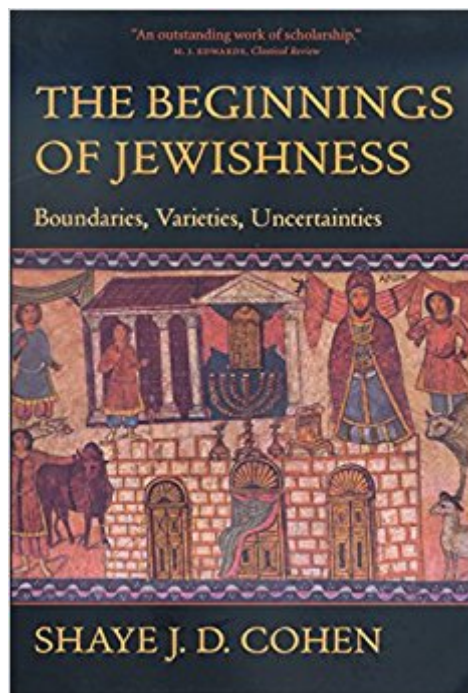




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# The Beginnings Of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties (Hellenistic Culture And Society)



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"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"

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).

The author describes the transformation of the adjective during Greek/Hasmonean/Roman times from tribal, geographical, ethnic, political, to religious meanings. Very interesting and well written.

Unfortunately, this book did not achieve attention and respect as it appropriately deserves. The author possesses an incredible knowledge on the issues of Judaism. In this modern Guide for Perplexed a curious reader could learn all the latitude of numerous controversies comprising the core of Jewish thought. This is an extraordinary book. I wish the author would present the discoveries he made in a more passionate manner. He deserves such a stance.

Shaye J. D. Cohen's 1999 *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* comprises revisions of eight previously published papers and two new papers discussing different aspects of Jewish identity during the Greco-Roman period. The author offers two questions in the prologue which form the foundation of his study (p. 2): "What is it that makes a Jew a Jew and a non-Jew a non-Jew?" and "Can a gentile become a Jew?" Rather than try to provide definitive answers to these questions, Cohen seeks to clarify their meaning and unpack their complexity. Because Jewish identity was a subjective social construct that had no simple definition and few empirical criteria available for evaluation, a multifaceted approach is required. The book is divided into three sections. The first tries to understand the question "What is a Jew?" Of central concern are the correct interpretation of the Greek term *Ioudaios*, and the maintenance of the boundaries of that interpretation. The second addresses the question of how one becomes a Jew. Is it a question of changing culture, politics, religion, or ethnicity? The third section addresses the effects of intermarriage on boundary maintenance. In an epilogue entitled "Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness: Us and Them" Cohen shares some final remarks concerning Jewishness in the modern Jewish mind. Cohen's first chapter asks the question, "Was Herod Jewish?" The chapter is a case study meant to illustrate the blurriness of the boundaries of Jewishness. Herod was of Idumaeian descent, and so represents a third generation convert to Judaism of some kind. How was he classified?

Several ancient witnesses are appealed to in an effort to answer this question. The results run the gamut from loudaios to Ascalonite, and from gentile slave to the Messiah. This shows the ambiguity of the term and its application in ethnic-geographic, religious, and political contexts. It also shows the complexity of conversion to Judaism, or, as Cohen recasts it in chapter 3 (p. 106), "Judaeaness." Chapter 2, "Those who say they are Jews and are not," addresses the question of self-definition. If someone claimed to be a Jew, what methods of verification were available in antiquity? How was Jewishness expressed? Cohen examines the possibility of distinctiveness in physical appearance, speech, names, occupation, and via circumcision. Ultimately, none of these characteristics provide firm footing, as far as Cohen is concerned, for identifying Jewishness. "How, then, did you know a Jew in antiquity when you saw one? The answer is that you did not" (p. 67). In chapter 3 Cohen examines the Greek term loudaios (and the Latin Iudeus). This chapter is the richest in primary texts and forms the foundation of the rest of his arguments. His thesis is that the term loudaios is an ethnic-geographic designation in all its uses prior to the mid-second century BCE, and should be interpreted as "Judaean." After the second century BCE a semantic shift takes place that incorporates a variety of other senses, such as religious, cultural, and political. As he will argue in subsequent chapters, the Hasmonean dynasty and its assimilation of Hellenistic ideologies catalyzes this shift and redefines forever what it means to be Jewish. Chapter 4 begins Cohen's discussion of the crossing of boundaries. He argues that two new definitions of Jewishness emerge from the Hasmonean rebellion: loudaios as a political and as a religious designation. loudaioi then are those who worship the God worshipped in the Jerusalem temple and/or those who are citizens of the Judaean state. The Idumeans represent the first example of the latter category, while two fictional conversions (Antiochus IV in 2 Maccabees and Achior in Judith) show the earliest intimations of the former. This time period marks a clear redefinition of Jewish identity, which Cohen attributes to increasing concern for boundary maintenance, which necessitated the need for formal processes of conversion, and to the Greek concept of politeia. Cohen examines in chapter 5 the ways which a gentile in the Greco-Roman period "became less a gentile and more a Jew" (p. 140). He discusses gentiles associating with, appreciating, and becoming loudaioi, as well as the different stages of assimilation, from God-fearer to convert to Jew. These designations show a conscious desire for, and the development of, formal boundaries. Chapter 6 treats the verb loudaĩfÆ'Ã Â zein. He points to three general definitions for related -izein verbs: (1) to give political support, (2) to adopt customs and manners, and (3) to speak a language. Contrary to popular opinion, Cohen does not believe that the verb should be understood as "to become a Jew" until it is adopted by Christianity. The Christian use also, "invested the word with new meanings,

new overtones, and a new specificity not previously attested" (p. 186). Chapter 7 discusses the rabbinic conversion ceremony, which is attested in two texts: b. Yevamot 47a-b and, with substantial changes, Gerim 1.1. In the former, the ceremony consists of four main parts: (1) presentation and examination, (2) instruction, (3) circumcision, and (4) immersion and further instructions. The latter also has four parts. The first two are the same, but the last two consist of instruction during the immersion and exhortation after the immersion. Gerim contains no instructions regarding circumcision, which was most likely performed in a prior ritual, or was presupposed for the performance of the ritual found in Gerim 1.1. Cohen concludes by pointing out the lack in either text of any mystical or spiritual requirements or exhortations. The ritual seems to be primarily one of initiation. Chapter 8 begins part three of Cohen's book, and it discusses the prohibition of intermarriage. This prohibition is traced from the earliest biblical attestations through to the Talmud. The chapter is one of the shortest and simply argues that nothing in the Hebrew Bible prohibits the marriage of a Jew to a non-Jew. Exodus and Deuteronomy prohibit marriage to specific Canaanite nations on the grounds that it would lead to idolatry, but there is no universal prohibition. By the time of Ezra and Nehemiah there is a sense of growing disapprobation for intermarriage, but the prohibition is not fully developed until the Hellenistic period, and it is not formally outlined until the Talmud. The title of chapter 9 is "The Matrilineal Principle," and constitutes a lengthy discussion of the origins of the modern concept of the matrilineal inheritance of Jewishness. In the biblical period the ethnicity of a woman was largely regarded as irrelevant. According to Cohen, "the woman was joined to the house of Israel by being joined to her Israelite husband; the act of marriage was functionally equivalent to the later act of 'conversion'" (p. 265). While many point to Ezra as the beginning of the matrilineal ideal, Cohen argues briefly that this is not certain. He concludes that it was not present during the Second Temple Period, but is first attested in the Mishnah ("It appears in the Mishnah like a bolt out of the blue" [p. 283]). The "other half" of the matrilineal principle, or the implications of a Jewish mother and a gentile father, are also developed in rabbinic literature, although of a later date. The next chapter is a continuation of the discussion of the matrilineal principle, but it focuses on one text from the Mishnah (M. Bikkurim 1.4-5), which "treats three areas in which converts suffer legal disability because of their non-Jewish lineage" (p. 309): (1) converts may not recite Deut 26:3-11, (2) converts may not say "God of our fathers," and (3) daughters of converts may not be married to priests. Interestingly, one line from the text speaks of a convert whose "mother was of Israel." This convert is not prohibited from reciting Deuteronomy, may say "God of our fathers," and may, if female, marry a priest. The differences between a convert and a born Jew disappear if the convert has a Jewish mother. Cohen seeks to explain why in this

chapter. Cohen's volume makes an invaluable contribution to the discussion of Jewish identity. He certainly succeeds in unpacking (and appreciating) the complexity of the questions asked in his prologue. Without providing definitive answers (for the most part), he draws upon vast corpora of primary texts that show the subjective and often conflicting nature of Jewishness. Caution is exercised at almost every turn. Some conclusions are overstated, though. For example, the certainty with which he declares "Judaean" to be the proper understanding of *Ioudaios* for any usage prior to the mid-second century BCE is excessive. He is inconsistent with that threshold as well, dogmatically translating Josephus (and later) occurrences of *Ioudaios* as "Judaean" without argument. The story of Dinah is repeatedly referenced in discussions of its Hellenistic era reception, but its significance for a pre-Maccabean ideology of conversion is not engaged. In many contexts equal weight is also given to Jewish and non-Jewish definitions of identity, which downplays the importance of self-identification. Philo's appeal to Aristotelian genetics and his version of the matrilineal principle are also neglected. Despite some oversights, Cohen highlights the most critical questions and his conclusions, right or wrong, have catalyzed, and will continue to catalyze, debate over those questions. For that alone Cohen's book is one of the most important contributions to the debate in recent years.

'The Beginnings of Jewishness' seems like it ought to be essential reading for both Christians and Jews who wonder where they came from. In the book, Cohen avoids reading back into the Bible itself and considers a great deal of other historical and literary evidence to determine when being a Jew changed its meaning from 'being from Judea', the geographical location, to 'being a member of the Jewish religion'. He finds the first traces of this in the Hasmonean period, expansions of it in the Roman and up through history. Along the way he is also tracing the beginnings of Rabbinic Judaism after the fall of the Jerusalem Temple, which is quite different from what constituted Judaism before that event. All of this would probably be very surprising to those who hold anachronistic visions of Jesus as a Rabbinic Jew!. Cohen also goes into quite a bit of detail on matrilineal descent and conversion, maybe more than some would want, but interesting nonetheless. Good book.

I am not a Jew. I bought this book thinking it would explain in good part how the religious culture of the Judeans in the Second Temple period became the enduring religion of a people spread far and wide and how, after the cleansing of Judea, it gave rise to the central documents of that religion, the Mishnah and the Talmud. (What Cohen calls moving from *ethnos* to *ethnoreligion*.) The book actually does little to answer that concern except glancingly. It is centered on the period I was

thinking of (with many extensions later), but the contents are better described by the subtitle, Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties, and especially Boundaries. Cohen is a rabbi and a professor of Judaic studies (more accurately a historian of Judaism); quite probably to him my original question was too elementary, and the general answer to it is a given, part of the background from which he speaks. From \*his\* point of view, the book does contribute seriously to the question of the beginnings of Jewishness. ("Contribute" -- the book is a collection of linked essays on very specific questions, not an overview.) From my original point of view, the book seems totally preoccupied with boundary questions, e.g., when and how did the Romans stop thinking of Judai as people from Judea, and start looking at them as people sharing a religion, or how did non-Jews become Jews in different periods. Yet, despite having gone in beyond my depth, I found it impossible to open the book anywhere and not keep on reading, deeply interested. And, as I read on, I realised that the entire book is the best model of historical scholarship, on any topic, that I have ever seen. It could be read with much profit simply for the quality of the work, totally outside any question about Jewishness. If I taught history at the post-graduate level, certainly I would ask my students to spend some hours with the book and then judge by its standard all other scholarly works they will meet. One of Cohen's qualities is that he is an admirably clear and careful expositor, and that he writes very good prose. (So the book could also be proposed to social science postgrads, though it might push some to drop out.) This is why I got hooked in the first place. But the main quality is in the richness of the footnotes (probably two thirds of the text). When Cohen gets through with a question he has posed, you do not simply have his answer (which may be "I don't know"), but a good dossier of the sources that he thinks bear on the question, with luminous explanations -- always brief, Cohen is anything but a waster of words. Therefore, having followed his travails, you may well incline to a different conclusion. This is a touchstone for true scholarship. This quality of mastering his material and at the same time very candidly sticking to it, extends where Cohen deals with the Christian Fathers or Aquinas. If Cohen is situating and explaining a passage from Aquinas, for instance, you will feel that you are reading a thomistic scholar. (I have to admit, though, that Paul gets under his skin.) The book is more than worth buying even if you will make heads or tails of no more than a tenth of it. To go beyond this, however, you will need "elementary pre-yeshiva". "Mishnah", "tannaic", etc. are not defined (I had to go to an elementary book first to get up to speed). There is not a single Hebrew character in the book, only transliterations where needed, but obviously a Talmudic student, knowing Hebrew and Aramaic, would get more out of the discussions. Ancient Greek and especially Latin would also be helpful. Of modern languages, Cohen sometimes leaves French untranslated.

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