

Introduction

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The papers published in this volume were presented at an international conference organized in collaboration with the Faculty of Theology of the University of Oslo and held at SOAS, University of London, from 5–7 November 2018. The conference examined the social and institutional contexts and oral, literary and material formats in which religious knowledge emerged and was transmitted in antiquity, from ancient Mesopotamian until early Byzantine times. We investigated settings — e.g. the family and household; the temple, synagogue, church and ‘school’ — that enabled the transmission of customary practices and ancestral traditions from one person to another and from one generation to the next. Some of these contexts were private, others public or semi-public. To some, only relatives and friends had access, whereas others served the wider public. While some of this transmission was based on the observation and imitation of practices, religious knowledge was also exchanged orally in discussions, teaching sessions, sermons and lectures. Furthermore, material culture in the form of floor mosaics, wall paintings, reliefs and statuary could stimulate the viewer's imagination.

Although distinctions between high and low culture and laypeople and clergy are not or only partially applicable to the ancient societies, scenarios and time periods we are dealing with here, self-proclaimed or officially endorsed religious experts who distinguished themselves from the rest of the population can be found in all of them. These experts conducted rituals on behalf of others (priests) or advised their fellow-religionists on how to lead a god-pleasing life (rabbis, monks). Some taught students and some gave public sermons and lectures to larger audiences. They considered themselves role models in self-control, morality and asceticism, and expected others to imitate them. The ways in which they behaved towards non-experts and how they enabled them to share some of their expertise is important to investigate.

Equally important is the question of the types and degrees of religious knowledge possessed by the majority of non-experts. Most of them would have been illiterate in the sense of being unable to read the ancestral textual tradition

in which some of these experts claimed expertise. Can we assume that they possessed a ‘working knowledge’ of certain narratives and rules that formed the basis of the identity of the group they were born into or decided to join? Were ritual practices concerning festival observance, food preparation and purity transmitted from parents to children, and, if so, were there variations between one household and the next? In the transmission of such knowledge, gender, socio-economic status and religious commitment would have played a role.

Our literary sources were compiled and edited by the literate intellectual elites. They provide the perspectives, concerns and values of religious experts in the specific traditions. How can we approach these texts methodologically to access and identify the religious knowledge, customs and practices of the masses? Whereas former generations of scholars tended to read these texts literally as historical evidence of actual practices, nowadays a more critical approach is taken which distinguishes between theory and practice, wishful thinking and actual observance of experts’ instructions. If religious leaders were not officially appointed but revered on the basis of their reputation and popularity, they could control their contemporaries’ behaviour through persuasion only. In the case of institutional appointments — e.g. to the temple priesthood and church offices — the social and geographical distance between the leaders and the masses may have been so large that personal interaction would have been limited or non-existent. Leaders, whether self-proclaimed or appointed, may have claimed a monopoly on religious knowledge while scolding and looking down on those they considered ‘unlearned’. The so-called ‘unlearned’ may have resented the experts’ claims to superiority, which conflicted with long-established social stratification that prioritized wealth in estates, heredity and public office. Conflicts would have been unavoidable.

1. What Constitutes Religious Knowledge in Antiquity?

What do we mean when we talk about ‘religious knowledge’? In the broadest sense, this would cover all kinds of knowledge about religiously relevant practices, rituals, beliefs, traditions, texts, prayers, spaces, institutions and mediating figures such as priests, holy men, healers and wisdom teachers evident in a certain population or subgroup. Especially important with regard to antiquity is the absence of a clear-cut separation between religion and other aspects of people’s lives. In his book *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, Brent Nongbri has shown that the traditional assumption that religion constituted a sphere of life distinct from other life experiences is wrong as far as pre-modern societies are concerned.¹ He has argued that in antiquity there

was no conceptual area that could be called ‘religious’ in contrast to ‘secular’ or ‘worldly’ areas of life.

This consideration is especially true for what we commonly call ‘Judaism’, as Daniel Boyarin has shown in his book *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion*. Boyarin argues that the reduction of the practices, thoughts and experiences of Jews to Judaism as a religion is a modern phenomenon that is based on Christian notions of religion encompassing belief and worship. In ancient and medieval Jewish societies, on the other hand, the observance of the Torah and rabbinic halakhah was understood as legally binding and did, in fact, constitute Jewish law (*nomos*) comparable to and overlapping with Roman and Islamic law when Jews enjoyed legal autonomy.² Belief or ‘faith’, a concept so central in Christianity from Paul’s writings onwards, never constituted a separate category until the nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums* created Jewish ‘theology’ by analogy with Protestant Christianity.³ In antiquity, the Jewish God was part of Judean ethnic culture, as was the Torah as an ancestral legacy. As far as ancient Jews are concerned, ‘religious’ knowledge must therefore be understood as encompassing many different aspects of ancestral Torah-based Jewish culture. These aspects cannot be limited to ‘religion’ in the narrow and belief-centred Christian sense of the term.

If we claim that ‘religion’ is concerned with the sacred or supernatural, problems also occur. In many cultures such as ancient Mesopotamia, worship focused on statues of deities: ‘these statues were not considered symbols or representations of a god or goddess. Rather, ancient texts make clear that these statues were considered to present the deity; they contained, though they did not exhaust, the real presence of a god or goddess.’⁴ Here, then, we have the presence of the divine within the material world. A similar phenomenon can be observed within early Christianity, where the ‘Son of God’ is considered to be ‘incarnated’ in a living person. Christians who worshipped Jesus worshipped an actual person who ate and drank, went to the toilet, and ultimately died. Although the dogmatic disputes of the fourth and fifth centuries tried to emphasize the divinity of Jesus, the fact that worship was directed at a person who lived and died like everyone else remained and caused theological problems, as the Arian controversy of the fourth century ce shows.⁵ In many ancient religions, then, worship focused on inner-worldly phenomena that were considered more than mere representations of the divine sphere.

Stanley K. Stowers has suggested a definition of religion that recognizes it as a ‘social/cultural phenomenon’ within ancient societies, taking the great variety of expressions into account while also acknowledging the local perspective:

Religions are the often linked and combined practices (i.e. doings and sayings) of particular human populations (e.g., imagined as cultures, societies, ethnicities, groups, global movements) that involve the imagined participation of gods or other normally non-observable beings in those practices and social formations . . . Religion is the unfolding activity [. . .] involving those practices that postulate participation with and make reference to gods . . .⁶

This definition is broad enough to be applicable to the ‘religious knowledge’ of the households, groups and societies under discussion here. The ‘knowledge’ in question would not have been theoretical or text-based only. Nor would it have been limited to speculation about the gods. It would have been a practical knowledge that was embodied and realized in everydaylife activities, ranging from one’s behaviour toward one’s neighbours and slaves, to circumcision and festival observance.⁷ Many of these practices would have been learned through socialization within households and local communities.

2. Knowledge Experts and Popular Religion

While everyone would have possessed religious knowledge of some kind, in all ancient societies, experts in the respective group’s religious traditions and rituals emerged who were either officially appointed (e.g. high priests or bishops) or informally acknowledged by their peers and the populace (e.g. rabbis or monks). Their status was based on heredity (priests), intellectual acumen (rabbis, church fathers), ascetic radicalism (monks), or success in magic (amulet writers, healers, rain makers, etc.). They distinguished themselves from the rest of the population institutionally (priests, bishops), spatially (desert monks) or intellectually (rabbis).

Some of these distinctions would have been easier to maintain than others. In ancient Babylonia, priests were in charge of running the temples. Scholars differ over the amount of influence the royal palace held over the temples, yet both the temples and their officials were clearly distinguished from the masses, who lacked official power and acknowledgement.⁸ In Jerusalem before 70 ce, priests and high priests administered and conducted the sacrificial service on behalf of laypeople. Their authority was based on their institutional power. In the Hasmonean era (142–63 bce), political rulers’ authority over and interference with priestly affairs increased.⁹ Throughout the First (c. 1000–587 bce) and Second Temple (515 bce–70 ce) periods the political ruler and the high priest remained the highest local authorities. When the official religious cult was highly centralized and institutionalized, popular religious practices were mostly conducted within households, occasional pilgrimages to

Jerusalem notwithstanding.¹⁰ Household practices were transmitted from parents to their children and learned through socialization. Although there would have been similarities among households, variation and ‘internal religious pluralism’ would have been the norm.¹¹ The similarities were based on customary practice, the variations due to a lack of official oversight over the private sphere.

When official institutional leadership structures were absent, distinctions between self-proclaimed leaders and the populace were less clear. This was the case in Roman Palestine after 70 ce, when rabbis emerged and eventually filled the gaps in religious orientation left by the destruction of the Temple.¹² Post-70 rabbinic Judaism differed from Temple-centred priestly Judaism in significant ways. Rabbis lacked institutional power. Their influence on other Jews depended on their scholarly reputation. Reputation is a flimsy thing, however, since it depends on personal relationships and subjectivity rather than on clearly objectifiable criteria. Therefore, even the question of who was considered a rabbi in antiquity is unanswerable from a historical point of view. Boundaries between rabbis and non-rabbinic Jews were blurred as far as the Palestinian rabbinic movement is concerned.¹³ Rabbis lived in the same neighbourhoods and followed the same professions as other Jews. They advocated Torah study for all male Jews and discussed Torah in publicly accessible study houses. They would therefore have differed from the majority of their male co-religionists only on the basis of their intellectual expertise and the degree to which they practised their own halakhic rulings.

As self-proclaimed and locally acknowledged experts in Torah knowledge and its interpretation and adaptation to new circumstances, some prominent rabbis may have acquired an elevated status in Jewish society from the third century onwards. As members of an intellectual elite they may have considered themselves equal to Graeco-Roman philosophers and superior to the local Jewish aristocracy. Whether they were acknowledged as equals by the official elites is doubtful, however. Therefore, common distinctions between high and low culture do not seem to be applicable to rabbis and non-rabbinic Jews in Palestinian Jewish society as they might be in Graeco-Roman society, where philosophers and orators were members of the upper strata of society. But even for Graeco-Roman society with its theatre performances, public entertainments and speeches in the marketplace that attracted mixed audiences, such a dichotomy may be inappropriate.¹⁴ As far as religious knowledge is concerned, a distinction between expert and popular knowledge seems to be more appropriate, keeping in mind that experts were part of the general population. Parts of their knowledge would have been based on their familiarity with local customary practice.

In contrast to ancient Jewish society, where leadership structures remained informal and unofficial until the time of the editing of the Babylonian Talmud in the fifth to seventh centuries ce, in Christian society hierarchically organized leadership structures developed quite early and were already in place by the second century ce. While there is no persuasive evidence of institutionalized rabbinic academies in Roman Palestine in the classical period (70–400 ce), Jeffrey L. Rubenstein has pointed to the editorial (stammaitic) layer of the Babylonian Talmud as the earliest evidence for such a development in Persian Jewish society.¹⁵ The establishment of a rabbinic institutional leadership structure was an innovation of the post-talmudic geonic period, possibly under the influence of Islamic culture, as far as rabbinic Judaism is concerned.¹⁶

The development of hierarchical leadership structures happened much earlier in Christian circles and was probably in place by the late second century ce.¹⁷ An earlier variety of roles and functions eventually gave way to a more fixed and hierarchical church structure with the offices of presbyters, elders, deacons and bishops at its head.¹⁸ In the second century ce, Origen's teaching of circles of disciples in Caesarea may have resembled rabbinic teacher–disciple relationships.¹⁹ In late antiquity, when Christian leadership roles were more established and a greater distance between office holders and ordinary Christians ensued, such personal communication would have been rare. Church fathers would have given the occasional sermon but mainly instructed community members through their writings and letters, (copies of) which would have been read out aloud in Christian gatherings.

Especially important is the combination of classical *paideia* (Greek learning) and Christian education in late antiquity. Church fathers like Jerome (fourth century ce) possessed ‘ample knowledge of classical literature’, which they acquired in Christian schools: ‘Jerome claims that if he still remembered and quoted the classics, this would not testify to his continuous reading but to the deep and indelible impregnation of such knowledge acquired at school.’²⁰ In late antiquity (third–sixth centuries ce) ‘classical Hellenistic and Roman educational values were merged with a new approach to education from a religious perspective’.²¹ An education in classical literature and rhetoric was mandatory for Christians of the upper strata of society, bishops and church fathers. The use of simple biblical phrases was considered embarrassing: ‘That Christianity had used, and continued to use, “the language of fishermen” could be a severe embarrassment to a highly trained author of literary ambition . . .’²² A wide gap would have existed between educated Christians from the upper strata of society and ordinary working-class Christians, who lacked such *paideia*. The possession of *paideia* connected the learned elites to the highest ranks of the Roman-Byzantine Empire: namely, the emperor himself and the episcopate.²³ As A.D. Lee has pointed out, from Constantine onwards bishops

assumed an ‘increasingly high profile . . . beyond the parameters of church affairs’; this ‘was to be one of the most important developments in the social history of the empire during late antiquity’.²⁴

An alternative to these high-ranking and powerful Christian elites were the desert ascetics and ‘holy men’ who propagated a simpler form of Christianity traced back to its biblical roots. These individuals taught others through persuasion and example rather than institutional power. The monks of fourth- and fifth-century ce Egypt and Syria turned poverty into their power base. As Peter Brown has pointed out, these monks ‘came from a wide variety of social backgrounds and were far from averse to reading and producing books. But Christian writers consistently presented them as men untouched by *paideia*.’²⁵ They were ‘the antithesis of the philosopher, the representative of the educated upper classes’.²⁶ As such, they would have been the ideal role models for members of the less educated and impoverished lower strata of society. This is how Anthony was seen by Augustine, who wrote: ‘The uneducated rise up and take heaven by storm, and we, with all our learning, here we are, still wallowing in flesh and blood’ (*Confessions* 8.8.19).²⁷

Desert monks and ‘holy men’ catered to the needs of the masses that were not met by church authorities. The help and advice they provided stood at the intersection of religion, ethics and daily life. Their spatial distance set them apart from ordinary people and enabled them to function as mediators between humans and the divine. Such mediation could take the form of prayer or advice requested by visitors to their locale. According to Brown, ‘[t]o visit a holy man was to go to where power was’.²⁸ This power was charismatic, that is, based on the ‘holy man’s’ reputation to provide healing and peace of mind. The teachings of the desert monks were transmitted in the form of anecdotes and wise sayings that were easy to remember, digest and use for one’s own purposes.²⁹ Significant differences notwithstanding, certain similarities between the teachings of the Egyptian and Syrian desert monks and Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis are evident in both content and form.³⁰ Both provided an individual, Scripture-based and practice-oriented approach to the holy that differed from the institutionalized, *paideia*-based homilies and exegetical commentaries of church authorities. Some ascetics such as Hieracas (= Hierax) of Leontopolis (late third–fourth centuries ce) seem to have continued Origen’s model of personally teaching small circles of students. James E. Goehring distinguishes this ‘academic model’ from the ‘episcopal model’ of teaching.³¹ Obviously, the former resembled rabbinic teaching much more than the latter, at least as far as the first to fourth centuries ce are concerned.

3. The Medium is the Message

Just as important as the investigation of the contents of ancient religious knowledge is the focus on the media in which such knowledge was communicated and expressed. Marshall McLuhan's catchphrase, 'The medium is the message', is therefore as important for ancient cultures as it is for understanding art and artefacts today. Most relevant for our topic is the realization that religious knowledge was mostly transmitted orally, even if it had its basis in texts. Only a tiny minority of people would have been able to access and read the 'sacred' texts directly, and even fewer people, usually professional scribes, would have been able to write them.³²

Literacy levels were highest among the urban upper strata of society. Albert I. Baumgarten considers Second Temple Jewish 'sectarian' groups to have been urban movements: Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes would have been concentrated in Jerusalem and other major towns of Hellenistic and Roman Palestine.³³ Sectarianism, urbanism and literacy were connected: urban groups with direct access to Torah scrolls and the ability to read and interpret the texts distinguished themselves from mainstream society as well as from each other. While mainstream Jews would have been illiterate and 'unlearned' besides the transmission of customary family traditions, Pharisees and Essenes developed scholastic traditions that separated them from their co-religionists. The scholastic nature of the Qumran community has also been stressed by Steven D. Fraade, who calls them a 'studying community'.³⁴ The many text finds of the so-called Qumran library provide evidence of at least some community members' interest in the writing, preservation and interpretation of texts.³⁵

Oral transmission that is ultimately based on the written text of the Torah can take many different forms. It ranges from the reading aloud of selected Torah texts in Hebrew to the use of Greek translations and ad hoc translation into Aramaic (e.g. in synagogues) to recitation based on memory (e.g. in rabbinic study sessions); from paraphrase and creative retelling to the invention of stories based on biblical characters and moral values. Whereas the reading from (and ad hoc Aramaic translation of) Torah scrolls necessitated the presence of these precious and expensive scrolls at the place where they were read aloud, the creative retelling and interpretation of biblical narratives and the invention of stories featuring biblical characters and values was possible in their absence. Public Torah readers in synagogues had to be able to read the texts aloud in Hebrew (or in Greek where Greek translations were used). The number of males who possessed such a high degree of literacy and skill (not everyone who could read Hebrew could read the Torah aloud in public) would have been very limited, especially outside the major cities. In amoraic times (third to fourth centuries ce), rabbis' support of scribes teaching Torah-reading

skills to boys (against a fee payable by their parents) may have increased the pool of Torah readers at the time when synagogues became local religious centres.³⁶

Those who could read the sacred texts and had direct access to them would have functioned as mediators between this hereditary tradition and the largely illiterate populace. They were the ones who chose the texts that were read out aloud (aside from following the annual Torah reading cycle). If the spaces where such readings took place were private or semi-private, they could limit access to them. The mere ability to read sacred texts did not bestow scholarly acumen on individuals, however. Rabbis looked down on scribes, who may have possessed the technical skills of reading and writing Torah texts in Hebrew but lacked interpretative skills.³⁷ What characterized religious scholarship was the ability not only to read but also discuss, think with and apply Torah rules and values to new circumstances of daily life. Rabbinic Torah-based discussions with colleagues and students took place orally and probably often without having Torah scrolls at hand. Such handwritten scrolls were very costly and therefore unaffordable to anyone but the wealthy. They were also considered sacred objects that were not to be carried or used in spaces inappropriate for them.³⁸ We do not know whether and to what extent Torah scrolls were (temporarily or permanently) present

in local study houses. Fixed Torah shrines are known in Byzantine-era synagogues only.³⁹

In societies where literacy levels are low and access to writing is severely limited, those who have such access are held in high esteem. After the destruction of the Temple, when the written tradition of the Torah emerged as the most important Jewish heritage, Torah scholars would have eventually become renowned within society. They probably not only claimed but actually maintained a monopoly on the high level of Torah knowledge necessary for exegesis and halakhic creativity. As Torah experts, they set themselves up as guides who advised their co-religionists in leading their lives under God's guidance. By providing halakhic advice in all areas of daily life, they made themselves indispensable to those who cared about maintaining a Jewish identity in the Romanized environment of late antique Palestine.

Jews who lacked rabbis' scholarly expertise would have transmitted their private household practices from one generation to the next, and in other areas followed local customary practice. Shaye J.D. Cohen has already pointed out that shared Jewish customs would have included circumcision, refraining from eating pork and the observance of the Sabbath and some festivals.⁴⁰ To 'live Jewishly' would have meant to practise a certain minimum of shared 'customs and laws of the Hebrews'.⁴¹ The ways in which, for example, the Sabbath was observed and the biblical injunction to refrain from work was interpreted would have differed from one family to the next. Rabbis tried to provide orientation in such a situation of variety and uncertainty. Not only did rabbis differ among themselves, however; following an individual rabbi's advice was entirely voluntary. What percentage of Jews consulted rabbis in antiquity cannot be determined from the surviving sources.

Other ways to increase one's religious knowledge beyond customary practices depended on one's social relations, one's environment and the time period in which one lived. Relatives of religious experts had better access than other people to more specialized knowledge.⁴² In late antiquity, when synagogues and churches were set up as the religious centres of local communities, people could go there and listen to Bible readings and sermons. In the third to fourth centuries ce, synagogue and church art developed, which represented central biblical stories and religiously relevant visual identity-building symbols, like the menorah and Temple-related symbols in Judaism and the cross in Christianity.⁴³

Besides the oral recitation and visual representation of sacred texts, practical wisdom, with the sage as a behavioural model, developed from the Hellenistic period (from c. 300 bce) onwards and peaked in late antiquity. Stoic, Epicurean and Cynic philosophers did not engage in theoretical debates that were removed from life in this world. They provided practical guidance

and served as role models who lived in accordance with their own values.⁴⁴ As Trevor Curnow has pointed out, ancient philosophy ‘directly addressed the question of how to live in the world’, not shying away from what we might consider trivialities.⁴⁵ Wise men like Diogenes and Seneca served as role models for their contemporaries. Jewish and Christian sages like Jesus, the rabbis and desert monks functioned within this broader context of lived practical wisdom. What others could learn from them was not so much theoretical religious knowledge in the form of theology or exegesis but guidance on how to behave in the world, in relation to other humans, nature, objects and one’s own body.

4. The Scope of This Book

This volume includes papers that investigate the use and dissemination of religious knowledge in antiquity from ancient Mesopotamia to early Byzantine times. The book consists of three parts, dealing with ancient Mesopotamian religion, Judaism and Christianity in successive order. Each part is arranged chronologically. Since the main focus of the conference was on Judaism, the majority of papers are dedicated to Jewish culture in antiquity.

In the first part, on ‘Popular Religious Knowledge in Ancient Mesopotamia’, Andrew George considers what constituted religious knowledge in ancient Mesopotamia and examines the means by which it was transmitted. He investigates whether and to what extent ordinary people had access to state-sponsored religion and religious knowledge and explores what other religious experiences and practices were open to them. Sam Mirelman emphasizes the fact that the sources are sparse and difficult to interpret. Cuneiform texts provide us with detailed information concerning Mesopotamian ritual practice, particularly for the first millennium bce. Such texts generally reflect the official cult, featuring the activities of priests, temple officials and the king. Occasionally, however, ordinary inhabitants of the city are mentioned. Mirelman’s chapter focuses on public lamentations as instances of a wider participation in the context of the Eclipse of the Moon ritual and during the repair of cult statues. In addition, the public would have functioned as spectators in the performance of regular temple laments during circumambulations in and around the city. The textual record may not fully reflect cultic reality. Although laypeople were not permitted to enter the temple complex, they would have participated from afar, in their homes or in the cities of ancient Mesopotamia.

The second part, on ‘The Production and Dissemination of Religious Knowledge in Judaism’, begins with Diana Edelman’s paper on biblical textual

strategies employed to disseminate Torah knowledge to Jews in the period c. 350–200 bce. Since literacy skills would have been extremely low, other mechanisms for disseminating basic tenets, beliefs, values and practices would have been needed. On the basis of Symbolic Convergence Theory, Edelman explores how the Torah employs key strategies to create and maintain group identity and cohesion. Key tenets and beliefs such as the practices of circumcision, Sabbath observance, the use of mezuzot and tefillin and participation in the three annual pilgrimage festivals are identified as crucial to be remembered, taught and learned. The final section of the chapter investigates how Levitical Torah teaching is presented in the books of Chronicles, perhaps reflecting new teaching practices of the Hellenistic era that have been retrojected into the monarchic period as precedents for subsequent developments.

David Hamidović analyses the textual cluster of *Serakhim* that relate to the Rule of the Community to consider the production and dissemination of knowledge within the Qumran community. The literary genre of *Serakhim* demonstrates the transformation of oral traditions into written format and of writing into orality among community members. Columns 5, 6 and 9 of 1QS describe this process at work. Under the assumption that one is dealing with a composite text here, Hamidović contextualizes the concept of *mishpatim* that constitutes the background of the *Serakhim*.

The following three chapters focus on rabbinic Judaism. Philip Alexander explores folk religion (minhag) as a source of rabbinic law. He borrows the anthropological concept of an elite ‘great tradition’ and a popular ‘little tradition’, arguing that the relationship between the two should be seen as a two-way street, with the traditions dynamically interacting with each other. He applies this concept to rabbinic Judaism with its distinction between minhag and halakhah (religious law) and shows that minhag, understood as folk religion, was always integrated into halakhah. Drawing on legal positivist analysis of English common law, he discusses the ‘rule of recognition’ applied by rabbis when accepting custom as law and identifies four distinct rabbinic attitudes towards minhag: acceptance, modification, rejection and toleration. Thus, from an internal analysis of the Jewish legal tradition itself, folk religion is recognized by rabbis as having made a significant contribution to Judaism. What the elite gave to the people, the people in many cases already owned.

Catherine Hezser investigates the social contexts in which interaction between rabbis and non-rabbinic Jews could have taken place in Roman Palestine. Although Palestinian rabbinic literature mostly features interaction among rabbinic colleagues and between rabbis and their students, rabbis are occasionally said to have met non-rabbinic Jews, for example, in the houses of wealthy householders, in study houses, synagogues and open spaces. The

chapter examines how relations between rabbis and non-rabbinic Jews are depicted in comparison to relations among rabbinic scholars. Are rabbis and non-rabbinic Jews described as equals or do the texts contain implicit or explicit markers of status differences? Questions about spatial access to rabbis are closely linked to access to Torah knowledge. Rabbis' behaviour and practice in public seems to have been as important as verbal instruction. As embodiments of Torah knowledge, rabbis would have served as role models for their fellow-Jews. Since Judaism focuses on practice rather than beliefs, rabbis' conduct in everyday situations may have been the foremost way of disseminating rabbinic knowledge.

Jewish liturgy as it developed from late antiquity until the Middle Ages would have been another medium of educating the public in religious matters. Following up on an earlier paper in which he began to examine the role of rabbinic liturgy as an educational tool, Stefan Reif discusses sections of medieval commentators' introductions to the prayer-book written between the tenth and seventeenth centuries in both the eastern and western world. He also pays attention to liturgical poetry and how it may have contributed to such a pedagogical process.

The third part of this volume contains three chapters that deal with 'The Production and Dissemination of Religious Knowledge in Christianity'. Christine Amadou examines the representation of the early Christian saint Thecla in a variety of literary genres, from hagiography to philosophical dialogue. What do the different genres reveal about the transmission of religious knowledge and how do they transmit it? How should we read the female, gender-related aspect of this path of transmission? By focusing on three texts and using theories from the History of Knowledge and the History of Ideas, Amadou explores the figure of Thecla as a transmitter of religious knowledge and examines how the different genres reflect this process. In *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* she highlights the gendered relationship between chastity, knowledge and authority. In *The Miracles of Thecla* she focuses on the miracles connected to reading and writing and thus to scriptural knowledge. In Methodius's *Symposium* she examines female knowledge of chastity within an ecclesiastical context. Through these three readings she explores questions of gender and religious knowledge. Divisions between popular and elite religiosity have to be nuanced when women's access to religious knowledge and power are taken into account.

Hugo Lundhaug's chapter addresses the dissemination of religious knowledge by means of apocryphal texts and traditions transmitted in Egyptian monasteries from late antiquity to the early Islamic period. By placing the apocryphal texts of the Nag Hammadi codices within the broader context of Egyptian monastic literary practices and by looking at monastic manuscript

collections from the fourth to the twelfth centuries, the chapter argues that the production and use of Apocrypha was not a marginal phenomenon in Egyptian monasticism. On the contrary, the transmission of Apocrypha played a significant role in the distribution of religious knowledge.

In the final chapter of the volume Jan Stenger investigates religious knowledge in early Byzantine Gaza. Religious instruction in the *polis* of Gaza and its surroundings is very well documented for the first half of the sixth century. We possess a large number of texts that provide knowledge about the Bible and Christian doctrine to a mixed audience of laypeople and discuss questions of pious conduct. While addressing the same audiences, religious instruction was given by figures of different status and in widely different settings. In the vicinity of Gaza, two recluses were regularly approached by townspeople on matters of everyday life and doctrinal controversies. The answers were provided in written form. Within the *polis*, secular teachers, the sophists of the local school, occasionally touched on religious topics in front of gatherings of the civic community. This chapter analyses the settings, types of knowledge, participants and types of discourse. It differentiates between two models of authority and relates them to the teaching settings. The analysis demonstrates that the dissemination of religious knowledge was embedded in traditional *polis* culture rather than constituting a separate domain. Religious instruction was not confined to religious functionaries and specialists.

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Endnotes

- 1 See Nongbri, *Before Religion*.
- 2 For Josephus, see Nongbri, 27 and, for medieval society, 61.
- 3 Nongbri, 138 with reference to Leopold Zunz.
- 4 Sommer, 'Cult Statue', 221.
- 5 On the problems involved in worshipping Jesus, see Hick, *Metaphor of God*, 169–70.
- 6 Stowers, 'Theorizing the Religion', 8–9.
- 7 On the practical orientation of ancient religions, see also Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses*, 23.

- 8 On the relationship between the palace and temple in ancient Persia, see Fried, *Priest and the Great King*, 8–48.
- 9 See the comprehensive study by Babota, *Institution*.
- 10 See Albertz and Schmitt, *Family and Household*; Albertz and Schmitt, *Family and Household Religion*; Bodel and Olyan, *Household and Family Religion*.
- 11 Albertz, 'Family Religion', 92.
- 12 On the emergence of the rabbinic movement, see Hezser, *Social Structure*, 55–77. Shaye J.D. Cohen, argues that 'in the second century the rabbinate neither was, nor had any interest in being, the leaders of Jewry' ('Place of the Rabbi', 282); this changed in the third century only.
- 13 See Hezser, *Social Structure*, 53–142.
- 14 On this issue, see Schulte-Sasse, 'High/Low', 7. Pietro Pucci points out that with regard to, e.g., the Alexander Romance and the ancient novels, '[t]he barrier between high and low cultures is being more frequently breached' ('Sacrifices in the *Oresteia*', 540).
- 15 For Roman Palestine, see Hezser, *Social Structure*, 185–227; for the Babylonian rabbinic movement, see Rubenstein, *Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, 77–87.
- 16 There are numerous references in rabbinic texts to students sitting before rabbis. See Hezser, *Rabbinic Body Language*, 87–93. Obviously, students could sit before rabbis at various locations, both inside and outside the house.
- 17 On this development, see Stewart, *Original Bishops*; Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops*; and Rapp, *Holy Bishops*.
- 18 On this development, see Williams, *Stewards, Prophets*.
- 19 See Lapin, 'Jewish and Christian Academies', 498.
- 20 Gemeinhardt, van Hoof and van Nuffelen, 'Education and Religion', 2–3.
- 21 Gemeinhardt, van Hoof and van Nuffelen, 'Education and Religion', 4.
- 22 Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 185.
- 23 On the connection between *paideia* and power, see Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 35–70. See also Black, *Paideia, Power and Episcopacy*.
- 24 Lee, *From Rome to Byzantium*, 10.
- 25 Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 71.
- 26 Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 71.
- 27 Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 72.
- 28 Brown, *Society and the Holy*, 121.
- 29 On the Apophthegmata Patrum, see, e.g., Ward, *Wisdom of the Desert Fathers*; Rubenson, *Letters of St. Anthony*, 155–62; and Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, passim*.
- 30 See Bar-Asher Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic Literature*, 64–100; Hezser, 'Creation of the Talmud Yerushalmi'.
- 31 Goehring, *Ascetics, Society*, 131, following David Brakke.
- 32 On literacy in ancient Mesopotamia and Israel, see Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, 134: 'Of course, literacy rates in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt are estimated to be very low, with some studies suggesting that the rate is in the low single digits.'
Even if literacy rates were slightly higher in ancient Israel, 'this does not lead to the conclusion that the non-elite populace was literate'. On literacy in ancient Jewish society, see Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*. While William V. Harris reckons with the 'rise of religiously inspired reading' in late antique Christian circles, altogether, literacy levels remained low throughout antiquity (*Ancient Literacy*, 331).
- 33 Baumgarten, *Flourishing of Jewish Sects*, 46.
- 34 Fraade, 'Interpretive Authority'.
- 35 For an overview of scholarly views, see Reed, 'Linguistic Diversity', 132–36. According to Mladen Popović, 'The Qumran collection(s) . . . must have attracted a

- number of people who would have engaged in activities associated with large scroll collections, such as reading and studying' ('Ancient "Library" of Qumran', 167).
- 36 On the likely connection between rabbinic propagation of Torah-reading skills and synagogues in need of Torah readers, see Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 242, 452–58. On the development of synagogues as local religious centres in late antiquity, see Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 215–39.
 - 37 See Hezser, *Social Structure*, 467–75.
 - 38 On the Torah as a sacred object and the rarity of Torah scrolls in ancient Jewish society, see Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 110–68.
 - 39 See Fine, *Holy Place*, 106.
 - 40 Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*, 165.
 - 41 See Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*, 166, on the basis of Sozomen, a Christian writer in the fifth century ce.
 - 42 Shaye J.D. Cohen ('Place of the Rabbi') therefore assumes that, at least in the first two centuries ce, rabbinical students stemmed from rabbinic families. Outside such families, rabbinic knowledge would have been difficult to find.
 - 43 On the development of synagogue art, see Levine, *Visual Judaism*; for a comparison between Jewish and Christian art, see Hezser, *Bild und Kontext*, 31–80 (Binding of Isaac) and 114–47 (symbols and group identity).
 - 44 Christoph Jedan (*Stoic Virtues*, part 4) focuses on the practices of Stoic virtue that are expressed in a multiplicity of partly divergent rules. Trevor Curnow (*Ancient Philosophy*) examines how philosophical discussions were relevant for everyday life. 45 Curnow, *Ancient Philosophy*, 2.

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