



# THE JEWS IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Rodrigo Laham Cohen

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# **The Jews in Late Antiquity**

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## **Introduction**

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*Surely it is time to break with the lachrymose theory of pre-Revolutionary woe, and to adopt a view more in accord with historic truth* (Baron 1928, 526).

More than eighty years have passed since Salo Baron's "Ghetto and Emancipation", whose words had such a major impact on Jewish historiography. Gradually, Jewish and non-Jewish scholars began to highlight not only a history of segregation, persecution, and massacres, but also interaction and coexistence. However, some researchers inverted the terms and built a rosy picture of Jewish life during late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Thus, Jewish communities from Italy, Gaul, the Balkans, North Africa, Palestine, Babylonia, and even Spain were seen as untroubled groups in the period. Seizures of synagogues, expulsions, and forced conversions were analyzed as exceptions. It was suggested that only after the First Crusade in 1096 CE did the situation of Jewish people change in Europe. In the same vein, it was affirmed that Jewish settlements in the Land of Israel and Babylonia suffered no major religious problems.

However, each Jewish community must be analyzed in its specific context. This may seem like an obvious statement to make, but it is important to keep that in

mind. There are several Jewish histories in late antiquity, not just one. Even if we accepted that there was a common Judaism, we have to consider that the Jews of Visigothic Toledo, Papal Rome, and Babylonian Pumbedita were surrounded by different societies and realities. We can discuss the level of isolation each Jewish group experienced, but to sustain the idea of a complete separation is to ignore the sources.

In this sense we present the history of the Jews in late antiquity by focussing on regions. We do not neglect the possibility of making generalizations. In fact, common patterns will be identified. But it is very important to be clear about regional and temporal differences between each distinct case study.

When Baron wrote the article quoted above, late antiquity had not yet been recognized as a specific historical period. As every historiographical (and artificial) construct, it is not easy to explain in few words the key features of the period. However, we can say that the idea of *Spätantike*<sup>1</sup> was coined to illuminate continuities after the debated “fall” of the Western Roman Empire in 476 CE. Of course, there are still ongoing controversies around the period’s characteristics and its precise time frame but this is not the place to examine those topics. Suffice to say, it is important to clarify that this study is mainly focussed on the period between the third and seventh centuries CE.<sup>2</sup>

The book is organized into eight chapters. The first presents the problem of sources and other methodological issues. Then, we analyze different regions: Italy, North Africa (except Egypt), Gaul, Spain, Egypt, the Land of Israel, and Babylonia. Due to space constraints, very important Jewish settlements in the Balkans—including Greece—Asia Minor, and Syria will not be considered.

Due to the characteristics of this short book, only a brief study of each case has been presented. Thus,

investigations and historiographical controversies are condensed. For that reason, we strongly recommend reading the cited bibliography for a better comprehension of each region. *The Jews in Late Antiquity* should be considered as a first step toward the understanding of a little-known period in Jewish history.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although Peter Brown popularized the category in his seminal book *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971), Alois Riegl was the first historian that used the expression—in German—in 1901.

<sup>2</sup> The most common criterion for late antiquity is to take the Crisis of the Third Century (ca. 235–284) in the Roman Empire as a starting point and the rise of Islam as the final event (ca. seventh century).