

## EDITORIAL / EDITORIALE

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The current issue of *Henoch* gathers three contributions on Judaism and the Jews in the Mediterranean during late antiquity and the Middle Ages, encompassing and exemplifying different approaches to sources of different kinds.

The key concept that links together the first two essays is the interaction between the Jews and neighboring cultures.

Rodrigo Lanham Cohen's enquiry takes into account evidence of two different kinds about Jewish groups or communities in the southern Italian peninsula during late antiquity (6th-7th cent.): the data concerning the Jews from Gregory the Great's *Registrum epistularum*; epigraphical and archaeological evidence produced by the Jewish population, especially in Venosa and Taranto. This comparative approach is aimed at better defining the geography of Jewish settlement in the region and its linguistic and onomastic habits. Cohen thus sheds new light on the doctrinal features particular to Judaism in that context, as well as on the relationships among the various Jewish communities and between the Jewish minority and Christian society at large.

With a similar comparative perspective but from the point of view of intellectual history, Matthias Morgenstern investigates marital law in the Palestinian Talmud, focusing on tractate *Ketubbot* and stressing its discontinuity from Biblical law on the same topic. He thus shows early rabbinic marital law in Palestine to have been shaped by the pervasive influence of Roman law and of early Christian discourse on marriage and virginity, a full-fledged example of the acculturation of one Jewish subculture to a dominant foreign model. (The vast majority of the population of Palestine had already become Christian by the 4th century.) A similar dynamic was described by Shaye J. D. Cohen in his seminal investigation of matrilineal descent in Judaism.<sup>1</sup>

Our third contribution, by Shalom Sadik, is a textual analysis of the hitherto relatively neglected tractate *Ma'aseh Nissim* by the Provençal philosopher Nissim of Marseille (early 14th cent.). Nissim's thinking on human will and the psychological process that leads man to freedom of choice bears marks of originality when compared to other Jewish thinkers (both earlier and contemporary) on the same topic. The most widespread conception of that time held human free will to be a consequence of man's intellectual faculty (thus Maimonides, Bahya ibn Paquda, Isaac Israeli). Others (among them

<sup>1</sup> Sh.J.D. Cohen, "The Origin of the Matrilineal Principle in Jewish Law", *AJS Review* 10 (1985), pp. 19-53.

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Yehudah ha-Levi) ascribed human decision to will rather than to intellect. All these thinkers also maintained that animals, too, possessed a certain degree of freedom. Nissim of Marseille's innovation was to define free will as originating in a psychological process during which human will is subject to conflicting input from the practical and the contemplative intellects. Human will can therefore lead to behavior that goes against nature, whereas animals are not granted such freedom, "for all thy wishes are / obedient to Nature's law," as the romantic poet Giacomo Leopardi would write five centuries later.<sup>2</sup>

We hope that this issue exemplifies the methodological diversity and effervescence of contemporary research on Jews and Judaism in late antiquity and the Middle Ages in three different dimensions: Jews' existence within the Christian majority and the *Realien* that define it; the emergence of the rabbinic legal system by way of revisions to its Biblical basis through the lenses of Roman and early Christian thought; and rabbinic Judaism's later differentiation from the new philosophical paradigm of rationalism and the proto-scientific investigation of human nature.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Lonely Sparrow* (1835), transl. by F. Townsend (1887).