruling class, purging rivals to rabbinism – Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots – and by facilitating the split between Judaism and Christianity, also made imperial Graeco-Roman culture unpalatable to many Jews. The Mishna (*Sotah* 9: 14) reveals that the war against ‘Quietus’ (c. 115–117 CE), involving Greek massacres of Jews, led to a rabbinic ban on the study of Greek. The pure Hebrew of the Mishna, cultivated in the expanding towns in Galilee, elevated Jewish culture and education over Hellenism – though most Jews in the empire continued to speak Greek. The resentment and hostility created by Greeks made Greek education seem odious, not just to pious Jews

but also to some Jews otherwise sympathetic to Hellenism. The accumulated insult among Greeks and Jews for over two centuries ruined the ideal of synthesis, of ‘Hellenistic Judaism’. Those for whom ‘Hellenistic Judaism’ had the greatest attraction, including the Judaeen aristocracy and many of the Temple priests, were eradicated, leaving the only semblance of national rule under Rome in the hands of the rabbis, for whom Torah education for the masses was a sacred goal. The prestige of Jewish learning rose as rabbis were involved in the revolts and martyred themselves for the Torah. While revolt and martyrdom held Jewish education back, they evidently fixed the ideal of universal education more firmly than before as a goal to be sought. The talmudic story of Akiba’s martyrdom for the Torah during the Hadrianic ban on Judaism, whatever its historical accuracy, plainly reflects a conviction among a significant number of Jews in the 66–135 CE period that Jewish learning was worth dying for. In other *aggadot* set against the Roman ban on Judaism, Judah ben Bava commits the capital crime of ordination and urges his ordainees to flee: ‘As they started to run, his body was pierced sieve-like with three hundred iron spears’; and Hanina ben Teradion is burned to death wrapped in Torah scrolls.<sup>29</sup> The survival of Jewish education meant that the martyrs did not die in vain. Roman rule aroused the allure of a seemingly utopian world, free from Roman rule, in which Jewish children go to school daily and study Scripture and the Law. Jewish pacifism following the Bar-Kokhba revolt ultimately made possible a *modus vivendi* with Rome in which, in an historic irony, the empire guarded the guardians of the Torah and enabled rabbinic Judaism to flourish. The empire ensured the survival of the Jews and Judaism for its duration, and after its collapse.

Hostility to Judaism in the Roman empire in the century after 70 CE drew on a combination of pagan Greek hostility to Judaism and Christian theological anti-Semitism. Christian anti-Semitism – ‘the most significant development in the century after 70 CE’<sup>30</sup> – might in some cases have been decisive in convincing Jews that to combat the combined challenge of Hellenism and Christianity and their allure they had to give their children systematic school education to keep them loyal and proud Jews. The Greek Bible, once a tool for Jewish assimilation into Greek culture, became by 135 CE the Scripture of Christianity, the hook for the fishers of men. Christians proselytized both among Jews and also among Greek enemies of Judaism. Amid widespread hatred and contempt for Jews and Judaism disowned

before the angels of God, rabbis taught love for the people chosen as a divine inheritance. If Christians insisted upon faults of the Jewish people as revealed in the Hebrew Bible, and particularly the prophets, the rabbis would not stand idly by: they tore apart biblical denunciations of Israel and the prophets who ‘tell Israel his sins’ – including Moses, Samuel, Elijah, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel – and emphasized instead God’s love for Israel.<sup>31</sup> The trauma of the wars became permanently embedded in Judaism, in prayers, legends, dirges, and fast days; and its legal system codified in the Mishna in Galilee by the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE was created in the shadow of defeat. The Mishna unified Jews worldwide under a single legal code. The paradox of defeat was that it ‘led to the triumph of rabbinic Judaism’.<sup>32</sup> By the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, the rabbis sought a form of Jewish education free of impure and malign foreign influence, and based exclusively on Jewish texts.

### *From battleground to classroom*

We have seen that the process by which Jewish school education became firmly established in Galilee was closely linked to the transformation of the Jews from militancy to pacifism. After 135 CE, the survivors of the Jewish revolts were forced to accept that Judaism in the Roman empire could be destroyed if they continued to fight Rome. In the absence of national leaders, the Jews followed their rabbis, turning from the battleground to the classroom, from political to religious aims, from suicidally militant messianism to pacifist resignation. They re-made Judaism, beating sword to ploughshare, subduing violent messianic fantasies to rational-legal study, creating schools where the battle was to survive as Jews, to learn, debate and understand the Torah, and to live by its holy precepts. They deserted the thousand-year military tradition recorded in the Bible and the Apocrypha and remained pacifists until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Jewish education after 135 CE rejected militancy. It sought peaceful co-existence in the often-hostile lands of the dispersion.<sup>33</sup> The Roman empire, once almost genocidally-hostile to Judaism and the Jews - and still the proverbial hated Edom - accepted its Jews as citizens; the Roman army, which had killed countless Torah scholars, kept the peace in Galilee while the Mishna was

edited.<sup>34</sup> Education became the *raison d'être* of the rabbis. As in the Bible unarmed prophets fought for their people, in the rabbinic tradition Torah scholars were an 'army of God'.<sup>35</sup> Yet, in a world of actual war, Jewish pacifism could be seen as a flag of weakness and surrender, a red rag to sadists and opportunists through the ages.

The wars of 66-135 CE left a deep mark on world history, above all by making final the split between Judaism and Christianity. With this split, Christian anti-Judaism emerged, with fateful results. The ultimate Christianization of the empire could also be seen as an outcome determined by the Roman-Jewish wars. As the Jews were left in no doubt that war against the empire was futile, the Antonines, who came to power after Hadrian's death in 138 CE, reached a similar conclusion: victory made further war with the Jews pointless. Zealotry had been crushed. The Temple in Jerusalem was gone. Jerusalem itself was no more. Judaism was tainted with defeat. No more Jewish kings and Temple priests, war-hardened generals, messiahs and their suicidal followers. Huge numbers had been slaughtered. Jerusalem and its environs were de-populated of Jews.<sup>36</sup> A pacifist education would appease Rome and facilitate peace and a new birth of Torah, divorced from the slightest taint of active militant nationalism. The rabbis of the Mishna (the *tannaim*) led by Judah Hanasi (died c. 219 CE) took on the task of suppressing and sublimating the militancy of a millennium of statehood, war and cultic ritual in a lost Temple and capital city. Memory would have to suffice: the scar of tragic loss and a precious possession kept alive in words and rituals. To forget was to die.<sup>37</sup> The ancient grief for the loss of statehood and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BCE was already part of the fabric of Judaism. After 70 CE this grief was rekindled, as was the sense of guilt and abandonment by God described by the prophet Jeremiah and in the book of Lamentations. In immersing themselves in a legal and spiritual world of their own, the Jews in effect declared inner independence while showing that they posed no military threat to Rome. In some ways, Judaism was strengthened and purified by its divorce from power, its absorption in the spiritual life.<sup>38</sup>

### *The Pax Romana and the emergence of a Jewish school system after 138 CE*

After the Bar-Kokhba revolt, improved relations between the surviving Jews, led by their Roman-approved Patriarch, and the Roman authorities, better economic conditions, the *Pax Romana*, as well as the Roman peace with Parthia, with its large Jewish community, made possible the growth of Jewish education. Galilee, ironically notorious as a provincial backwater - the 'Galilean fool' was a stock figure - was now the thriving base for Jewish survival through education. As Roman-Jewish relations stabilized, businessmen-rabbis such as Judah Hanasi and Hiyya, who were in close contact both with the Roman authorities and the Jewish masses, established synagogues and schools with a fixed curriculum for male children, cutting across class differences. Whereas wealth in the Bible is usually shunned, the rabbinic view of wealth was more positive as it could pay for synagogues, houses of study and prayer, and for teachers and educational materials. This did not mean that wealth was necessarily regarded as a desirable ideal on its own. Among Jews, uniquely, money is 'almost universally expected to lead to education',<sup>39</sup> and this seems to have been the case in ancient Galilee in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. Ruins of many synagogues built under Roman rule - somewhat ironically with many Greek architectural features - may still be seen.<sup>40</sup>

The accommodation arrived at by Jews and Romans after 138 CE was evidently preserved until the empire fell: the Jews suppressed messianic militancy and active expansionism, and paid their taxes, and the Romans provided military protection and allowed religious freedom and the right to study and teach the Torah, and to maintain schools for this purpose. The Patriarch's wealth and power advertised the benefits of Roman rule,<sup>41</sup> despite its oppression. The teaching that 'Torah scholars increase peace in the world'<sup>42</sup> could now replace the open call for liberation from Rome. Jewish education, no longer threatening dissidence and revolt, could be tolerated by Rome. As education spread, children gained in status as the survival of Judaism depended on them. The writing of the Oral Law meant that literacy became



practically essential for knowing the Law. Torah study was firmly established as a *mitzva* (commandment) incumbent upon every Jew.<sup>43</sup> In a list of *mitzvot* in the Mishna, the study of Torah is ‘equal to them all together’.<sup>44</sup> Synagogue functionaries, particularly the *chazan* (reader), would often teach the children.<sup>45</sup> Synagogue attendance, which the rabbis encouraged in lieu of pilgrimages to Jerusalem, raised the literacy level. God himself, in one opinion, made enquiries if a man was absent.<sup>46</sup> In the Mishna, a child is allowed to read the Torah and translate in the synagogue service.<sup>47</sup> This ruling suggests both a high level of child literacy and the institutional encouragement of literacy. Literacy was evidently not uncommon even among the children of the very poor: ‘Is a child in rags allowed to read the Torah?’<sup>48</sup> The poor were more likely to be loyal to Jewish learning than the rich, many of whom had in the past been unfaithful to their own people and assimilated into Hellenistic society: ‘Take care of the children of the poor, for from them Torah shall come.’<sup>49</sup> The Mishna condemns those insufficiently literate to carry out religious obligations, such as the recital of the *Hallel* psalms (psalms of praise, nos. 113-118, recited on festivals): ‘If a servant, woman or child should read the psalms for him, he should repeat them – but may a curse come upon him.’<sup>50</sup> Those unable to recite the obligatory verses when the firstfruits were brought to the Temple were often reluctant to bring the firstfruits. To avoid disgrace, everyone, literate or not, would have the verses read to them, to be repeated by rote.<sup>51</sup> Illiterates are cursed in the Talmud: ‘Cursed be the man whose wife or children have to say Grace for him. [...] Cursed be the man of 20 who needs the help of a 10 year old to read the Hallel.’<sup>52</sup> The vehemence of this language suggests an unsatisfactory state of education in rural areas and small towns which continued at least until the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. A large class of uneducated peasants (*amei ha-aretz*) was evidently still unwilling to support Jewish education.<sup>53</sup> Yet, it seems, illiteracy was diminishing. If servants, women and children could read the blessings, and if illiteracy of grown men was seen as a disgrace, then school education was working. To remedy the shortage of teachers, Rabbi Hiyya introduced a pupil-teacher system by which children living in places without teachers were taught individually a different book of the Pentateuch or a section of the Mishna. They would then teach each other what they had learned.<sup>54</sup> Scholars were discouraged from living in

places without a schoolteacher.<sup>55</sup> Small communities with no school would apply to the Patriarch or to a leading rabbi to appoint a communal factotum to teach Bible and Mishna.<sup>56</sup> Communities that failed to do so were denounced: ‘Every town in which there are no schoolchildren should be destroyed’ or ‘put under a ban’; and the destruction of Jerusalem was attributed to the neglect of the education of schoolchildren.<sup>57</sup> Learning became a mark of social distinction, with at times substantial economic advantages.<sup>58</sup> Students were often maintained by their teachers or by the Patriarch, and schools were given financial assistance, especially by diaspora Jewish communities.<sup>59</sup>

Though imperfect and largely excluding girls, a Jewish educational network was reasonably well-established in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries.<sup>60</sup> By the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, Judah’s grandson, Judah II, introduced a universal system of education for boys, which included most villages, however small, in the land of Israel.<sup>61</sup> Aphorisms attributed to Judah II confirm the high value attached to elementary education: ‘The world exists only because of the breath of schoolchildren’; ‘Schoolchildren must not neglect their studies even for the rebuilding of the Temple.’<sup>62</sup> Similar sayings are attributed to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Amora, Resh Lakish: ‘Take heed of the children of the ignorant, for from them Torah will come’.<sup>63</sup> The late third century CE Amora, Rav Zera, stated that to determine whether a phylactery scroll could be used without correction, a child of average intelligence should be asked to read a partly erased character in the scroll.<sup>64</sup> It seems that the average male child, not just in Babylonia, where Rav Zera lived, but in all probability in the land of Israel too, was by this time given at least a rudimental education. By the early 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, Jewish education in the Roman empire was probably available to a larger sector of the population than in any previous society, and the question arises in the Talmud: ‘Is there anyone to be found without elementary school knowledge?’ The answer offered sums up the enormous progress in Jewish education and the reshaping of Jewish society in the Roman empire: ‘Yes: when a child is taken captive by non-Jews.’<sup>65</sup>

## *Modern Jewish education and the struggle against poverty*

The full effects of the Jewish educational tradition and the school system created by the rabbis are beyond the scope of this paper, but some observations are particularly germane to the view of ancient Jewish education as a tool for the economic mobility of Jews after 1789, from the working classes to the middle classes. Jewish education in the Roman era survived to the modern period somewhat like the Pantheon in Rome, battered but intact, and distinguished less for utility than antiquity. At the start of the modern era, most Jews belonged to the impoverished working class concentrated in Eastern Europe. Few had any secular education, which was damned by the rabbis as heresy. From the time of Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), the leading figure in the German-Jewish Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*, or in Hebrew, Haskalah), Hebrew with its status as a classical language bridged traditional Judaism and non-Jewish culture, often via translations from German scientific textbooks which few Jews could read in the originals but many could read in Hebrew. The Haskalah aimed to adapt traditional Jewish education to the modern world and to enable Jews to improve their economic conditions and their social usefulness. In effect it rationalized traditional Jewish education, recognizing its strengths in creating a culture of literacy and study, while targeting it with criticism and satire. Enlightened Jews tended to detest rabbinic education for its religious superstition, benighted elitism, curricular narrowness, financial and administrative neglect, and failure to adapt to rapid change.<sup>66</sup> The Jews in German lands were the first Jewish community to break away from rabbinic domination and gain general educational assimilation within a European culture; in the process, by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century they reformed their practice of Judaism and joined the middle class. They furnished a model of the benefits of modernization to other Jewish communities, chiefly to the relatively small Western European Jewish communities living in emerging secular urban-industrialised states, and attracted by the prospect of emancipation and equal rights. German Reform, which came to the United States in

the German-Jewish migrations of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, had powerful influence on the post-1881 Eastern European Jewish immigrants, encouraging secular education, citizenship and aspiration, with the result that a largely Orthodox working class immigrant community in 1900 was transformed into a largely secular middle class American community of about 4 million by 1939.

However, in the less developed countries of Eastern Europe, where anti-Semitism was widespread, the Jewish masses kept their traditional way of life, including religious education, in conditions of dire poverty.<sup>67</sup> In the villages of the East, the Jews were surrounded by mostly illiterate peasants and targeted with open, violent hatred. Having fewer illusions, they mostly reacted as to a familiar time-worn injustice, withdrawing into their communal life and the consolation of tradition, preserving their physical differences, their distinctive dress and education, their use of Yiddish in daily life and close observance of Jewish rituals and obedience to rabbinic authority. Their secular education was minimal while their Jewish religious education was vast. To those who emigrated to Western Europe or America, this seemingly impractical culture proved invaluable in their educational advancement and emergence from poverty. Yet, as long as they remained in a world which defined Jewish identity almost exclusively by Orthodox observance, the Eastern European Jews generally despised their assimilated brethren in the West for having sacrificed their traditional way of life. The preservation of their traditions was more important to them than the prospect of social mobility which could undermine communal cohesion.

There were, nevertheless, powerful reasons to reform Jewish education, if not to abandon it totally. Solomon Maimon's autobiography,<sup>68</sup> written in German in the early 1790s, exposes the state to which Eastern European Jewish schools had deteriorated by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, prior to the Polish partitions. Synagogues and schools in ancient Palestine were apparently better ventilated and lit than East European schools over 1500 years later. Maimon describes a small, smoky hut, an earth floor, where some children sit, others on benches, a tyrannical ignorant teacher wielding the whip, at time even causing permanent injury, assistants no less cruel, robbing their charges of the food their mothers have packed for them, the

children so terrified that they do not tell.<sup>69</sup> Is this a school or a prison? Maimon's exposé foreshadowed many similar accounts in a variety of languages, sharing the underlying aim of modernizing Judaism and Jewish culture, whether in the diaspora or the land of Israel. Among Maimon's targets is the Hasidic movement, which spread with extraordinary speed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century in much of Eastern Europe. Hasidism, in part a reaction against the intense talmudic intellectualism which had come to dominate much Jewish life, was violently opposed to secular education and to attempts to establish schools with a modern curriculum.<sup>70</sup> Alongside the egregious traditional neglect of school education in Maimon's age is, again, the extraordinarily high valuation of the talmudic elite. Maimon describes how as a young man trying to gain an education in Germany in the 1770s, he was reduced to beggary; then, in a remarkable turnabout, literally overnight, his knowledge of rabbinic literature and ability to extemporize in Hebrew set him among the elite: the wealthiest men in town sought him out, his rags were replaced by fine clothes, he was fed well, given comfortable accommodation, and looked after. Maimon was among the first to question the traditional Jewish educational double standard: school education is squalid and cruel; 'higher' education has status but is intellectually blighted. The pain of it is the harder to bear as he is superlatively gifted and sees a light at the end of his tunnel - of reason and real knowledge: science, mathematics, medicine, philosophy. He takes the name 'Maimon' in honor of Maimonides, admiring his Aristotelian rationalism, perhaps not seeing that his hero was closed in the same medieval religious world he was struggling to escape.

By the time of Maimon's death in 1800, the Poland of his youth described in his autobiography was totally changed by the partitions, which ended the traditional ties the Jews had with the Polish aristocracy, and established State-based authority, of Russia, Austria and Prussia, which now ruled former Polish territory. The Haskalah urged Jews to seek secular education to enable them to overcome their poverty and make them productive and useful to the State. Ultimately, the force of assimilation proved impossible to resist, not just in the more enlightened and liberal countries of Western Europe which granted Jews emancipation but even in the Central and Eastern European countries which were slower to do so, and where raw anti-

Semitism was widespread. In Eastern Europe, notably in Lithuania, religious study continued until 1939 to be generally regarded as the highest existence for a Jew. In an autobiographical memoir written in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Yiddish and Hebrew novelist, Mendele Mocher Sefarim recalled his home town in Lithuania, where practically all the men maintained the ancient tradition of Torah study. The picture here of the sacred status of study was generally true throughout Eastern Europe and, to a lesser extent, in many Western and Central European Jewish communities prior to World War I:

‘They would gather in the House of Study between afternoon and evening prayers, to sit or stand round the tables and listen to the preachers expound the Torah, whether the Pentateuch or *aggada* or *Ein Ya’akov* or ethical wisdom; and on the Sabbath and holidays before afternoon prayers the preacher stood wrapped in his prayer shawl on the pulpit by the Holy Ark and preached in style, spicing his words with analogies and proverbs, quotes from the prophets, rabbinic tales and witticisms, kindling in the congregation the fire of holy love for the *Shekhina*.’<sup>71</sup>

Impoverished though the Eastern European Jews were, they supported the *yeshivot*, the talmudic seminaries for older students, where tuition was free. Mendele, himself a *yeshiva* student in the 1840s, recalls how the students were supported, in a description which holds true for Torah studies through the ages going back to the early rabbinic age:

‘They came not by horse and cart but on foot, penniless. No sooner did they put their pack down - two worn, patched shirts, one pair of socks with dirty, much-trodden heels - than they came under the town’s care. The townspeople, poor as they were, supported these boys willingly. The poorest man in town shared his bread with a pious scholar - all for the honor of the Torah!’<sup>72</sup>

In contrast, the more assimilated Jews in Western Europe tended to see Eastern European Jewish education as medieval backwardness, a barrier to full acceptance and assimilation.<sup>73</sup> The *bet midrash* was no longer the ‘workshop for the national soul’ (*bet yotzer le-nishmat ha-uma*), as Bialik put it, but an intellectual cemetery with tombstone-like books marking a dead past. The *yeshiva* was similarly moribund.<sup>74</sup>

### *From the Haskalah to Zionism: the role of Hebrew*

Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most European Jews were not at home with the languages of the countries in which they lived, but most Jewish men and many women had at least some knowledge of Hebrew, in the prayerbook and the Bible. As the language of Holy Scripture, Hebrew was blessed by the German academic world with status not inferior to Latin and Greek and, therefore, suitable as a vehicle for Jewish assimilation. But this was a secular status. The Haskalah movement - whose main period of influence was from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century - brought about a critical reevaluation of rabbinic literature, in common with all religious texts in the Enlightenment movement. Compulsory secular education and conscription were generally welcomed by emancipated Western and Central European Jewish communities. Traditional elementary Jewish education at all levels, but especially for children, became a flashpoint of conflict.<sup>75</sup> Secular enlightenment made Hebrew vulnerable to attacks as a best-discarded symbol of religious insularity and educational backwardness, a bar to emancipation, to desired assimilation, acceptance, and worldly success. Hebrew for the first time also became a target of controversy and confusion over Jewish national-religious identity. In the first Hebrew journal, *Ha-Me’asef* (The Gatherer) founded by disciples of Mendelssohn in 1784, but whose readers included Eastern European *maskilim*, there were frequent articles calling for the elimination of Hebrew as the language of prayer:<sup>76</sup> German must now be the language of Jews in German-speaking lands. At

best, Hebrew could serve a utilitarian function, easing the process of adaptation to the modern world. Many now-forgotten works of scholarship were written in or translated into Hebrew for educational purposes.

The trouble with the functional view of Hebrew was that once the function – assimilation into German culture – was achieved, Hebrew was like the stage of a rocket that had served its purpose and could be dropped. Hebrew was stripped by Enlightenment thinkers of its aura of reverence and cannibalized into a didactic tool by which Jews ignorant of European languages and learning could gain secular education. Hebrew, promoted by the Haskalah as a means of secular education for Jews ignorant of other languages, particularly in the sciences but also in history and the arts, was often a springboard for their disappearance as Jews. Hebrew, originally in Germany, but increasingly elsewhere, could be used somewhat like baptism in Heine's quip, as an 'entrance ticket' to European civilization. By the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, Jews were disproportionately represented in schools and universities, and in the so-called 'liberal' professions such as medicine and law, in which advancement was based on merit, not privilege.<sup>77</sup> Though assimilation tended to lead to upward social mobility, it often led to the abandonment of Hebrew and Jewish education. Children of *maskilim* often converted to Christianity. As Jews increasingly chose to send their children to secular schools which used the language of the state, Hebrew as a didactic bridge to secular culture was no longer needed by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Haskalah was driven by forces of secularization which, when fuelled also by anti-Semitism, revived an ancient militant Jewish nationalism. Rabbinic education, even if jettisoned, had unexpected uses. The chief historic utility of Hebrew proved to be the opposite of the intentions of the *maskilim*: for they created an essential foundation for the revival of Hebrew as the language of Jewish nationalism and, ultimately, statehood. A new, largely secular, national form of Jewish education emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, based on modern Hebrew and greatly inspired by the ancient texts, particularly the Bible but also the Talmud, which were no longer dismissed as irrelevant but, instead, mined as sources of Jewish national-cultural distinctiveness, and devotion to and sacrifice for the nation. By the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish educators such as Chaim Tchernowitz in Odessa and David Yellin in



Jerusalem introduced for the first time since the Roman era the policy of using Hebrew as the language of instruction (*Ivrit be-Ivrit*) in the classroom: this was the foundation for the re-creation of modern Hebrew as a national language. Though made obsolete by assimilation and anti-Semitism, the Haskalah movement had by this time largely succeeded in creating a bridge between traditional rabbinic education and the modern world, giving most Jews, however poor, limited opportunities through literacy of educational training and emergence from the widespread poverty which blighted Jewish life until modern times.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For statistics showing the correlation of education and development, see the annual *State of the World's Children*, published by UNICEF.

<sup>2</sup> Though literacy among slaves in the Roman Empire was generally a function of servitude rather than a means of self-enrichment, the later Stoics regarded slavery as contrary to nature. The Roman army was a socially levelling force and encouraged social mobility (Brown 1971). Epictetus, a major Stoic philosopher of the 2nd century CE, was born a slave, his life story illustrative both of the immense largely-untapped intellectual potential among the poor and also of the growing social mobility in the Roman empire at the time. On the poor in the Roman Empire, particularly in Rome, see Whittaker (1993), Harris (2007), and Beard (2016: Chapter11).

<sup>3</sup> In battle against idolatry, the Torah justified revolt against Rome, as a 'religious imperative' (Goodman 1987: 12). Insurrectionary agitation was 'a virtually permanent phenomenon in the life of [Judaea until 135 CE] and not a passing phase as elsewhere' (Stern 1977: 244). Josephus has

Titus declare to the besieged Jews on the verge of his conquest of Jerusalem in 70 CE, 'You have been in a state of revolt from the time Pompey's army crushed you [in 63 BCE]' (*Jewish War* VI, 2 [329]).

<sup>4</sup> For Josephus' account of Cestius Gallus' defeat in 66 CE, following massacres of Jews in Caesarea and Alexandria, see *The Jewish War* II xviii-xix [499-555]. In the Bar-Kokhba revolt, an estimated one-third of the entire Roman army took part, including forces from at least ten legions. After the Bar-Kokhba revolt, an entire Roman legion once stationed in Egypt and evidently deployed in the war, the *Legio XXII Deioteriana*, which had existed for nearly two centuries and had taken part in the 66-73 CE war, disappears from Roman lists, possibly because its numbers

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were so depleted in the 132-135 CE war (Avi-Yonah 2001: 171); the same is true of the *Legio IX Hispana*. Roman casualties were extensive, and retaliation was of a severity practically unique in Roman history: the Romans wiped out much of the population of Judaea, destroyed an estimated fifty fortresses and a thousand villages and banned Jews from setting foot in Jerusalem, which was rebuilt as a pagan city, Aelia Capitolina, with a temple to Jupiter on the Temple Mount (*ibid.* 173).

<sup>6</sup> The Bar-Kokhba revolt of 132-35 CE ‘attracted many Gentiles, members of the downtrodden lower classes of the Roman world, who now found occasion to vent their spleen on their oppressors; in the army of Bar-Kokhba, they were received into the “League of Brothers” which formed its mainstay’ (Avi-Yonah 2001: 171). For perspectives on the war, see Schäfer (2003).

<sup>7</sup> The inclusion of objects from the Temple in Jerusalem and a Torah scroll in the Roman triumph of June 71 CE made clear that the defeat of Judaism was being celebrated, not just the victory over Judaea (Goodman 2007: 453). The same was true of the obligatory annual ‘Jew tax’, the humiliating *fiscus Judaicus*, paid by all Jews, including children, women, and slaves, to the temple of Jupiter in Rome instead of the annual donations to the Temple in Jerusalem. The ultimate Roman tolerance of the growth of the rabbinic tradition and Jewish schools was an extraordinary turnabout, and for the Jews a form of religious-cultural victory. Palestinian Jews evidently did not entirely give up on armed revolt, and minor uprisings are known from the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries CE (*Encyclopedia Judaica* [2007] 20: 628). There were, perhaps, other revolts which went unrecorded – but in general, after 135 CE, the Jews were a pacifist people, and the system of education which they developed reflects this fact.

<sup>8</sup> On this case of ‘ethnic cleansing’ as ‘the decisive transformation in the religious demography of the Holy Land in the Imperial Age’, see Millar (1993 : 342). On the eradication of an estimated 50 fortresses and 1000 Judaeian villages, see Avi-Yonah (2001 : 173). Increased Jewish urbanization, which already in the early Roman period characterized life in the land of Israel and the diaspora, was accelerated by the forced population transfer; by the medieval age, under Muslim rule, Jews tended no longer to be farmers but followed urban professions (see Botticini and Eckstein 2005). However, until 1789, secular education among Jews was accepted only within the parameters of traditional observance, or rejected completely as heretical. Social mobility spurred by secular education after 1789 was accompanied to an unprecedented degree by Jewish defection from orthodoxy and the rejection of traditional Jewish religious education as impractical and retrograde. Secular education was thus equated with secular identity (or heresy, depending on one’s viewpoint), whose attractions included the prospect of assimilation and social mobility.

<sup>9</sup> See Aberbach and Aberbach (2000: chs. 7, 8).

<sup>10</sup> The high status of education as a religious duty for rich and poor alike all distinguishes Jewish education from most other educational systems until modern times. See Aberbach (2019). Education in other ancient societies was mostly the preserve of the aristocratic and priestly classes. Still, in the Roman empire, family tutors and schoolteachers were often Greek slaves or freedmen; and the emperor Trajan in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE created institutions for the education of limited numbers of poor children (Marrou 1982: 303). As seen later in this paper, the long-term effects of the Jewish elevation of education became glaringly evident in the 1789-1939 period, when mandatory educational systems were established in the newly-emerging European nation states, and most Europeans were still illiterate.

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<sup>11</sup> Most of the main talmudic sources relating to historical milestones in the evolution of a Jewish school system in the land of Israel appear in the Babylonian Talmud, suggesting among other things the need in diaspora Jewish communities to establish irreproachable precedents for their own schools. These sources include: *Kiddushin* 66a; Jerusalem Talmud, *Ketubot* 8, 11, 32c; *Bava Batra* 21a; *Gittin* 56, 58a; *Ketubot* 103b, *Bava Metzia* 85b.

<sup>12</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, *Ketubot* 8, 11, 32c.

<sup>13</sup> *Bava Batra* 21a.

<sup>14</sup> On the breakthrough, though limited, of mass education in the Hellenistic world, see Harris (1989). Among factors which might have facilitated education was the rapid urbanization of Palestine in the time of Herod (37-4 BCE), a process which continued in the Mishnaic age in Galilee, where urban growth was stimulated by substantial immigration from Southern Palestine.

<sup>15</sup> *Berakhot* 61b.

<sup>16</sup> The curriculum as outlined by Judah ben Tema, one of the last Tannaim (mid- 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE): ‘Scripture at age five; Mishna at age ten ... Talmud at age fifteen’ (*Avot* 5: 25). The writing of the Mishna suggests that written texts were used in study; still, it seems that resistance to writing Torah down continued and much study was conducted by heart (*Torah she-be'al peh*) (Sussman 2005). Oral study had practical advantage in view of the expense of scrolls and writing materials; it allowed greater flexibility in Torah interpretation (hence the reluctance to write the Law); and in time of persecution it was best to avoid written evidence.

<sup>17</sup> Among texts pointing to the spread of Jewish education in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE are *Ketubot* 103b, *Bava Metzia* 85b, *Sanhedrin* 17b, and Jerusalem Talmud, *Hagigah* 1, 7, 76c. The existence of a Patriarch, answerable to Rome and having Roman protection, with status recognized by Jews and Romans, in peaceful and prosperous conditions, was a far cry from the chaotic situation during and after the period of the revolts, which extended for a lifetime (66-135 CE).

<sup>18</sup> The Temple, too, though the chief focal point of national pride, could diminish the notion of Jewish education as a sacred duty incumbent upon all, for even illiterates could take part in communal worship and sacrifices, or pilgrimages and donations, or via the priesthood or the enormous labor and goods markets supporting the Temple. In rabbinic literature, the Temple and priestly functions and the sacrifices are described in minute detail in hope of their ultimate restoration but - unless the *aggada* on Joshua ben Gamla is counted (*Bava Batra* 21a) - there is no mention of a school system run by Temple priests. The diversity of Judaism prior to 70 CE was a further obstacle, making a unified educational system difficult, if not impossible to achieve. After 70, the main Jewish educational centre was in Yavneh (Jamnia) before moving to Galilee (Cohen 2010). On literacy in Palestine in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, see Millard (2000).

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<sup>19</sup> The Greek model for mass education was ‘the great Hellenistic innovation’, though ultimately confined largely to the wealthy class (Harris 1989: 325). In Teos, for example, education for all children was the aim, at one time achieving a literacy rate of 30-40% (*ibid.*, 329). Schools were a feature of the Roman Empire, and though chiefly for the well-born also gave limited opportunities to children of the poor (Marrou 1982: 296ff.). In 1<sup>st</sup> century CE Judaea, in contrast, the notion of mass literacy was still a ‘mirage’ (*ibid.*, 282). According to Fraade (1993: 56), Qumran provides ‘our earliest [c. 50 CE] and only evidence from the Second Temple period for a mandatory, communal curriculum of studies for children’. On children’s education at Qumran, see Brooke (2017). Josephus’ long chapter on Jewish rights granted by Julius Caesar (*Antiquities* xiv 10) has nothing on schools. Also, there is no talmudic tractate devoted to elementary education, nor any sign that education was one of the uses of the half shekel tax paid by all Jews to the Temple. Yet, it is impossible to be certain whether or not the absence of proof of literacy signifies that the evidence has in fact vanished. Goodman (1994: 99), observing that ‘No ancient society was more blatantly dominated by a written text than that of Jews in the Roman period’, suggests that there must have been many thousands of Bibles in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. It may be that even in the Second Temple period, Jewish education compared favourably with Roman education: ‘The Roman state neither created an educational system itself nor gave anything like adequate financial support to the system which developed of its own accord. Education was not made compulsory even at the primary stage, and the acquisition of literacy was haphazard’ (Bonner 1977: 328). On the evolution of Jewish Scripture and literature as the core of Jewish education and national identity, see Carr (2005), Goodblatt (2006), and Hirshman (2009). For a full discussion of texts in the original relating to Jewish education in the Talmud and Midrash, see Aberbach (1982). Apart from the school of Rabban Gamaliel, in which Greek and Greek wisdom were studied in preparation for contact with diaspora Jews and the Roman authorities (*Bava Kamma* 83a), Palestinian Jewish schools are not known to have taught secular subjects. On Greek education for Jews in Palestine, see Hezser (2001: 90–94); on secular education for Jews in the diaspora, see Feldman (1993: 57–59). Philo records proudly, ‘the Jews . . . studied their laws diligently from earliest youth’ (*Legatio* xvi 31). Josephus, writing about 20 years afterwards, refers not to schools but to an early and thorough knowledge of Torah (*Against Apion* i 60; ii 178), in keeping with the biblical ideal of fathers teaching their children (Deuteronomy 6:7; *Antiquities* iv 7, 12 [ 211]). He attributes the high level of child literacy to Jewish law which ‘commands that the children be taught to read and that they should learn both the laws and the deeds of their forefathers’ (*Against Apion* ii 204). Horbury (2017) writes that Philo, Paul and Josephus are a 1st century CE Jewish triumvirate, witnesses to the growth of Jewish education. For talmudic evidence of ‘hundreds’ of schools in Jerusalem in 70 CE, see *Ketubot* 105a, and Jerusalem Talmud *Megillah* 3, 1, 73d. It is unlikely, however, that the same standard of education prevailed in rural areas as in the towns. When families were broken up, as many were in the wars, children’s education must have suffered.

<sup>20</sup> See Tcherikover (1975: 377).

<sup>21</sup> On Judaism as a ‘politically subversive force’ in the Roman empire, see Smallwood (1976: 541). Jewish expansion evidently reached its peak in Nero’s reign, immediately prior to the 66 CE revolt (see Stern 1974 : 429).

<sup>22</sup> ‘Know how to reply to an *apikores* [an ‘Epicurean’, i.e. a heretic]’ (*Avot* 2: 14).

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<sup>23</sup> ‘...the events between 175 and 167 BC which began with the introduction of gymnasium education and ended with the “abomination of desolation” marked a unique and deep turning-point in the history of Palestinian Judaism during the Graeco-Roman period’ (Hengel 1974: 77). Hengel describes the subsequent growth of Jewish schools in Judaea (*ibid.*, 77-83).

<sup>24</sup> ‘... there was such an extreme of Hellenization and increase in the adoption of foreign ways because of the surpassing wickedness of Jason, who was ungodly and no high priest, that the priests were no longer intent upon their service at the altar. Despising the sanctuary and neglecting the sacrifices, they hastened to take part in the unlawful proceedings in the wrestling arena after the call of the discus, disdainful of the honors prized by their fathers and putting the highest value upon Greek forms of prestige’ (II Maccabees 4: 13-15). On Hellenistic education among Jews prior to and after the destruction of the Jewish state in 70 CE, see Gruen (1998).

<sup>25</sup> See Duff (1958) and Aberbach and Aberbach (2000: 69-78). Greek-inspired or assisted anti-Jewish policies led to a decline in ‘Hellenistic Judaism’ and a consequent emphasis on a purely Jewish education. See Aberbach (2019).

<sup>26</sup> *Jewish War* II xviii, 1-8 [457-98]; xx, 2 [559-61]. The Hellenistic pogroms ‘must have led many otherwise pro-Roman Jews to support the war cause for reasons of self-defence’ (Rhoads 1976: 151). In these circumstances, Hellenistic education among the wealthier Jews might have been curtailed. Some Romans, too, including Cato and Juvenal, expressed aversion to Greek culture.

<sup>27</sup> *Antiquities* xx 8, 7 [176].

<sup>28</sup> Millar (1993: 352).

<sup>29</sup> *Sanhedrin* 14a; *Avoda Zara* 18a.

<sup>30</sup> Goodman (2007: 581).

<sup>31</sup> See Aberbach (2019: ch. 9).

<sup>32</sup> Schürer (1973, i 555).

<sup>33</sup> Already by the time of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, the majority of the Jewish population lived in the diaspora, throughout the Roman empire and in Babylonia; and from Babylonia, too, from the 7<sup>th</sup> century, they formed diaspora communities throughout the Islamic world. Their demographic conditions dictated that the Jews should follow the advice given by the prophet Jeremiah to the Babylonian exiles in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE: to settle down, live normal lives and pray for and seek the welfare of the city (or land) in which they lived, ‘for in its welfare you will find your welfare’ (29: 7). Despite the martial spirit of the Bible, peaceful accommodation is a deeply-ingrained belief in Judaism – even with enemies.

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<sup>34</sup> The presence of an estimated 25,000 Roman legionaries after the Bar-Kokhba revolt, who were paid well by the government in Rome, contributed in building the economy (Safrai 1994: 339ff., 456-7). The legionary forces are thought to have had some elementary education (Harris 1989: 254), some of which might have passed with time to the local population.

<sup>35</sup> Feierberg (1973: 157). The word ‘Torah’ (‘teaching’) has a specific meaning - the Five Books of Moses - but also more generally, as here, refers to the entire world of Jewish observance in which study is central.

<sup>36</sup> For *aggadic* references to the Roman treatment of the Jews in defeat, see Jerusalem Talmud, *Ta’anit* 4, 5, 69a; *Lamentations Rabba* ii 2-5; iii 51.

<sup>37</sup> *Sanhedrin* 99a. Among techniques used to aid memory was the custom of collective chanting (*ibid.* 99b), which in Orthodox schools and *yeshivot* continues to this day. Remembering and forgetting were often, unfortunately, seen as moral qualities, functions of will rather than ability or interest. The habit of seeing the Torah as essential to life as water (e.g. *Berakhot* 61b) led to the extreme view that to forget just one item of Torah was a capital crime (*Avot* 3: 10).

<sup>38</sup> On the idea that in defeating the Jews, the Romans did them a favor, see Schürer (1973, i 555-56) and Simon (1996: 35). Like a mutinous crew faced with shipwreck, the fractious Jews were forced to work together - and with the Romans - to survive. Among consequences for education was increased democratization of knowledge. The various families and groups with control over Temple ritual often acted as guilds, keeping their knowledge to themselves; post-70 CE Judaism, in contrast, tended to encourage public learning to a far greater degree, including (particularly in the Order of *Kodashim* in the Mishna) areas that were previously restricted. By the time of the writing of the Mishna in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, the anachronistic codification of Temple laws represented not a militant threat to Rome but the pacifist messianic hope that the Temple would be rebuilt.

<sup>39</sup> Slezkine (2004: 249).

<sup>40</sup> For the archaeological evidence of synagogues built in the land of Israel under Roman rule, see Levine (1992, 1998).

<sup>41</sup> For a glimpse of Judah’s wealthy circle, see *Eruvin* 85b. The high valuation of poverty in biblical and much rabbinic literature was evidently suspended in the case of Judah Hanasi.

<sup>42</sup> *Berakhot* 64a.

<sup>43</sup> *Menachot* 99b.

<sup>44</sup> Mishna *Peah* 1: 1. The significance attached by the rabbis to Torah study is indicated in their inclusion of this passage in the daily *Shacharit* (Morning) prayers.

<sup>45</sup> Mishna *Shabbat* 1: 3.

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<sup>46</sup> *Berakhot* 6b

<sup>47</sup> Mishna *Megillah* 4: 6.

<sup>48</sup> *Megillah* 24b.

<sup>49</sup> *Nedarim* 81a.

<sup>50</sup> Mishna *Sukkah* 3: 10. The Mishna also declares that ignorance brings people to sin, and that ‘he who does not know Bible, Mishna and secular matters does not belong to the community’ (Mishna *Kiddushin* 1: 10). In modern times, the high valuation of Torah study in rabbinic literature was challenged, first by the Hasidic movement, which sought to preserve the soul of Judaism in prayer and song while rejecting its excessive intellectualism, then by the Enlightenment (Haskalah), which combined rational elements of Judaism with secular learning. In more extreme cases, Jews rejected Torah study in the virtual triumphalism and lack of shame with which they proclaimed their ignorance. See Aberbach (2019: ch. 15).

<sup>51</sup> Mishna *Bikkuim* 3: 7.

<sup>52</sup> *Berakhot* 20b, *Sukkah* 38a; Jerusalem Talmud, *Rosh Hashana* 3, 10, 59a.

<sup>53</sup> E.g. *Bava Batra* 8a, *Pesachim* 49. The effects of the neglect of Jewish education were apparent in the fact that some prominent rabbis, such as Eliezer ben Hyrkanus and Akiba, evidently received no education in childhood but began their studies in adult life (*Ketubot* 62b-63a, *Nedarim* 50a).

<sup>54</sup> *Ketubot* 103b, *Bava Metzia* 85b. The rabbinic decree that every town was obliged to provide schools (*Sanhedrin* 17b) evidently reflects continuing resistance to education as does the decision of Judah II to send a delegation of rabbis, including Rabbi Hiyya, from town to town to inspect the state of education and appoint teachers where needed (Jerusalem Talmud, *Hagigah* 1, 7, 76c).

<sup>55</sup> *Sanhedrin* 17b. The importance of education was such that a father and teacher were allowed to discuss terms on the Sabbath (*Shabbat* 150a); and the noise made by schoolchildren was not grounds for complaint (Mishna *Bava Batra* 2: 3).

<sup>56</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, *Shevuot* 6, 1, 34d, Jerusalem Talmud, *Yevamot* 12, 7, 13a; *Genesis Rabba* 81, 2.

<sup>57</sup> *Shabbat* 119b. As children’s education was increasingly seen as vital to Jewish survival, children were evidently idealized (*ibid.*) as being in a state of purity from sin and closeness to God - a view similar to that among the early Christians (Matthew 18: 3; Mark 9: 36-7, 10: 14; Luke 9: 46-8). The deaths of countless Jewish children during the three Jewish revolts might have strengthened the resolve to provide the surviving children with better education - and a better life generally - than was possible previously. The gentile world, in contrast, was seen as intrinsically impure. See Alon (1977: 179).

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<sup>58</sup> See *Avot* 3: 5.

<sup>59</sup> As was the case with the scattered Greeks, the fact that the Jews were scattered was an incentive to literacy and writing, and the creation of an educational system to facilitate communication. See Harris (1989: 332). Modern Jewish cultural nationalism was formed by the international character of the basic curriculum, particularly the study of Hebrew.

<sup>60</sup> Judah's intense and successful work as an educator, with the aim of providing Torah knowledge, particularly the laws of purity, to everyone (including girls and women) - this being his purpose in editing the Mishna - seems to have been projected anachronistically on to a midrashic image of the biblical king, Hezekiah (8<sup>th</sup> century BCE), in whose age everyone - even girls - supposedly knew the laws of ritual purity and impurity. *Sanhedrin* 94b, *Ecclesiastes Rabba* 9, 18, 3. The education of girls is a matter of rabbinic debate (*Sotah* 20a). The rabbis tend to follow Ben Sira (43: 9-10) in their apprehensions for the female sex - 'Happy the man who has sons, woe to the man who has daughters' (*Pesachim* 65a, *Sanhedrin* 100b, *Kiddushin* 82b). Only one woman in talmudic literature takes part in *halakhic* discussion - Bruria, wife of Rabbi Meir. In the rabbinic view, as in other cultures, women are seen as a dangerous source of temptation and corruption: it is best to limit contact with them. Yet, among those most responsible for bringing the nation to ruin men, not women, are the culprits. The rabbis express greater sympathy for the education of girls, regardless of social standing, than is generally the case in ancient cultures (and indeed, in many modern cultures too). Fathers are expected to teach daughters as well as sons (*Mishna Nedarim* 4: 3), literacy among women is encouraged by the rabbinic ruling that women are expected to pray (*Mishna Berakhot* 3: 3), the ethical principles underlying *halakha* are not gender-based; and there is even a view that knowledge of Greek is an 'ornament' to girls (Jerusalem Talmud, *Peah* 1, 1, 15c). It is likely that the high status of advanced Gemara study, though until modern times exclusively a male activity, influenced attitudes toward learning among Jewish women. The *Tseno Ureno* (c. 1590s), a highly popular Yiddish edition of the Pentateuch, read mainly by woman, was typically tattered and tear-stained; and women were the main readers of the early Yiddish novels, of Mendele Mocher Sefarim and Sholom Aleichem (who had an epitaph inscribed on his tombstone in New York, 'He wrote in Yiddish for women') (Zborowski and Herzog 1974: 124-27). On the education of Jewish girls in Tsarist Russia, see Adler (2011). The extraordinarily large number of Jewish women since the late-19th century who undertook competitive examinations and obtained higher degrees can be attributed partly to the high value attached to learning in traditional Jewish society.

<sup>61</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, *Hagigah* 1, 7, 76c

<sup>62</sup> *Shabbat* 119b.

<sup>63</sup> *Sanhedrin* 96a.

<sup>64</sup> *Menachot* 29b.

<sup>65</sup> *Shevuot* 5a.



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<sup>66</sup> Hebrew satire, of Joseph Perl, Isaac Erter, and Mendele Mocher Sefarim, and others, was directed mostly at the Hasidim, whose standards of education were often treated as a joke. See Davidson (1966). On the depiction of traditional Jewish education in Haskalah literature, see Avital (1996). The writings of Isaac Leib Peretz marked a change in the image of Hasidim among enlightened Jews in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, no longer a laughing-stock but a repository of profound folk wisdom. Yet, even the satire of Eastern European Jews with the aim of reforming them in a State-oriented patriotic direction preserved much valuable ethnographic material, and helped shape Jewish national identity (Bartal 2005).

<sup>67</sup> The view of traditional Judaism as associated with poverty is expressed by Heine, in ‘*Das neue israelitische Hospital zu Hamburg*’ (1844), his poem on the newly-built Jewish hospital in Hamburg (‘*Ein Hospital für arme, kranke Juden*’) (Heine 1982: 399).

<sup>68</sup> The text referred to is the edition/translation of Moses Hadas (1947). The original German text dates from 1791-92, by which time Maimon, a brilliant talmudic scholar from Polish Lithuania, had completely divorced himself from Jewish life. In his autobiography, he recalls the immense social and intellectual hurdles he had to overcome to obtain a secular, ‘rational’ education. Moshe Leib Lilienblum’s influential autobiography, *The Sins of My Youth* (*Chatot Ne’urim*, 1876), shows that by the time of Alexander II, a century after Maimon, most Eastern European Jews had made little educational progress - the curriculum was still largely confined to religious texts, the Haskalah had made little impact on the Jewish masses, most Jews still did not speak or read the language of the country, and poverty and child marriage were still commonplace. Lilienblum uses the events of his own life to illustrate how traditional Jewish life and education ruined countless lives. Yet, there were significant changes since Maimon’s day: the number of Jews in secular schools and universities was growing, educational texts in Hebrew and other languages were being published, and increasing numbers were studying and reading modern Hebrew. Lilienblum’s writing itself illustrates the enormous advance made in Hebrew language and literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>69</sup> As there were so many scandalous goings-on in schools, a proverbial expression for snitching was ‘to tell tales from school’. For a Yiddish satiric exposé of the *cheder*, see Linetski’s novel, *The Polish Lad* (*Dos Poylishe Yungl*, 1867). Eastern European Jewish religious schools, like most other schools, were continually marked with the poverty of their environment: they were often filthy and crowded, filled with hungry children, and with ignorant, impoverished teachers; and yet, there were also some excellent teachers and gifted students (Baron 1964: 142). By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, increasing numbers attended general schools (*ibid.*, 143).

<sup>70</sup> In response to the Russian Education Act of 1804, requiring Jews to give their children a secular education, Nachman of Bratslav (grandson of the founder of the Hasidic movement, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov, ‘Master of the Good Name [of God]’) typically believed that no secular learning was more efficacious than the power of faith. Even medically trained doctors were useless. Such convictions were common among Hasidim and, as Hasidism was widespread in Eastern Europe, were a major factor in holding back Haskalah and secular learning.

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<sup>71</sup> Mendele (1947: 264). *Ein Ya'akov*: a collection of legends and homilies from the Talmud, by Rabbi Ya'akov ben Shlomo ibn Haviv (16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century); *Shekhina*: according to Jewish legend, the feminine presence of God wandering with the Jews through the diaspora. See Scholem (1974: 229-233).

<sup>72</sup> Mendele (1947: 300).

<sup>73</sup> After 1789, Jews increasingly saw traditional Torah education as a handicap in a secular enlightened world in which they sought to be no different from anyone else. Consequently, they tended to reject the rabbinic view of Israel as a chosen people, elevated above other people by the Torah. A striking example of the traditional view is the midrash on the curses for failure to keep the Torah, yet 'I [God] did not despise or reject them' (Leviticus 26: 44): if not for the Torah, the Jews would be no different from anyone else (*Sifra, Bechukotai* 8: 10). In contrast, secular enlightenment and emancipation encouraged Jews to *seek* elimination of differences from Gentiles as far as possible, and to identify fully with the state which emancipated them, or promised to do so.

<sup>74</sup> Bialik, a student at one of the most illustrious Lithuanian *yeshivot*, in Volozhin, taught in the *yeshiva metukenet* (reformed *yeshiva*) of Rabbi Chaim Chernowitz in Odessa, where secular studies were included together with traditional texts. Though Bialik felt the old-style *yeshiva* had no future in the modern world, he was well aware that the great centers of Talmud study, particularly in the Lithuanian *yeshivot* of Volozhin, Mir and Vilna, produced a disproportionate number of intellectuals such as himself, who later entered the secular mainstream. The *yeshivot* also produced some of the chief ideological supporters and opponents of Zionism. On *yeshivot*, see Etkes (2006). Simon Schama (2017: 606) gives a memorable sketch of the transformation of Jewish education in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Odessa: 'Martinet *melameds* of the *cheder*, swishing their switches as they made boys parrot the *Shulkhan Arukh*, had been replaced by schoolteachers of the "Russian Schools" in waistcoats; and for girls, strong-minded young women in broad-belted dresses and pinned-back hair recited Pushkin and Shakespeare.'

<sup>75</sup> For detailed accounts of European Jewish education in the 1789-1939 period, see Ormian on Poland (1939), Szajkowski (1980) on France, Rabin (1979) on pre-State Israel, Zalkin (2000) on Russia, and Meyer (2006) on Germany. On Jewish education as reflected in Haskalah fiction, see Patterson (1964); and on Jewish education in Eastern Europe, see Adler and Polonsky (2017).

<sup>76</sup> Barzilay (1959: 168). Also see Aberbach (2006).

<sup>77</sup> On the enormous educational strides of the European Jews after 1789, see Slezkine (2004).

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