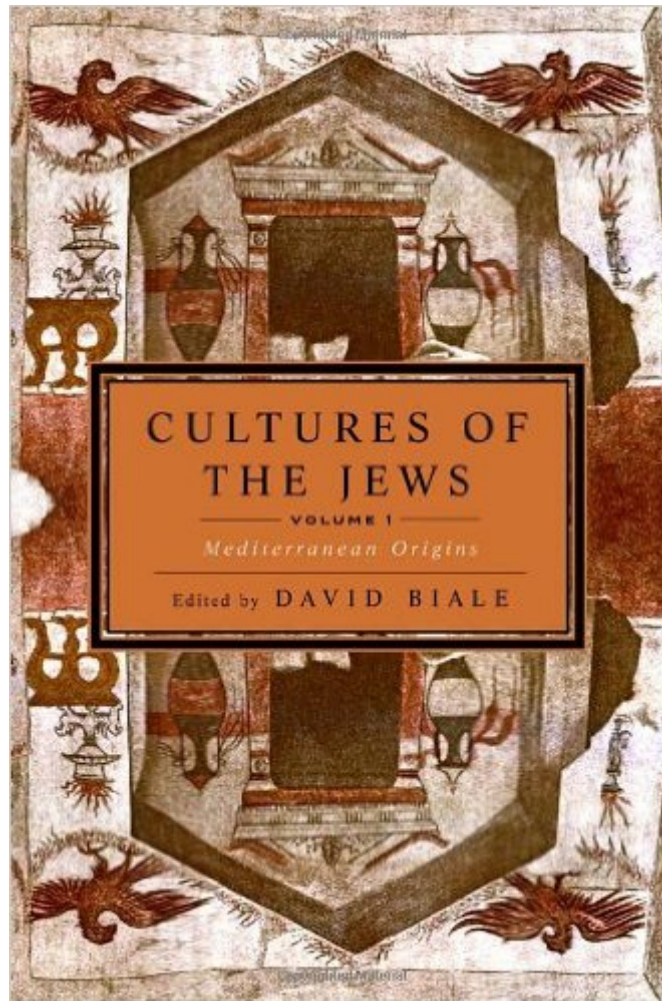


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Cultures Of The Jews, Volume 1: Mediterranean Origins



Synopsis

Scattered over much of the world throughout most of their history, are the Jews one people or many? How do they resemble and how do they differ from Jews in other places and times? What have their relationships been to the cultures of their neighbors? To address these and similar questions, some of the finest scholars of our day have contributed their insights to *Cultures of the Jews*, a winner of the National Jewish Book Award upon its hardcover publication in 2002. Constructing their essays around specific cultural artifacts that were created in the period and locale under study, the contributors describe the cultural interactions among different Jews—“from rabbis and scholars to non-elite groups, including women”—as well as between Jews and the surrounding non-Jewish world. What they conclude is that although Jews have always had their own autonomous traditions, Jewish identity cannot be considered the fixed product of either ancient ethnic or religious origins. Rather, it has shifted and assumed new forms in response to the cultural environment in which the Jews have lived. *Mediterranean Origins*, the first volume in *Cultures of the Jews*, describes the concept of the “People” or “Nation” of Israel that emerges in the Hebrew Bible and the culture of the Israelites in relation to that of neighboring Canaanite groups. It also discusses Jewish cultures in Babylonia, in Palestine during the Greco-Roman and Byzantine periods, and in Arabia during the formative years of Islam.

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Customer Reviews

The editor David Biale explains in the preface that the cultural histories of the Jews are marked by a pattern of assimilation and adaptation to their surrounding cultures. Not remarkable, since this

happens with any people group, but more than others the Jews have always insisted upon their distinctiveness. This distinctiveness can only be realized, however, within the context of their cultural assimilation to the majority culture wherever they are found. It's somewhere in this dynamic that aids in setting a culture of Jews apart. After reading the preface and introduction to this work explaining the project of the book along these lines, I was eager to continue only to be disappointed in the first chapter by Ilana Pardes, entitled 'Imagining the Birth of Ancient Israel: National Metaphors in the Bible'. Far from anything to do with Jewish cultural history, this essay comprised a wholly narrative-critical reading of the biblical account of Israel's origins, which the author presupposes were indeed imagined. While narrative criticism is indeed important, the author was heavy on quasi-poetical language in her description of the stories in Genesis and Exodus, reading metaphors that probably, it seemed to me, weren't intended by the authors, e.g., reading the crossing of the Red Sea as an 'initiation rite' or as a 'rebirth'. The essay was illuminating, however, as Pardes (I think aptly) sees the story of Israel in these early books as constituting somewhat of a 'national biography'. Collective Israel seems to be indeed portrayed as a character in the biblical narrative. Its biography parallels that of individual characters in the course of the story, such as Abraham and Moses. Pardes also illuminates the stories in light of comparative ancient mythological literature.

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