

16 *Places of worship: temple and synagogue*

In this chapter

Ancient Judaism assumed that the preferred manner of worship was sacrifice, especially of animals, in the Jerusalem Temple through the hereditary priesthood. Sacrifices took many forms and had diverse functions. The institution was terminated with the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, and Jewish thinkers in subsequent generations have held differing views regarding the relative value of sacrifice and verbal prayer.

Synagogues are first attested in the latter decades of the Second Temple era. The name means a “house of assembly” and they served diverse communal functions, especially for the reading and expounding of the Bible, as well as for public worship. It appears that women originally prayed together with the men, but sexual segregation was introduced in the medieval era and remains the norm in Orthodox synagogues. In congregational prayer, as formulated by the ancient rabbis, there is a distribution of roles between the individual congregants and a prayer leader. Previous generations cultivated the elaborate craft of *piyyut*, Hebrew liturgical poetry. In modern times, the roles of the synagogue and the rabbi have been adapted to make them approximate those of the Christian church and minister.

Main topics covered

- Biblical worship: temple and priesthood
- The origins of the synagogue
- Women in the synagogue
- Aspects of communal prayer
- *Piyyut*
- The synagogue in modern times
- The modern rabbi

Biblical worship: temple and priesthood

Although the destruction of the Temple brought an end to the biblical sacrificial cult, its fundamental importance to Judaism will be readily apparent to anyone who browses through the numerous passages about the priesthood, sanctuary and offerings that fill the pages of the Torah, Mishnah, Talmud, the prayer book, codes of Jewish law, and other central documents of the Jewish religion. In modern western culture, the notion of burning animals as an act of religious devotion appears peculiar, or even distasteful or immoral. In previous ages, however, the Hebrew sacrificial system was one of the least problematic areas of the religion to justify to outsiders, because similar rites were practiced by most religions in both western and oriental lands.

In a controversial discussion in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides suggested that God would have preferred to ordain verbal prayer in the Torah, but that the Hebrews of that generation, freshly liberated from slavery in Egypt, were not sophisticated enough for it; and God knew that they would not accept the monotheistic religion if it did not satisfy their inclination to offer sacrifices. Presumably, the original reason for offering sacrifices was to invoke the gods' good will by feeding them. Some remnants of this attitude survive in biblical idioms like "sweet savor before the Lord," but the prophets, as well as later Jewish authors, made it clear that such expressions were not to be understood literally, and that God has no need for human gifts.

Jewish tradition provides no agreed-upon rationale for the institution of sacrifices. The most common word for sacrifice is *qorban*, from a Hebrew root meaning "near," "close." A well-established Jewish tradition interprets the word in the sense of "bringing one closer to God." Often, the religious impact of sacrifices lay in the fact that the offerers were depriving themselves of the objects that they were devoting to God. With respect to those offerings that were intended to procure forgiveness, it is common to see them as a form of vicarious atonement, in that the animal is being substituted for the sinners who really should have forfeited their lives. The rabbinic tradition understood that the central act of the sacrificial procedures was the pouring out of the blood, because blood holds the soul of a living creature.

The sacrifices can be classified according to several different criteria, including:

1. *Purpose*: as a communal obligation attached to a fixed time or date; thanksgiving; cleansing or sin offering; guilt-offering; purification; fulfillment of a vow; and more.
2. *Material*: sheep or cattle, meal offering, wine or water libation, first fruits, and more.
3. *Mode of offering*: burnt offering (consumed entirely on the altar); portions assigned to the priests; may be eaten by donors.

The regulations are set out in meticulous detail in the Torah, and were expanded in subsequent works.

Sacrifices may be either communal or individual. The communal ones are offered by the priests on behalf of the entire nation. Of especial importance was the *Tamid*, the “continual offering” of a lamb that was burned on the altar every morning and evening. Because they were being offered on behalf of the entire people of Israel, Pharisaic tradition insisted that they be purchased from a special fund to which all the Jews of the world, whatever their economic circumstances, were required to contribute the identical amount annually.

During the eras when no sanctuary existed, sacrificial worship was not carried out, as is the case at present. We know that Jewish temples were erected in Egypt during the Second Temple era, by the military garrison on the island of Elephantine, and later by the priest Onias; however, these endeavors were not sanctioned by later Jewish tradition.

The most essential parts of the sacrificial service can only be performed by priests (Hebrew: *kohen*; plural: *kohanim*). In fact, entry into the inner precincts of the sanctuary, where the altars are located, was permitted only to male priests. The Jewish priesthood is a hereditary caste, consisting of those who trace their ancestry back to the very first high priest, Moses’s older brother Aaron. Now, in the absence of a Temple, the sanctity of the priesthood finds expression in a small number of ritual restrictions, obligations and prerogatives. For example, priests may not marry divorcées or converts to Judaism, or come into proximity of corpses; they recite the “priestly blessing” (Numbers 6:24–27) in the synagogue service and are the first to be called up to participate in the liturgical reading of the Torah. However, they have no special position of authority in the community.

In addition to the priests, descendants of the tribe of Levi were also set apart by the Torah to perform quasi-priestly functions, including participation in choirs that chanted psalms to accompany the worship in the sanctuary. Because Aaron and Moses were members of the tribe of Levi, the Aaronide priesthood is actually a subset of Levites. The priests and Levites were not assigned tribal territory in biblical times, and were therefore expected to occupy themselves in religious activities, whether in connection with the actual sacrificial cult or as judges and teachers. The Torah declared that the general Israelite populace is required to set aside portions of their property, especially of their food, for the upkeep of the priests and Levites. Thus, a *terumah* (usually translated as “heave-offering”) was designated from produce; a tithe (tenth) should be given to the Levites, out of which the Levites must separate a tenth for the priests. Additional priestly portions were to be taken from bread (*hallah*), meat, wool, and other commodities.

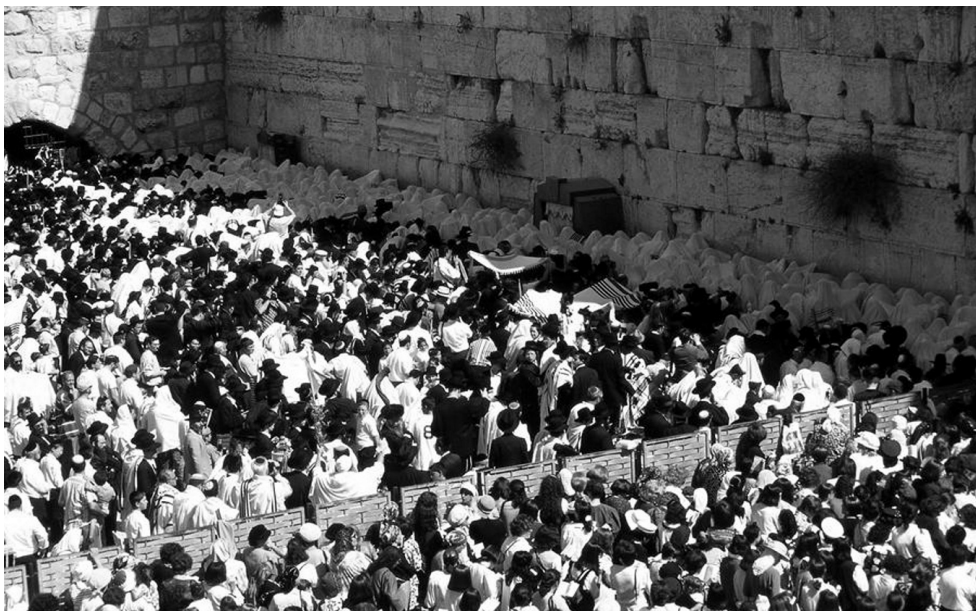


Figure 16.1 Blessing of *kohanim* at Western Wall

The origins of the synagogue

Since talmudic times, the synagogue has been the central and most recognizable religious institution in any Jewish community. The Greek word “synagogue” and its Hebrew and Aramaic equivalents (*beit keneset*, *be kenishta*) mean “house of assembly,” indicating that it served a range of communal functions. Archeological evidence from Egypt reveals the existence of sites designated *proseuche* (place of prayer). It is not clear whether prayer was one of the primary purposes of the Palestinian synagogues when they first made their appearance in ancient times. In talmudic times, communal worship was one of the chief activities to take place inside synagogues, though definitely not the only one.

The synagogues’ main functions in antiquity involved the public reading of the Bible—especially, the Torah—on Sabbaths and festivals, and with the preaching of sermons based on the designated biblical sections. The main text for scriptural reading in the synagogue was the Torah, whose five books were read sequentially over a given time-period. The most common cycle was probably three and a half year (that is, twice every seven years), though the custom prevalent in Babylonia, and which subsequently became almost universal in Jewish communities throughout the world, was to complete the reading in a single year. On Sabbaths and festivals, the reading from the Torah was followed by the reading of a passage with a related theme from the books of the Prophets (*Nevi'im*).

According to talmudic law, every adult male is required to participate in at least three prayer services each day: in the early morning, afternoon and night. The

morning service is a lengthier one, and on certain days includes the formal reading of the Torah. More elaborate services take place on the Sabbath (extending from Friday evening until Saturday night) and on the many annual festivals. While it is considered preferable to recite one's prayers as a member of the congregation in the synagogue, and certain portions of the service can only be recited in the presence of a community (defined by talmudic law as at least ten adult males), the obligation to pray is a personal one and applies even where the individual is not in a congregational setting.

The physical form of a synagogue is not defined in detail by Jewish religious law. Essentially all that was required was enough space to contain the congregation, the furniture to house the Bible scrolls that are read during the service, and a table or platform on which to read from the scrolls. Synagogues are usually designed to conform to the talmudic requirement that worshippers be facing in the direction of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

In theory, traditional synagogue worship was largely "democratic," in that all (adult male) worshippers had roughly the same rights and obligations to lead and participate in the prayers or scriptural readings. While biblical law assigned privileges to the Priests and Levites, these pedigrees were only of minor, ceremonial significance after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Nevertheless, the congregational setting also provided opportunities to underscore inequalities in learnedness, social status and other distinctions. The social hierarchies could make themselves felt when people were called to participate in the ritual reading from the Torah on Sabbaths or festivals, when the rich and powerful members of the community stood a better chance of being called up for the honor than the common folk. Competition over social recognition, and disgruntled complaints about having been slighted by the synagogue authorities, were a frequent source of friction. Some incidents led to deep-rooted feuds, and even to violence.

The Middle Ages introduced the eminently democratic institution of "interrupting the service." The right of mistreated parties to interrupt public worship in order to plead their cases is one that was respected in both European and Middle Eastern Jewish communities. There is reason to suspect that its beginnings can be traced to the land of Israel during talmudic times. In Islamic countries, the right to interrupt services seems to have been based on the legal assumption that the community as a whole, assembled in the synagogue, had the status of the supreme tribunal, in accordance with the biblical notion that "the people shall judge" (Numbers 35:24). Thus, to plead before the congregation was equivalent to addressing the highest court of appeal. A virtually identical procedure was entrenched in the customs of the German and French Jewish communities from the earliest days of their documented history.

Women in the synagogue

The archeological evidence from ancient synagogues provides no physical indications of separate rooms, galleries or other physical divisions that would have been set apart for women, nor are any such divisions mentioned in the abundant literary sources (aside from one unique situation that arose during certain annual festivities in the Jerusalem Temple). When we combine these facts with the testimony of several passages in rabbinic texts that seem to assume that women were present at the prayer services and sermons, the circumstantial evidence suggests that, prior to medieval times, men and women worshipped together in the synagogues. Thus, the separation of sexes in the synagogue appears to be a medieval development. In the Islamic world, this can be easily understood as an adaptation of the prevailing cultural attitudes, because women were generally excluded from the mosques, and only in a minority of instances were they assigned a separate section at the rear of the sanctuary. In Christian lands it is more difficult to account for the transition, since by the Middle Ages it had become normal for men and women to sit together in the churches. Likely, the Jewish convention emulates an earlier phase of Christian practice. It is at any rate consistent with a more general segregation of the sexes that extended to other aspects of social life as well. The separation was intended primarily to keep the worshipper from being distracted by sexual temptations. In Arab lands, the women's section of the synagogue usually took the form of a gallery, from which they



Figure 16.2 Devout women

could hear, though not necessarily observe, the service below. In many European communities, women conducted their own services in separate rooms, officiated by female prayer-leaders.

Aspects of communal prayer

The forms and texts of worship retained a large measure of uniformity throughout the scattered and distant Jewish communities. This was a consequence of the meticulous detail with which these matters were discussed in the Talmud, and of the authoritative “orders of prayer” that were issued by the leaders of the medieval Babylonian academies, the *geonim*. Communal prayers would be led by a prayer leader, the “representative of the congregation.” In theory, this function could be performed by any qualified person (that is, an adult male), though in reality the assignment of the duties was likely to involve issues of religious or social status. The pattern that evolved in European communities was that the congregants would read most of the texts quietly by themselves, and the prayer leader recited only the beginnings and ends of assigned passages, in order to maintain synchronization. Among Jews from Islamic lands, it is common for the congregants to chant most of the service in unison.

The talmudic liturgy was formulated on the assumption that the texts of the liturgy were part of the “oral Torah,” and hence could not be written down. Owing to the length and complexity of some of the prayers, it was acknowledged that not all Jews were capable of memorizing them, and hence the principal function of the prayer leader was to recite the prayers properly on behalf of the community, so that even the ignorant could fulfill their obligations. This was particularly conspicuous in the case of the *Amidah* (“Eighteen Benedictions”), the lengthy rabbinic prayer that formed the core of the liturgy. Following the talmudic norm, the *Amidah* would be recited quietly by the individual congregants, and afterwards repeated aloud by the prayer leader for the sake of those who were not capable of saying it by themselves.

By the Middle Ages the prohibition against writing oral Torah had been rescinded, and it was now possible to make use of written prayer books. Therefore, the prayer leader’s repetition of the Eighteen Benedictions became something of an anachronism, as well as a disruption to the synagogue decorum because people were unlikely to pay proper attention to it, and some were even inclined to use it as an opportunity to conduct private conversations. Some authorities, including Maimonides, were in favor of discontinuing the practice. However, the conservative character of Jewish custom made it impossible to accept such a radical departure from traditional practice.

Piyyut

The precise standardization of the prayers and customs was typical of the Babylonian rite. In ancient Palestine, on the other hand, the prevailing attitudes were more open to improvisation in worship. This phenomenon is most impressively apparent in the development of the genre of *piyyut* (Hebrew plural: *piyyutim*), Hebrew liturgical poetry.

The classical authors of *piyyut* were probably synagogue cantors. Many of their poems were composed as alternative versions of the standard prayers that were recited at the Sabbath and festival services, which were the most widely attended occasions of congregational worship. Many of the *piyyutim* were designed to be recited responsively with the congregation, or to the accompaniment of a choir. The literature of *piyyut* was immense in its volume and magnificent in its literary quality.

A full description of *piyyut* would be impossible within the boundaries of this book. We shall confine ourselves instead to a brief survey of the writings of one of the most important synagogue poets, Yannai. Yannai lived in the land of Israel, probably in the sixth or seventh century. He was the author of a cycle of poetic versions of the Sabbath and festival prayers, known as *kerovahs*. The *kerovah* follows an elaborate form, consisting of eight distinct sections. The *piyyut* uses many inventive poetic devices, including acrostics (making the first letters of the lines spell out the alphabet or the author's name) and rhymes. At specified points, it cites verses from the biblical sections that are read on that day. The *piyyut* is full of allusions to interpretations from the midrash, and presumes extensive familiarity with rabbinic literature. The most elaborate form of *kerovah* was known as the *kedushta*, designed to be recited at the Sabbath or festival morning service in conjunction with the seven-blessing *Amidah* prayer.

The linguistic texture of classical *piyyut* is unique. Generally it attempted to employ a purely Hebrew vocabulary, eliminating the numerous Greek and Aramaic loan words that were so common in rabbinic discourse. The authors utilize the Hebrew elements very creatively, often turning the three-letter roots that are the basis of most Hebrew words into two-letter words. The poets attached novel meanings to the words, based on unusual usages in the Bible. Certain fundamental religious concepts and biblical figures (such as: Torah, Abraham, Moses or Israel) are never mentioned by name in the poems, but are invariably alluded to by means of ingenious epithets. Each *piyyut* is specifically linked to the themes found in the assigned biblical readings for that day, while retaining the themes of the prayer or blessing in which it is embedded. Because the Palestinian rite divided the Torah into approximately 150 sections, to be read over three and a half years, it was an extraordinary challenge to compose a cycle of original *piyyut* that would cover all the Sabbaths as well as annual festivals. Yannai and other classical liturgical poets did precisely that, and with impressive success.

As the Babylonian liturgy became the dominant one throughout the medieval Jewish world, the profile of the *piyyut* in Jewish worship diminished considerably. The Babylonian cycle of reading the Torah was an annual one, and therefore the individual sections that were read each Sabbath were much longer, leaving less time for poetic elaborations. Furthermore, the Babylonian sensibilities were less amenable to replacing the standard prayers with poetic alternatives, or with allowing “interruptions” in the mandatory prayers. The *piyyutim* were now included as additions to the fixed prayer, not as replacements. Nevertheless, the genre of *piyyut* continued to thrive throughout the Middle Ages, and many of the era’s most prominent rabbis and scholars, including several who were better known as authorities in talmudic law, made distinguished contributions to the poetic legacy.

In the Enlightenment era, when reformers were looking for ways to shorten the Sabbath and festival synagogue services, the *piyyut* were among the most obvious candidates for deletion because their esoteric learned character was beyond the comprehension of Jews with limited Hebrew literacy and the grammatical underpinnings of the poems diverged considerably from the respectable models of classical biblical Hebrew. Apart from a few solemn holidays, especially Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the reduction or removal of *piyyut* from the services has become the norm even in Orthodox worship.

The synagogue in modern times

During the Jewish Enlightenment it was common for Jews to reinterpret their values and institutions along the lines of comparable Christian (especially Protestant) ones. A notable example of this pattern was the widespread identification of the synagogue as the central locus of Jewish religious activity, analogous to the role of the church for Christianity. For this reason, the synagogue and liturgy became the key targets for most calls for modernization of Judaism. In the earliest phase of Reform in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there were recurring demands for esthetic changes in the forms of worship, usually modeled after the conventions of the churches. Advocates of these reforms were concerned that the synagogue should not appear bizarre or crude according to the prevailing cultural standards. For this reason, they called for the enforcement of decorum during the services, in contrast to the relative informality that often characterized the traditional style of prayer. Instrumental (usually organ) music and choral singing were introduced, following the norms of European classical music. This raised halakhic problems, because the playing of musical instruments on the Sabbath and festivals was prohibited by traditional rabbinic law. Various means were sought to shorten the services, whose traditional versions extended to about three hours, with much of its content beyond the comprehension of the average worshippers. Items were deleted because they were deemed non-essential or obsolete.

Several reforms were introduced to the content of the liturgy on the grounds that the customary prayers expressed values that were inconsistent with modern sensibilities, or were likely to cause embarrassment from the perspective of their gentile neighbors. The reformers removed texts that expressed eschatological longings for the ingathering of the exiles to Jerusalem, the rebuilding of the land of Israel under the Davidic monarchy, and the re-establishment of the sacrificial cult in the restored Temple.

The need to accommodate congregants with limited mastery of Hebrew and traditional practice promoted several additional developments in the structures of synagogues and worships. For example, in traditional services, the person leading the services would face in the same direction of the other worshippers (towards Jerusalem), and the reading from scripture would take place on a platform (*bimah*) situated in the center of the sanctuary. In modern congregations, it is more common to delegate these duties to professionally trained cantors, and the *bimah* is often located at the front of the sanctuary, tacitly lending the experience the quality of a theatrical show in which the cantor is performing for an audience. In some synagogues, the cantor even faces towards the congregation during the prayers. While these practices are more likely to be encountered in non-Orthodox settings, they tend to overlap denominational divisions.

The modern rabbi

Although the functions of the rabbi in contemporary western Jewish communities have come to resemble those of Christian clergy, involving pastoral counseling, preaching, and performing rituals on behalf of the congregation, the rabbi's original role was as an expert in Jewish law (*halakhah*) and the chief judge of the community. In this sense, traditional rabbinic literature recognized, at least theoretically, that women could perform rabbinic functions, because at least one legal ruling is ascribed to a woman named Beruriah in an ancient rabbinic text.

The roles of modern rabbis were now extended to pastoral functions and to the preaching of theology and moral instruction. One area in which the modern rabbi maintains a closer resemblance to his or her ancient counterpart is in the role of a preacher. The weekly sermon, a literary oration in which the rabbi would creatively link the words of the Bible to the concerns of the community, was a crucial part of the Sabbath or holiday synagogue service in ancient times, and forms the basis for much of midrashic literature. In medieval Germany and eastern Europe, the practice fell into decline, and in many localities the community's rabbi was only expected to deliver two sermons during the year: on the Sabbath prior to Passover he would speak about the intricate laws related to the approaching holiday, especially those involving food preparation and the elimination of leaven from the house; and on the Sabbath between the Rosh Hashanah and the Day of Atonement, at the height of

the Jewish penitential season, the rabbi would deliver a discourse on the theme of repentance. The deficiency from the side of the community rabbis was often filled by itinerant preachers who traveled from town to town to deliver their homilies. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when advocates of religious reform demanded the reintroduction of weekly sermons on non-halakhic themes, they were accused of proposing unheard-of innovations. However, the weekly sermon continued to occupy a central role in the synagogue services in southern Europe and in Sephardic communities throughout the Middle Ages. Many examples of the genre were recorded by their authors or students, and sermons lie at the root of several well-known works of moralistic and exegetical literature.

Key points you need to know

- In biblical Israel, worship was usually equated with the offering of sacrifices on the altar of the sanctuary. A priestly caste was charged with administering this cult.
- The synagogue emerged during the late Second Commonwealth as the setting for communal activities like reading and teaching the Torah. Eventually its main role was associated with congregational prayer.
- Distinctive and highly structured formats were developed to accommodate the individual, collective and esthetic aspects of synagogue prayer. The genre of *piyyut* once enjoyed great popularity. The venerable art of preaching fell into neglect in several medieval communities, but was revived in the modern era.
- Largely under Christian influence, modern Jewish communities assigned increased importance to the synagogue as a setting for Jewish religious life. The rabbi, once defined by his authority as an expert in Jewish religious law, took on pastoral or ritual roles resembling those of Christian ministers.

Discussion questions

1. Compare the roles of priests and rabbis in traditional and modern Jewish communities.
2. Discuss some of the features that would be common to a well crafted *piyyut* and a scripture-based sermon.
3. Note some features that were introduced to Jewish practice before the oral Torah was put into writing.
4. To what extent might the distribution of roles in the synagogue reflect views about the fundamental natures of men and women?

Further reading

Synagogue and community

- Baron, Salo Wittmayer, *The Jewish Community: Its History and Structure to the American Revolution*, Morris Loeb Series. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1942.
- Finkelstein, Louis, *Jewish Self-Government in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed., Abraham Berliner Series. New York: Feldheim, 1964.

Liturgy and liturgical poetry

- Elbogen, Ismar, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, 1st English ed. Philadelphia, PA and New York: Jewish Publication Society and Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1993.
- Heinemann, Joseph and Jakob Josef Petuchowski, *Literature of the Synagogue*, Library of Jewish Studies. New York: Behrman House, 1975.
- Hoffman, Lawrence A., *The Canonization of the Synagogue Service*, Studies in Judaism and Christianity in Antiquity. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979.
- Idelsohn, A.Z., *Jewish Liturgy and Its Development*. New York: Schocken Books, 1967.
- Petuchowski, Jakob Josef, *Theology and Poetry: Studies in the Medieval Piyyut*, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization. London and Boston, MA: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.
- Posner, Raphael, Uri Kaploun and Shalom Cohen, *Jewish Liturgy: Prayer and Synagogue Service through the Ages*. Jerusalem: Keter, 1975.

Preaching

- Bettan, Israel, *Studies in Jewish Preaching: Middle Ages*, Brown Classics in Judaica. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987.
- Saperstein, Marc, *Jewish Preaching, 1200–1800: An Anthology*, Yale Judaica Series. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989.
- “*Your Voice Like a Ram’s Horn*”: *Themes and Texts in Traditional Jewish Preaching*, Monographs of the Hebrew Union College. Cincinnati, OH and West Orange, NJ: Behrman House for Hebrew Union College Press, 1996.