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The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties (Hellenistic Culture and Society)

By Shaye J. D. Cohen



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In modern times, various Jewish groups have argued whether Jewishness is a function of ethnicity, of nationality, of religion, or of all three. These fundamental conceptions were already in place in antiquity. The peculiar combination of ethnicity, nationality, and religion that would characterize Jewishness through the centuries first took shape in the second century B.C.E. This brilliantly argued, accessible book unravels one of the most complex issues of late antiquity by showing how these elements were understood and applied in the construction of Jewish identity—by Jews, by gentiles, and by the state.

Beginning with the intriguing case of Herod the Great's Jewishness, Cohen moves on to discuss what made or did not make Jewish identity during the period, the question of conversion, the prohibition of intermarriage, matrilineal descent, and the place of the convert in the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. His superb study is unique in that it draws on a wide range of sources: Jewish literature written in Greek, classical sources, and rabbinic texts, both ancient and medieval. It also features a detailed discussion of many of the central rabbinic texts dealing with conversion to Judaism.



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Editorial Review

Review

"One of the greatest strengths of Cohen's erudite book is that he is willing to acknowledge that many parts of his argument are open to challenge. While some might be overwhelmed by the sheer volume, this reviewer thinks he has done a great service in collecting an immense amount of relevant data, allowing readers to weigh the evidence for themselves and draw their own conclusions. . . . Cohen's book is the most comprehensive study to date on the question of Jewish identity in antiquity."--J. S. Kaminsky, "Choice"

About the Author

Shaye J. D. Cohen is Ungerleider Professor of Judaic Studies and Professor of Religious Studies at Brown University. His earlier books include *Josephus in Galilee and Rome: His Vita and Development as a Historian* (1979) and *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah: A Profile of Judaism* (1987).

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