THE FATE OF JEWISH HISTORIOGRAPHY
AFTER THE BIBLE: A NEW INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

What caused the eventual decline in later Jewish history of the vibrant historiographical tradition of the biblical period? In contrast to the plethora of historical writings composed during the biblical period, the rabbis of the early common era apparently were not interested in writing history, and when they did relate to historical events they often introduced mythical and unrealistic elements into their writings. Scholars have offered various explanations for this phenomenon; a central goal of this article is to locate these explanations within both the immediate historical setting of Roman Palestine and the overarching cultural atmosphere of the Greco-Roman Near East. In particular, I suggest that the largely ahistorical approach of the rabbis functioned as a local Jewish counterpart to the widespread classicizing tendencies of a contemporary Greek intellectual movement, the Second Sophistic. In both cases, eastern communities, whose political aspirations were stifled under Roman rule, sought to express their cognitive and spiritual identities by focusing on a glorious and idealized past rather than on contemporary history.

Interestingly, the apparent lack of rabbinic interest in historiography is not limited to the early rabbinic period. Throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, Jews essentially did not write their political, diplomatic, or military history. Instead, Jews composed "traditional historiography" which included various types of literary genres among which the rabbinic "chain of transmission" was the most important. The chain of transmission reconstructs (or fabricates) the links that connect later rabbinic sages with their predecessors. Robert Bonfil has noted the similarity between this rabbinic project and contemporary church histories. Adding a diachronic dimension to Bonfil's comparison, I suggest that rabbinic chains of transmission and church histories are not similar though entirely independent phenomena, but rather their shared project actually derives from a common origin, the Hellenistic succession list. The succession list literary genre, which sketches the history of an intellectual discipline, apparently thrived during the Second Sophistic and diffused then into both rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity. Thus, even though historiography was not terribly important to the early rabbis or to most Second Sophistic intellectuals, the succession list schematic, or the history of an intellectual discipline, was evaluated differently. Rabbis and early Christians absorbed the succession list from Second Sophistic culture and then continued to employ this historiographical genre for many centuries to come.

A puzzling and intriguing feature of the history of historiography is that even the finely honed historical consciousness of a group may decline over the course of time. In The Idea of History, for example, R. G. Collingwood famously interpreted what he perceived to be the stifling of Herodotus's "really historical point
of view” by Thucydides and by other historians of Greek and Roman antiquity.1 Though Collingwood’s particular interpretation of the history of Greek historiography is highly questionable,2 his overarching thesis is nonetheless of tremendous importance in that it articulates the idea that the historical consciousness of a group may change with time. This idea is particularly relevant for the history of Jewish historiography because ancient Jewish sources appear to reflect a fascinating shift in the Jewish historical consciousness. While the Bible provides evidence of a thriving historical consciousness at an early date, the literature of later periods suggests that this historiographical tradition was eventually discontinued. In these later periods, the Jews did not seem to care to record the events of their time for posterity nor to examine their sources for knowledge of the past. However, one minor form of historiography, namely the “chain of transmission” (or “chain of tradition”), surprisingly emerged within the otherwise ahistorical rabbinic mindset. This transition from a rich historiographical tradition to a literature devoid of historiography save for the chain of transmission signifies an important shift in the ancient Jewish historical consciousness. In my analysis of this shift below, I interpret it anew and seek to demonstrate how it may be better understood in light of a contemporary non-Jewish intellectual movement called the Second Sophistic.

I

The Second Sophistic refers to the golden age for rhetoric and, more generally, to the widespread revival of classical Greek culture in the Hellenistic atmosphere of the eastern Roman empire during the first few centuries of the common era (ca. 60 CE–250 CE). In this period, the eastern provinces of the empire gradually underwent a highly significant transformation. At first, in the wake of the conquest of the Hellenistic east and the wars of the Late Republic, many eastern provincials in the early empire viewed Rome as a remote and brutal force. This intense and overtly hostile attitude towards Rome, however, progressively decreased in the course of subsequent centuries.

As the east was integrated into the Roman Empire, eastern provincials were slowly assimilated into the politics, economy, and culture of this vast and wide-ranging empire. The bitter hostility towards Rome abated as violent conflicts receded into the past and as Rome successfully maintained the long-lasting peace of the realm. During this peaceful period, easterners were afforded many opportunities to participate in the overarching imperial community. Many individuals were granted citizenship and, in the long run, the constitutio Antoniniana of 212 CE rendered citizenship quasi-universal. Upper-class provincials were encouraged to participate in the state machinery and, so long as Roman interests were not endangered, they were granted much leeway in the administration of local laws and customs. The Pax Romana, new and superior trade routes, as well as a

common currency offered fresh economic opportunities, inducing a certain measure of economic interaction and unity throughout the empire. Politically, the rule of the emperor united the east with many distant regions, and the eastern elite gradually ascended to the highest echelons of the imperial bureaucracy. The political and economic interdependency of the imperial framework also enabled a shared “Greco-Roman” culture to flourish throughout the empire. Thus, Roman towns, for example, look so similar all over the empire because of shared Greco-Roman architectural, engineering, and artistic norms and practices. In short, the apparently successful assimilation of the east into the empire seems to indicate that eastern provincials gradually traded in their hostile attitude towards Rome for a far more accommodating stance.³

In light of the easterners’ political accommodation to Rome, economic integration into the empire, and assimilation of Greco-Roman culture, one might imagine that many members of the eastern elite would also have come to identify themselves culturally and spiritually as Romans. The Second Sophistic, however, testifies to the presence of an important contrary trend in the cultural life of the east. During this period of relative peace and prosperity for the Greek-speaking provincials in the east, sophists attained a prominence rarely achieved by intellectuals or academicians.⁴ These sophists traveled, taught, and entertained, acquiring glory and fame in the process. In this time of social mobility and healthy urban life, the sophists spearheaded a Greek cultural renaissance that resonated throughout the east.⁵

Philostratus, the sophists’ biographer, coined the term “Second Sophistic” to denote the activity and fame of the sophists during this period,⁶ but modern historians use the term more broadly to refer to the widespread revival of classical Greek culture in the east. For historians, the activities and influence of the sophists exemplify notable and distinctive features of the period as a whole.


5. The Second Sophistic began in the latter half of the first century because the Mithridatic wars, Roman expansion, and the civil wars at the end of the Republic had weakened the Greek east. During the early decades of the first century CE, Greek intellectuals still had to depend on Roman patrons; they only attained the confidence and initiative necessary for a vibrant Hellenic revival in the second half of the century. The Second Sophistic then continued to blossom throughout the second century, ending sometime during the mid-third century. This golden age ended in the middle of the third century because the latter half of the century was an unstable period for the Roman Empire that was not conducive to a vibrant intellectual movement. In addition, public life in the restored Roman Empire of the fourth century was focused on Rome rather than on the local Greek setting which had served as the hub of the Second Sophistic. Other fourth-century factors such as Christianization, the greater use of Latin, and the removal of some prominent citizens from the Senate also contributed to the eventual demise of the Greek renaissance. See H. I. Marrou, A History of Education in Antiquity (London: Sheed and Ward, 1981), 215; G. Anderson, The Second Sophistic: A Cultural Phenomenon in the Roman Empire (London: Routledge, 1994), 2; S. Swain, Hellenism and Empire: Language, Classicism and Power in the Greek World AD 50–250 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 2-3.

Thus, the sophists’ literary productions as well as their social and political roles are important not only in their own right but also because they shed light on the wider cultural environment of the Greek-speaking east.

Rhetoric, the intellectual and literary discipline of the sophists, acquired newfound importance during the Second Sophistic. Although rhetoric had become the most widespread form of higher education centuries earlier, not since classical times did masters of rhetoric achieve the status, renown, and power attained by the sophists of the Second Sophistic. Second Sophistic sophists lectured to vast audiences and were admired for their talent, mastery of oratory, knowledge of the classics, impromptu lectures, and wit. They continued to practice and teach all the rhetorical forms known in antiquity, but concentrated on epideictic (or ceremonial) speeches for public occasions and declamations for entertainment. The declamation (μελέτη) in its suasoria form became the most popular speech. In the deliberative suasoria, the declamer would recreate a historical situation and urge the audience to take a course of action on a matter that had been decided ages earlier.7 Most themes for declamations predated Alexander’s conquests, and those not based on specific historical events were set in the ambiguous context of an imaginary past. The sophist engaged his audience’s imagination and demonstrated his literary acumen by referring to classical literary works, rephrasing famous sayings, employing wordplays, and reproducing (to the best of his ability) the Attic dialect of ancient Athens.8 Most importantly, the sophist recreated, if just for a moment, the glorious past of the Greek world.

Scholars have suggested that the classicism (and atticism) of the Second Sophistic derived from the rising interest in grammar in the Hellenistic period, the traditional topics of the educational system, and the conservative nature of the schools. These factors, however, fail to explain the wide-ranging and pervasive quality of this phenomenon.9 Instead, one must look to the role of the sophists in their ambient society in order to appreciate the significance that the glory days of Greece held for them.

The sophists were not merely popular academics; they were the most talented intellectuals of the educated elite in the east.10 As a rule, sophists were from wealthy families (because the price of schooling and travel was high); their literary gifts further enhanced their position in society. They traveled throughout the empire as ambassadors and on lecture tours. They became involved in local politics and even represented their cities before the emperor.11 Thus, they were conscious of their aristocratic station in the local Greek elites and as Roman citizens, and they were sometimes even elevated within the power structure of the Empire. Nonetheless, although sophists belonged to the eastern elites who cooperated with Rome and served as the administrative arm for the empire during this

9. See Anderson, The Second Sophistic, 103; Swain, Hellenism and Empire, 27-42.
10. Swain, Hellenism and Empire, 2.
11. Their skills were brought to the attention of Roman rulers who granted them posts (Bowersock, Greek Sophists, 50-57), chairs, and immunities from taxation and public service (ibid., 30-42; Anderson, The Second Sophistic, 30).
peaceful era,\textsuperscript{12} they remained somewhat distanced from Rome and rarely cultivated friendships with Latin-speaking Romans from the west.\textsuperscript{13} Even though they served Rome, the urban aristocrats apparently did not identify fully with Rome, the ultimate power in the political arena.

In light of this state of affairs, historians reckon that sophist classicism was a means of accommodation to Roman rule. This reaction did not necessarily entail enmity towards Rome, and certain intellectuals appreciated the peace and prosperity that Roman rule afforded them. Nonetheless, Rome was a foreign city that, for some reason and perhaps by divine will, was granted political dominion on earth.\textsuperscript{14} In the imperial world where ultimate political authority resided in Rome, the Greek culture of the east attempted to assert its identity in any peaceful way that it could. City politics thrived, and cities competed in conflicts that recalled the great poleis of the classical period. The sophists played an important role in this renewed city life and their rivalries often reflected overarching city rivalries.\textsuperscript{15} Yet, every Greek was well aware that Rome was master and therefore the revival of a classical culture devoid of foreign influences (and Roman influences in particular) became the natural avenue for Greek self-expression. Although many facets of "Greco-Roman" culture are obviously manifest in the material remains of the eastern provinces, contemporary Greek literature bears fewer traces of this international culture. Thus while the Hellenistic eastern elites identified politically with Rome, they expressed their cognitive and spiritual Hellenic nature by recreating the classical glories of Greece. Not surprisingly, the history of Rome was for the most part ignored by the Greek sophists of the Second Sophistic.\textsuperscript{16}

Although Second Sophistic classicism may be explained, in part, as the self-expression of Greek provincials in a Roman world, this classicism also highlights a social divide in the local communities of the Greek east. The Greek elite sought to reinforce its own power by becoming the masters of both the classics and the language of the classics so that the general populace would view it as the true intellectual heir and authoritative interpreter of the classical tradition.\textsuperscript{17} For their part, the Romans encouraged this classicizing movement because, in addition to their appreciation for Greek culture, the consolidation of power in a Greek elite who co-operated with Rome reinforced Roman authority as well.\textsuperscript{18}

The classicism of the Second Sophistic, moreover, extended beyond the world of the sophists and dominated diverse areas of Greek culture during this period. The novel, which became popular at this time, was usually set in an imaginary composite past in which the classical polis was the center of life. Cities used or

\textsuperscript{12} See Bowersock, \textit{Greek Sophists}, 57-58.
\textsuperscript{13} See \textit{ibid.}, 88.
\textsuperscript{14} The portrayal of the Empire as a confederation of free cities was a fiction embraced by many easterners and maintained by Rome as well. See Goodman, \textit{The Roman World}, 137.
\textsuperscript{15} Bowersock suggests that the academic debates of the sophists and the rivalry between cities were play wars which absorbed local emotions and replaced the real struggles that had vanished. See Bowersock, \textit{Greek Sophists}, 89-100.
\textsuperscript{17} See Swain, \textit{Hellenism and Empire}, 33-42; Anderson, \textit{The Second Sophistic}, 95-100.
\textsuperscript{18} See Swain, \textit{Hellenism and Empire}, 66-78, 421.
created foundation myths to assert their corporate identities. Sparta revived the ancient training method for young men, and both Athens and Sparta became museum cities.19 Pausanias composed a guide to the Greek world, for the most part limiting his exposition to monuments from no later than the third century BCE. The architecture, political constitutions, and personal names of the Second Sophistic reached back to the past. Platonism emerged as a popular philosophy in this period partially because it possessed core texts that were also Greek classics. The writing of local and universal histories became popular, but the subjects of these discourses were an idealized rather than an actual past.20 Though a few historians, such as Arrian of Nicomedia and Dio Cassius, wrote contemporary history, they seem to prove the rule that most "of the Greek literature of the imperial period was concerned with the remote Classical past before Alexander the Great."21 In short, this classicism that blossomed throughout the Greek east and affected all levels of society is probably best understood as an accommodation to life under Rome. The rewriting of the past in the Second Sophistic offered a means through which the Greek-speaking easterners could construct their group identity. The highly sophisticated classicism of the intellectual elite reveals an aristocracy placing itself at the forefront of the classicizing movement and asserting its role as the genuine heirs and interpreters of the classical past.22

In order to further illustrate this classicizing stream in Greek intellectual life, let us consider the role of an ancient Hellenistic literary genre that resonated strongly within Second Sophistic cultural life, namely the succession list. The succession list traced the history of an intellectual discipline by listing the school’s leading thinkers while portraying each successive thinker as the disciple of an immediate predecessor. Since the successions genre was initially created sometime in the early second century BCE within the context of philosophical academies, scholars surmise that the discussion of Alexander the Great’s third-century successors, the διαδόχοι, inspired philosophers and ancient historians of philosophy to utilize succession language.23 In other words, the popular notion of

20. Swain in Hellenism and Empire discusses the various popular forms of classicism just mentioned. On the issue of the intrusion of fiction into history during this period, see G. W. Bowersock, Fiction as History: Nero to Julian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 9-22.
22. Although the Second Sophistic is limited to the Greek classical renaissance, it is noteworthy that the Roman world enjoyed a classical revival during the same period. “It is no secret that the second century shows a predilection for antiquity and archaism, and this predilection extended from East to West, dominating the literary activity of Greek and Romans. But the Greeks looked back to Athens of the fifth century and to Attic purity, whereas the Romans turned to the Punic Wars, studying the old Cato and exploring archaic Latin vocabulary” (Bowersock, Greek Sophists, 16). Unlike the Greeks, the Roman nostalgia for a bygone age cannot be interpreted as cultural self-expression in the face of political impotence since the Romans were the ones in charge. Therefore, perhaps Roman classicism did not develop out of a purely internal dynamic, but arose from the diffusion of Greek classicism into Roman society. Even so, while classicism seems to have permeated Roman culture, sophist rhetoric is practically invisible in the Roman culture of the period. Latin declamation may have continued in the schools, but it never developed into a popular art form like Greek declamation. Apparently, since Romans wielded real power, they felt no need to simulate the power of their predecessors (see Bowie, “Literature and Sophistic,” 919-921). Only non-Romans were forced to search for their identity and national pride in the ancient past.
23. See J. Mejer, Diogenes Laertius and his Hellenistic Background, Hermes 40 (Weisbaden: Steiner, 1978), 63. ("Epicurus seems to have been the first philosopher to call his successors διαδόχοι")
non-familial political successors may have set the stage for the idea that great philosophers belonged to non-familial successions. Nonetheless, a more proximate cause for the creation of the successions genre was “the institutional practice of the established philosophical schools, starting with the Academy. In these schools, the head of the association had a successor (diaduchos) who was appointed or chosen.”24 Ancient historians of philosophy created succession lists on the basis of these institutional successions but then applied the model even to cases in which the succession was hypothetical or fabricated. Thus, succession lists embodied the political and institutional realities upon which they were initially modeled, yet they also sought to demonstrate the continuity of a school of thought over the course of history.25 In effect, the succession lists’ institutional and scholastic dimensions often intertwined because the continuous transmission of tradition established the successors as the authentic interpreters of the classical heritage and thereby justified their power over their schools.

Although serious historiography was relatively unimportant to eastern intellectuals during the Second Sophistic, the succession list flourished. Not only were succession lists of earlier periods copied and preserved during the Second Sophistic, the second-century philosopher Sextus Empiricus also apparently employed the succession list in order to link his school of thought to the ancient skeptics.26 In 176 CE, Marcus Aurelius established four official posts for the major philosophical systems; this renewal of the philosophical institutional succession probably revitalized the succession list literary genre.27 Towards the end of the Second Sophistic, Diogenes Laertius structured his history of philosophy on succession lists, and, outside of philosophy, Philostratus employed the succession list’s teacher-disciple model for his history of the Second Sophistic.28

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26. See Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, 9,116; Gluckert, Antiochus and the Late Academy, 348-356, 364.
27. See J. M. Dillon, “Philosophy,” in The Cambridge Ancient History: Volume XI, 926; Philostratus, Lives of the Sophists, 566; Dio Cassius, Roman History, transl. E. Cary and H. Baldwin Forster (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, 1982), 72.31; Lucian, The Eunuch, transl. A. M. Harmon (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, 1996). 3. Although the Epicureans and the Stoics seem to have maintained their schools intact during the first two centuries ce, the Platonic Academy and the Aristotelian Peripatetic were apparently shut down during the Augustan era. Once the schools were closed, the impetus for the creation of literary successions disappeared. The two oldest schools were succeeded by “small personal schools, set up by individuals, and continued, perhaps for a generation or two, by their chosen successors, but no central validating authority could pronounce on questions of orthodoxy or heresy” (Dillon, “Philosophy,” 924-925). This institutional change dovetails well with the linguistic development in which the term διάδοχος, which had referred to the great academies of Hellenistic and Republican times, came to denote “a philosophical tradition or ‘school of thought’, following the views of one of the more ‘classical’ philosophers of old” (Gluckert, Antiochus and the Late Academy, 152).
28. See Swain, Hellenism and Empire, 97.
One may wonder why the historical approach of the succession list resonated so strongly among Second Sophistic intellectuals. The important role of the succession list during the Second Sophistic stems from the meaning of intellectual succession during this period. In earlier periods, succession in an intellectual discipline was taken to reflect a process of change over time. Thus, for Aristotle the arts develop and change over time and the importance of a succession is that it reveals the cumulative stages in the history of a discipline. Similarly, when Celsus discussed the history of medicine in the first century CE, he noted the advances in medical knowledge and practice and even distinguished between periods of progress and periods of stagnation. However, this developmental view of historical succession was not in tune with Second Sophistic classicism.

As a typical representative of the Second Sophistic environment, Diogenes Laertius did not employ the succession list to highlight the opinions of successive philosophers or the changes that occurred over time. Rather, for Diogenes the founder of a school established the school’s philosophy while his successors articulated and interpreted his ideas. By tracing great ideas to individuals from the ancient past, the succession list served as a (pseudo-)historical literary genre that contributed to the Second Sophistic celebration of classical culture.

II

In light of the approach towards the past typical of Second Sophistic classicism, I would like to suggest that one finds a strikingly similar approach among contemporary rabbinic sages. Various scholars have already noted that the rabbinic attitude towards history differs greatly from the biblical historical consciousness; I believe that the shift from the biblical to the rabbinic historical consciousness reflects a process not unlike that which occurred among Greek-speaking intellectuals in the east. In order to explain the underlying rationale for this claim, I shall outline the evidence for a shift in the Jewish historical consciousness, interpret this shift in the context of the local historical setting, and then relate it to the broader political and cultural setting of the Roman Near East.

The collection of historical narratives preserved in the Bible demonstrates that historiography was of central importance to many Israelite authors of the biblical period. The Bible, however, was not the only form of historical writing in ancient Israel. Biblical authors explicitly refer to various other historical records, such as royal annals, which they did not care to reproduce in their entirety but from which they derived source material. The biblical narrators themselves did


31. The notion of progress is turned on its head by the classicizing tendencies of the period so that great discoveries and scientific advances are attributed to individuals from the ancient past. See L. Edelstein, *The Idea of Progress in Classical Antiquity* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1967), 76. On the atypical awareness of the conceptual development of philosophy during the first century CE, see Mejer, *Diogenes Laertius and his Hellenistic Background*, 3 n. 5: 94.

32. Mejer, *Diogenes Laertius and his Hellenistic Background*, 51.
not sense a need to record the numerous deeds and activities of each and every Israelite king. Instead, they selected the stories and events that they felt would contribute to a narrative in which God could be portrayed as the central force in history.\textsuperscript{33} In short, the message of biblical historiography seems to be that God determines, usually on the basis of a moral evaluation, the plight of the Israelites as well as the fate of all nations.\textsuperscript{34}

Although this sort of theological historiography seems to have been a central element in biblical discourse, scholars have noticed that historiography assumed a far less important role in the post-biblical literature of the Second Temple period (ca. 538 BCE–70 CE). Works such as 1 Maccabees from the turn of the first century BCE, and the historical writings of Josephus Flavius from the late first century CE, continue to present history within the framework of the biblical theory of history, but a number of scholars do not consider such books to be typical of the period. According to these scholars, the biblical role of historiography ceased to be a central feature of Jewish self-expression sometime during the Second Temple period.\textsuperscript{35} In any event, the turn away from historiography, which may have already commenced in the Second Temple period, intensified during the rabbinic period (ca. 70 CE–ca. 500 CE). Indeed, historiography seems to have left no trace whatsoever in rabbinic literature, the literature produced by rabbis in Palestine during the tannaitic period (ca. 60 CE–ca. 220 CE) and by rabbis in Palestine and Babylonia during the amoraic period (ca. 220 CE–ca. 500 CE).\textsuperscript{36} No extant rabbinic writings are histories, and we lack any indications that such histories ever existed. Moreover, not only do these early rabbis evince no interest in writing history, when they do relate to historical events they often introduce mythical and unrealistic elements. The rabbinic view of the past was the product of imaginative retrojections and wishful thinking, rather than the culmination of rigorous analysis and historical reconstruction.

In the nineteenth century, Jewish historians were already troubled by the apparent absence of Jewish historiography during the many centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple.\textsuperscript{37} In seeking to explain this state of affairs, these historians usually reasoned that since “the defeat of the Jewish state at the hands of the Romans, there was no longer any Jewish history and therefore no


\textsuperscript{37} Christian theologians even suggested that once the Jewish nation had rejected Jesus, its role in history came to an end (see G. Langmuir, “Majority History and Post-Biblical Jews,” Journal of the History of Ideas 27 [1966], 343; L. Kochan, The Jew and his History [London: Macmillan Press, 1977], 4-6). This polemical argument, however, is based on theological rather than historical grounds and therefore need not concern us here.
Rapoport-Albert, L. Kochan has objected, however, that this political explanation is insufficient "since the mere absence of a state as an explanation for the apparent lack of historical interest is a criterion drawn not from the Jewish world but rather from the Christian, from that world which had normally—and at no time more than in the nineteenth century—conceived of the state as *par excellence* the unit of historical writing." In addition, Momigliano has contended that "the disappearance of the Jewish state is no sufficient explanation of the end of Jewish historiography, though it was certainly a contributory cause. Jewish historiography was in a critical condition even before the end of the Jewish state, and there is no law of nature by which historiography should end when political independence ends." These insightful arguments indicate that the destruction of the Second Temple alone would not have led to the disappearance of Jewish historiography, though it probably should be viewed as a contributing factor.

A second explanation for the disappearance of Jewish historiography suggests that the biblical historical mindset ceded pole position to biblical law. Already during the Second Temple period, the fulfillment of biblical precepts became a central element in Jewish life; it is apparently the rabbis who transformed the study of Torah—that is, the Bible and its interpretation—into religious worship. In the wake of the destruction of the Temple, the rabbis envisioned that the study and observance of the law would replace Temple-worship and thereby function as the centerpiece of Judaism. Thus it is said in the Babylonian Talmud: "Since the day that the Temple was destroyed, the Holy one, blessed be He, has nothing in His world but the four cubits of *Halachah* (i.e. the law) alone." As Momigliano has characterized this rabbinic position, "history had nothing to explain and little to reveal to the man who meditated the Law day and night." The law revealed God’s will to man, so nothing was more true or more important than the law.

Moreover, living a proper rabbinic life not only involved practicing rituals and studying Torah, but also meant leading a moral and just life. In light of this dimension of rabbinic thought, M. D. Herr has demonstrated that even when rabbinic texts relate to historical events and personalities within non-legal contexts, the discussions are didactic expositions primarily designed to convey ethical values, and they therefore remain unconcerned with the historical facts of the mat-

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43. Just as *halakḥah*, or the rabbinic interpretation of Jewish law, was said to replace the Temple (see n. 41), so were acts of loving-kindness said to replace the atonement function of Temple. See Avot de Rabbi Nathan A, ch. 4.
ter. In addition, Herr highlights the artistic dimension of agadic discourse,\(^ {44} \) that is, the legendary discourse in rabbinic literature, and concludes that the rabbis, like playwrights, composed their stories around historical figures and felt no need to remain faithful to any historical sources or traditions.\(^ {45} \) Indeed, it seems that the rabbinic evaluation of agadah is not unlike Aristotle’s understanding of poetry: “Poetry is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars.”\(^ {46} \) For the rabbis, the particulars of history paled in comparison to the eternal truths of the law and the universal morals of the agadah.

Yet another explanation for the rabbinic attitude towards historiography, originally articulated by Jacob Neusner, claims that the rabbis “felt they had learned all that history had to teach, and turned, therefore, to more decisive matters.”\(^ {47} \) The Bible taught that good deeds are rewarded while evil ones are punished, that God is the central force in history, that Israel is God’s chosen people, and that the exile will ultimately terminate in a return to Zion.\(^ {48} \) In other words, the rabbis felt that they understood both the mechanism and the framework of history, and therefore “the very absence of historical writing among the rabbis may itself have been due in good measure to their total and unqualified absorption of the biblical interpretation of history.”\(^ {49} \) The rabbis believed that the biblical prophets had been shown the inner meaning of historical events, but since the rabbis did not claim prophecy for themselves they could not interpret contemporary events in the manner of the prophets.\(^ {50} \) Instead, “in the interval between destruction and redemption the primary Jewish task was to respond finally and fully to the biblical challenge of becoming a holy people. And for them that meant the study and fulfillment of the written and oral law, the establishment of a Jewish society based fully on its precepts and ideals, and, where the future was concerned, trust, patience, and prayer.”\(^ {51} \)

The explanations reviewed here for the rabbinic turn away from historiography should not be considered as mutually exclusive but rather as complementary. The destruction and devastation caused by two Jewish revolts against Rome in Palestine (66 CE–73 CE; 132 CE–135 CE) and one Jewish revolt in the diaspora (115 CE–117 CE) rendered the Jewish people politically impotent and thereby cre-

\(^{44}\) In a broad sense, agadah may be defined as the non-legal material of early rabbinic literature consisting of ethical teachings, legends, sayings, prayers, folklore, etc. More narrowly, agadah refers specifically to rabbinic legends and stories.


\(^{48}\) See Kochan, The Jew and his History, 12.

\(^{49}\) Y. H. Yerushalmi, Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory (Seattle: University of Washington Press), 22.


\(^{51}\) Yerushalmi, Zakhor, 24.
ated an unpromising setting for rabbinic historiography. In this stateless and perhaps disillusioning setting, the rabbinic elite internalized the themes and messages of the Bible, believing that the past and the future were known to them even if they lacked the prophetic ability to interpret the present. Since the Jews no longer played a role in the grand political arena, and the rabbis (conveniently) felt unqualified to interpret contemporary events in the traditional prophetic fashion, the rabbis turned away from historiography to more important issues, such as Torah and ethics. Torah study, precept observance, and the adherence to a high ethical standard were of central importance to the rabbis not only because these activities could serve as replacements for Temple worship, but also because they could bring an end to history by hastening the arrival of the messianic redemption.

III

In light of this contextualized interpretation of the rabbinic attitude towards history and historiography, I would like to suggest that the contemporary atmosphere of the Second Sophistic may enhance our understanding of the rabbinic historical consciousness. Due to their similar historical settings, the rabbis and many Greek-speaking intellectuals in the east developed an idealized, as opposed to historical, view of the past, while elaborating their respective cultural and spiritual identities. Although the violent nationalism of Judaea in the early tannaitic period bespeaks a strong political component in the identity of Jewish circles in Palestine during the late first and early second centuries, perhaps the relatively peaceful and prosperous Galilee of the second and third centuries served as fertile ground for a local Jewish classical renaissance akin to the Second Sophistic. Many Jews apparently migrated northward from a devastated Judaea to a peaceful Galilee in the aftermath of the Jewish revolts, and the widespread importance of cultural identity in the Second Sophistic seems to find a Jewish counterpart in the rabbinic movement of second-century Galilee. With the acceptance of Roman rule and the forfeiture of political nationalism, it may be that Jewish religion and culture assumed newfound importance in Galilee just as the classical Greek heritage did in the similar conditions of the Greek east. In the absence of Jewish sovereignty, group identity may have been derived for some Jews from the cognitive and spiritual dimensions of Judaism. In this setting, rabbis taught Jewish traditions and apparently acquired some measure of prominence. Thus, I suggest that the tannaitic experience in second-century Galilee may be understood as the rabbinic equivalent of the cultural efflorescence typical of easterners living under Roman rule. Like their Greek counterparts under

52. A belief in the end of prophecy does not necessarily entail that one will not try to write history. Like the rabbis, the author of 1 Maccabees did not consider himself to be a prophet (see 1 Maccabees 4:46, 9:27, and 14:41), yet unlike the rabbis he wrote a history of his time. Perhaps if the rabbis had lived in as grand a time for the Jews as the Hasmonaean period, they would have also written history.


54. In my opinion, the rabbis of the tannaitic period (i.e. the tannaim) were not the recognized and official leaders of normative rabbinic Judaism as many have assumed, nor did Judaism shatter and
similar conditions, the rabbis constructed their identity not on the basis of current affairs or actual history, but on the basis of an idealized portrait of the past. In elucidating Torah law and preaching a high ethical standard, the rabbis, like contemporary sophists and Platonists, probably imagined that they were simply interpreting their classical heritage. Sophists and rabbis, however, did not attempt to reconstruct the historical past accurately but used the past as a foil and projected their own values onto the past. Thus, rabbis transformed biblical figures into rabbinic scholars, anachronistically introduced rabbinic practices into the past, creatively modified biblical accounts in order to convey moral lessons, and sometimes whitewashed the apparent sins of their (supposed) ancestors. Obviously, rabbinic legends differ in many respects from Second Sophistic novels and rhetorical discourse. Yet, the constant attempt to construct a cultural identity through the memory of an idealized past was common to both the rabbis and many Greek-speaking litterateurs of the early common era.

For Jews and gentiles in the east, Rome was the only major political force of the present, and therefore recent history was of little or no interest to either rabbis or sophists. Though a few works of serious political history were composed during the Second Sophistic, they were the exception rather than the rule. Instead, most educated easterners preferred to explore the cognitive and spiritual dimensions of their identity rather than an all but nonexistent political dimension. Within this setting, the rabbis and Greek-speaking litterateurs presented themselves as masters of the classics, masters of the literary heritage that served as the source for cultural and spiritual self-expression. In particular, the rabbis focused on interpreting the law, conveying morals through artful literary media, and perpetuating the belief that the fulfillment of the law would hasten the arrival of the redemption, the endpoint of history. In this manner, rabbis, like sophists, offered their communities a positive self-image linked to a glorious past while simultaneously legitimating their own role as cultural authorities and masters of the classics. Thus, for both rabbis and sophists, historiography was for the most part irrelevant.

However, one apparently historical genre, the chain of transmission, appears in an early rabbinic composition entitled Tractate Avot. Avot 1:1 opens as fol-

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56. In light of Finley's analysis of the difference between myth and history (in "Myth, Memory, and History," 281-302), perhaps it is fair to say that the rabbis and sophists were interested in a mythical as opposed to a historical past. When the past was recounted through myths, it conveyed timeless verities and was a "great teacher in all matters of the spirit" (ibid., 284).
allows: “Moses received the Torah from Sinai and passed it on to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets passed it on to the Men of the Great Assembly.” After sketching in very broad strokes the chain of transmission of the Torah from Moses on Mt. Sinai until the early Second Temple period, Avot offers a more detailed presentation of the chain of sages who span the late Second Temple and tannaitic periods. This chain seems to be an exception to the ahistorical perspective otherwise pervasive in rabbinic literature, and it led Momigliano to conclude that “the only type of historical tradition in which the Jews really remained interested (apart from biblical events), was the relation of the various rabbis to their predecessors.”

The appearance of this genre in early rabbinic literature has puzzled scholars and inspired them to seek out the literary paradigm upon which this chain was modeled. Louis Finkelstein argued that the chain of transmission in Avot was modeled on a traditional genealogy of High Priests since a fourteen-generation schema was common to both lists. Avot, however, is actually quite unlike this supposed biblical precedent since the priestly genealogy records a familial lineage whereas Avot’s chain of transmission (excluding the House of Hillel) traces a non-familial succession. Moreover, Avot differs from all extant earlier Jewish texts, since no earlier text seeks to portray the past as a succession of teachers and disciples.

Recognizing that there is no Jewish literary precedent for the rabbinic chain of transmission, J. L. Crenshaw suggested that the chain of transmission was derived from the ancient Babylonian wisdom tradition. Crenshaw argued that one finds in Avot the Babylonian belief that God initially transmitted wisdom to primordial sages and that this wisdom was subsequently passed down by the ruling sages of each generation. After lying dormant throughout the entire history of Hebrew wisdom, this Babylonian motif, Crenshaw imagines, was finally actualized in Avot. Though Crenshaw’s desire to discover a non-Jewish origin for the chain of transmission is understandable, it is very hard to believe that a Babylonian wisdom tradition maintained an underground existence throughout the entire course of the Jewish wisdom tradition only to appear suddenly in Avot centuries later.

57. Momigliano, The Classical Foundations, 22. Since the chain of transmission does not relate to issues such as causality, motivation, and change over time, it is not, strictly speaking, a traditional work of history. However, since it purports to sketch the continuous history of the rabbinic movement, it may certainly be considered historiography of a lesser sort.

58. See L. Finkelstein, Introduction to the Treatises Abot and Abot of Rabbi Nathan (New York: Bet ha-Midrash le-Rabunim ba-Amerikah, 1950), 9-11 [Hebrew]. Since there is no complete priestly genealogy in the Bible, Finkelstein was forced to reconstruct this genealogy on the basis of various biblical texts. There is no textual evidence, however, that Finkelstein’s reconstructed genealogy ever existed. In addition, Finkelstein discusses similarities between Avot and the genealogy of Jesus related in Matthew 1:1-17, but it must be stressed that unlike this Christian genealogy, Avot is not a genealogy for the most part. (A good response to Finkelstein’s claims regarding the supposed importance of the fourteen stages in the rabbinic chain in light of Matthew’s 3 x 14 scheme may be found in M. D. Johnson, The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies with Special Reference to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus [Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1988], 205-207.)


G. F. Moore argued that the creation of a chain of transmission is inevitable “in all religions which profess to be wholly and solely based on a revelation, fixed and final, embodied in certain books,” but perhaps an investigation into the historical setting for *Avot* will reveal a less arbitrary and more historically plausible explanation for the genesis of the chain. For example, one might focus on the contemporary Christian context and suggest that the apostolic successions of early Christianity, which trace the unbroken succession of Christian leaders (or teachers) back to the apostles, served as the literary model for *Avot*. However, setting aside the possibility that the chain of transmission preserved in *Avot* might predate the apostolic succession, it seems unnecessary to posit a causal link between the rabbinic chain of transmission and Christian apostolic successions since the Hellenistic succession list was well known throughout Hellenistic and Roman antiquity. Elias Bickerman pointed out that *Avot*’s chain of transmission is a rabbinic adaptation of the scholastic succession list since, in proper succession list form, it opens with a legendary sage and then follows with the transmission of Torah through a list of successors. In a similar vein, Alan Brent demonstrated that the lists of Christian successors to the apostles were also modeled on the popular Hellenistic succession lists. Thus, rather than speculating about how one particular succession list (or one particular religious tradition’s succession discourse) may have served as the model for another, we should envision the wider role of Hellenistic succession lists as setting the stage for the creation of both rabbinic and Christian successions.

Moreover, the institutional and scholastic dimensions of the Hellenistic succession list noted above find natural counterparts in the rabbinic succession list. Just as the scholarchs of philosophical succession lists were the official leaders of their institutions, the members of the rabbinic chain of transmission were not simply famous personalities from the past but also leaders of the Jewish people (at least in rabbinic eyes). In respect to the scholastic dimension of the list, the rabbinic succession list portrays the history of an intellectual discipline just like its Greek counterparts. In addition, *Avot*’s presentation of the static transmission of an unchanging Torah is reminiscent of the classicizing understanding of successions in the Second Sophistic. Like Diogenes’ view of successive scholarchs, *Avot*’s succession list does not portray Moses’ successors as innovators but as transmitters who passed on the Torah that had initially been received in the distant, classical past. In short, the rabbinic succession list, like its non-Jewish counterparts, legitimated both the authority of rabbinic leaders and the traditions they propounded.

In light of the apparent lack of rabbinic interest in historiography and the paradoxical importance of the succession list, it bears noting that both of these features of early rabbinic Judaism extended well into the future as well. Throughout

the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, Jews essentially did not write their political, diplomatic, or military history. Without a state, national autonomy, or an army, there was no contemporary Jewish political, diplomatic, or military history to be written. Instead, Jews composed “traditional historiography” that included various types of literary genres such as chronicles of persecutions, but the rabbinic chain of transmission served as the most important genre for Jewish historiography up to the early modern period.65

In an article primarily concerned with the nature of Renaissance Jewish historiography,66 Robert Bonfil questioned why the rabbinic attitude to historiography common in the Middle Ages continued into the early modern period, whereas Christian historians reverted to new historiographical models. In attempting to explain this literary trend, Bonfil suggested that a comparison to fourth-century Christian historiographical practices might prove illuminating.

As Bonfil explains, medieval historiography, whether Christian or Jewish, was primarily interested in the internal history of a religious community. Christians wrote “ecclesiastical history,” which focused on the internal history of the church, and Jews composed “chains of tradition” which reconstructed the transmission of Torah from generation to generation.67 In contrast, classical pagan historiography had involved diplomatic, political, and military history and these ancient forms of historiography were revived only after the Middle Ages, in the Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. During the Renaissance, Christian historians turned to the historiographical paradigms offered by Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy, and Tacitus and accordingly wrote political and military histories. The Jews, however, “had long ceased to have kings and conduct wars” and therefore “as far as Jewish history was concerned, the humanistic historiographical model was irrelevant.”68 Faced with the resurgence of a form of historiography that was incompatible with the political situation of the Jews, the only viable option for Jewish historians during the Renaissance was to continue traditional medieval historiography:

In a sense, the situation became similar to that faced by fourth-century ecclesiastical historiography, as outlined by Arnaldo Momigliano in one of his finest essays. By making “Pagan historiography” the main concern of the historian, Renaissance historiography confronted the Jews with a problem similar to the one which was encountered centuries earlier by Eusebius and the early Church historiographers. In Momigliano’s view, Eusebius’s success lay in that his history did not attempt to reinterpret in Christian terms the existing pagan military, political and diplomatic history. Following in the footsteps of Jewish-Hellenistic historiography, he introduced a “new type of historical exposition,” characterized, inter alia, by the central position of doctrinal controversies and by the mar-


68. Bonfil, “How Golden was the Age,” 90.
ginality of military and political events, which at most might provide the setting for a providential apologetic history of the Christians. This kind of historiography was handed down through the Middle Ages, prolonging the divorce from political history. I would surmise that during the Middle Ages, such a divorce suited the Jewish perception of the axiologia worth recording for posterity. During this period, the Jewish writers of “Chains of Tradition”—type history could feel confident that their work was history as much as was “ecclesiastical history,” a genre whose legitimacy had been strongly affirmed by the followers of Eusebius and reinforced by the loose conception of history which prevailed at the time. This type of history filled the vacuum created by the total absence of contemporary Jewish political and military history.69

Thus, according to Bonfil, medieval Jewish authors of rabbinic chains of tradition could have felt confident that they were writing a proper form of history since their Christian contemporaries were writing history in a very similar manner. However, when Christian historians during the Renaissance turned to the classical models of historiography, Jewish historians were still forced to continue “traditional historiography” since the contemporary Jewish political setting did not provide the raw materials for a Thucydidean type of political and military history.

I would like to add a further dimension to Bonfil’s analysis by complementing his synchronic comparison of Christian ecclesiastical history and Jewish “chains of tradition” with a diachronic analysis. Searching beyond the medieval context, this diachronic approach focuses on the ancient setting from which the historiographical paradigm shared by Jewish and Christian historians of the Middle Ages emerged.

In creating the genre of ecclesiastical history, Eusebius synthesized various literary motifs and historiographical principles derived from earlier Jewish and Christian literature. As Momigliano has argued, Eusebius found the struggle-against-persecution motif in the books of the Maccabees, he derived the idea of a holy nation from both the Bible and Josephus’s writings, and he acquired the conception of an expanding Christianity from Acts. Eusebius also adopted from classical pagan sources, however, one historiographical model of considerable importance: “That was the history of philosophical schools—such as we find it in Diogenes Laertius. To begin with, the idea of ‘succession,’ διαδοχή, was equally important in philosophical schools and in Eusebius’ notion of Christianity. The bishops were the diadochoi of the Apostles, just as the scholarchai were the diadochoi of Plato, Zeno, and Epicurus.”70

The apostolic succession, which had already appeared in early Christian literature prior to Eusebius, traces the links between successive generations of Christian leaders or teachers back to the apostles. Although the creation of the apostolic succession on the model of the Hellenistic succession list certainly preceded Eusebius, the apostolic succession attained unprecedented importance in his history. It serves as the central structuring principle in Eusebius’s ecclesiastical history and underscores what he apparently considered to be the most promi-

69. Ibid., 89 (my italics).

nent and important aspect of his work, namely the continuity and divine preservation of the church.\textsuperscript{71}

In a striking similarity to the structural role of the apostolic succession in ecclesiastical history, 	extit{Avot}'s succession of rabbinic sages served as the central structuring principle in medieval Jewish chains of tradition. Since the apostolic succession and the rabbinic chain of transmission were both constructed on the model of the Hellenistic succession list, it turns out that Christian ecclesiastical histories and medieval Jewish chains of transmission owe their skeletal literary structure to the Hellenistic succession list. Thus a medieval Jewish author of a rabbinic chain of transmission may have felt comforted by the fact that contemporary ecclesiastical historians were involved in a similar project, as Bonfil contends, but I suggest that we should recognize how the skeletal structure of both rabbinic chains of transmission and ecclesiastical histories stem from the common literary culture of Greco-Roman antiquity and are not simply the products of entirely independent processes.\textsuperscript{72}

In light of the functions of the scholastic succession list portrayed above, it seems that medieval rabbinic chains of transmission and ecclesiastical histories not only employed a Hellenistic literary genre, but also adapted the institutional and scholastic dimensions of Hellenistic succession lists for their own purposes. Like Hellenistic succession lists, traditional rabbinic historiography and ecclesiastical histories legitimated an institutional authority and also traced the history of an intellectual discipline. Thus, just as early Christians could direct the apostolic succession against people they considered divisive schismatics or threatening heretics, the rabbinic chains of transmission could be used to bolster rabbinic authority and to undermine the claims of heretical groups such as the Karaites.\textsuperscript{73}

In short, I am suggesting here that even though historiography was not terribly important to the rabbis or to most Second Sophistic intellectuals, the succession list schematic, or the history of an intellectual discipline, was evaluated differently. Despite a lack of interest in classical historiography, demonstrating the continuous internal history of the rabbinic movement or a philosophical school was of interest for cultural, institutional, and doctrinal purposes.\textsuperscript{74} Furthermore, both Christians and rabbis initially absorbed this Hellenistic genre during the first few centuries of the common era when each group apparently viewed itself as a school, or school of thought, in the manner of Greek philosophical schools.


\textsuperscript{72} In other words, the similarity of form between Eusebius’s ecclesiastical history and rabbinic chains of tradition is the product of homologous, and not merely analogous, historiographical paradigms. (On the terms “homology” and “analogy” in the context of religious studies, see J. Z. Smith, \textit{Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity} [London: University of London, 1990], 47, n. 15.)

\textsuperscript{73} See Jacobs, “Historical Thinking in the Post-Talmudic Halakah,” 67-68.

\textsuperscript{74} In the rabbinic world, the members of the chains of transmission are presented as the true leaders of the rabbinic community, and the continuous nature of the chain was thought to guarantee an unbroken transmission of Torah lore. In addition, the order of the sages is significant for the judicial process since, according to one rabbinic principle, the law is determined according to the opinion of the most recent sage. See, for example, Gedaliah Ibn Yahya, \textit{Shalshelet ha-Kabbalah} (Venice: Be-vet Z. di Garah, 1586), 1-3.
Perhaps not unlike their Greek-speaking contemporaries, rabbis reacted to Roman domination by expressing their own cultural and religious identity, and in telling their own history they naturally employed the standard method for portraying the history of a school in classical antiquity. With time, both Christianity and rabbinic Judaism grew from these school origins into major world religions, yet medieval Christian and Jewish authors still echoed the Hellenistic successions genre whenever they wanted to portray their respective histories. In this manner, the Greek historiography of an intellectual discipline outlasted the ancient disciplines it initially traced by evolving into the underlying structure for the historiography of rabbinic Judaism and normative Christianity.

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