

Cynthia M. Baker, *Jew*, (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2017), pp. xiii-190

by Michael L. Satlow

I recently tried an experiment with my undergraduate class. “I know,” I told them, “that many of you would identify yourselves as Christian. What if, when I called on you, instead of using your name, I simply said, ‘Christian?’” The students looked slightly bemused. They agreed that it would feel a little odd but not offensive, and a few even ventured to say that they might vaguely like it. “Okay,” I continued, “I know that many of you would identify yourself as Jewish. What if, when I called on you, instead of using your name, I simply said, ‘Jew?’” The students were not at all bemused and shifted uncomfortably in their chairs. This they would not like at all, whether they were Jewish or not.

Why did my students act that way? In *Jew*, Cynthia Baker sets out to answer that question. My students had their own answer: there are negative historical resonances to being called a Jew. Yet further discussion again landed us in confusion: the same person who would take offense at being addressed as “Jew” might have no hesitation in another context declaring, “I am a Jew.” What is it about this term that makes it so loaded? Is it really that different from other such “slurs”? Baker does not exactly answer these questions but she lays a strong and important foundation for contemplating them.

There is a simple and powerful idea at the core of Baker’s argument. For some two millennia, the way in which we – whether Jewish or not – use and understand the word *Jew* (which Baker almost always writes in italics in order that it remain “provocative” (p. xiii)) those words in other languages that Baker identifies as its cognates (e.g., *Jude*, *juif*, *guidéo*, *Zsidó*, *yid*, *yehudi*) has been and continues to be overwhelmingly shaped by Christians discourse. While prior to the first century CE the Hebrew term *yehudi* and Greek term *ioudaios* were used rarely and with an ambiguous meaning, from Paul forward Christian writers would use the term *Jew* – not Israel or Hebrews – as a signifier for the Other, often with evil or demonic overtones. As Baker writes,

The Jews, in other words, serves instrumentally to name the key *other* out of which *and* over against which the Christian *self* was and is constituted. *Jew* is

Christian cultures' signifier for the fraught, debased, material primordially *out of which* spiritual and moral stature most *arise, from which* it may *free itself*, and *back to which* it is always in danger of *falling*... Hence, *Jew(s)* becomes a key element in formulations of Christian identity through narratives of origin, aspiration, and liberation, as well as of abjection, rejection, and otherness (p. 4).

There are two elements of this formulation that Baker seizes on and around which she structures her book. First, that *Jew* has been and continues to be regularly understood as one end of a binary. In its origins, the other end of that binary was *Christian*. Over time, particularly with the emergence of the Enlightenment and idea of the secular, *Christian* was sometimes replaced with another term or figure but the important, binary characteristic of *Jew* remains. Even as an ethnic or racial term, then, it is never like "Italian" or "French" (but does more structurally resemble the use of "Black" in some contexts). The second important element is that this binary is never value-neutral; it is always invidious. In most cases, *Jew* the negative operator, the signifier of what is missing or actively bad. Even in the few cases where the values switch, though, the same logic is at work, reacting *against* the traditional value.

Baker's book is short and she makes no claim to comprehensively explore the use of the word of the word *Jew* and its cognates through all languages and time. Her examples are meant to be illustrative, and none better illustrate the sometimes maddening complexity of *Jew*, especially in scholarly discourse, than her discussion of the present scholarly state of the question of the very origin of the term.

The Hebrew term *yehudi* appears rarely in the Hebrew Bible, all in sources that seem to date from the Persian period or later. Instead, the protagonists (or antagonists, depending on the story and one's perspective) of the Hebrew Bible are predominantly known as "the Children of Israel" or, less frequently, "Hebrews." Outside of the Bible there are a few attestations of the Aramaic cognate, mostly in legal documents. Beginning in the third to second century the term appears in Greek as *ioudaios*. The term and its Latin cognate *iudaeus* are rarely attested through the first century BCE but begin to circulate more widely beginning in the first century CE. Apart from proto-Christian uses of

the term, this seems at least in part due to increasing Roman awareness of *iudaei* both in Rome and Judaea.

The problem is how to translate these terms. Over the past two decades or so scholars have debated, sometimes hotly, over whether the term is best translated as “Judaean” or “Jew.” Morton Smith argues that in texts produced prior to the Persian period the term is best translated as “Judean,” denoting ethnicity and territorial origin, only afterwards gaining a religious nuance that might best be translated as “Jew.” Both Shaye Cohen and Steve Mason argue for similar shifts, although Cohen would place it in the second century BCE and Mason far later, in Late Antiquity (pp. 20-21).

For Baker, what is most significant about this debate is not the actual dating, or even the matter of translation itself, but the very *terms of the debate*. Here is the dichotomy: ethnicity or religion – pick one or the other.¹ Smith, Cohen, and Mason are not explicit about the stakes of this choice, and if asked I suspect that they would say that they were primarily focused on recapturing the ancient resonance of the term and, secondarily, on trying to identify the origin of a religion of the *ioudaioi* as distinct from ethnic origin. Baker, though, points out that the terms of the debate have their own distinct resonance across an invidious binary. Religion is universal and spiritual; ethnicity is particularist and fleshly. There is, Baker, suggests, no way for these scholars to escape the binary which is woven into the very choices that English provides.

The modern political ramifications of this argument are clearer when seen in the context of scholarly debates about the Gospel of John. The term *ioudaioi* appears frequently in the Gospel and almost always in a negative context. In older Bibles the term used to be translated rather unproblematically as “Jew.” In light of the shift in the Catholic Church’s stance toward the Jews and subsequent scholarship (most notably by Raymond Brown) the accepted translation began to shift to “Judaean.” There was something clearly at stake in this shift. The evil Judaean, who played a role in crucifying Jesus, are to be blamed. They are not, however, to be associated with contemporary Jews.

¹ The actual scholarly debate is a bit more nuanced than suggested by Baker. She does not mention my own essay in which I sought to escape this dichotomy: See Michael L. Satlow, “Jew or Judaean?,” in *One Who Sows Beautifully: Essays in Honor of Stanley K. Stowers*, eds Saul M. Olyan and Daniel Ullucci, (Atlanta: Brown Judaic Studies, 2013), 165-74.

The well-meaning attempt to re-term John's *ioudaioi* as "Judeans" and thus reduce the Gospel's possible anti-Semitic use met a predictable backlash that reinforces but also complicates Baker's paradigm. In 2014, Adele Reinhartz, a Jewish scholar of the Gospel of John wrote an essay for *Marginalia* that attracted wide attention.² "To be sure," she writes, "translating *ioudaioi* as Jews risks perpetuating the rhetorical hostility of the Gospel itself. But to use Judean instead of Jew whitewashes the Gospel of John and relieves us of the difficult but necessary task of grappling with this gospel in a meaningful way." The dichotomy is in the same general neighborhood as the one discussed by Smith, Cohen, and Mason but the valuation is explicit. For those scholars arguing about the Gospel of John, "Judean" and "Jew" are both negative terms; what is at stake is whether to draw an explicit link between these evil *ioudaioi* and contemporary Jews. Seen in this light, the general debate about how to translate *ioudaioi* can also be seen to be, at least on some unarticulated level, as one about historical continuity. How far back do the "Jews" go? To the biblical period? Hellenistic times? Or did they emerge in Late Antiquity together with Christians?³ Each one of these options has different stakes to different stakeholders.

For Paul, the new age of Christ brought the existing social order crashing down. There is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, man or woman, because all are one in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:28). In place of an existing world that divided people into ethnic groupings, of which *ioudaios* is the primary example ("Gentile" is not really an ethnic designator), all people will live as one. It is a starkly universal vision.

Yet ironically, here and elsewhere (especially Romans) Paul creates and reifies the very dichotomy that he claims has dissolved. *Jew* is deracinated in this discourse and its afterlife; it becomes a signifier for the particularist Other. While it remains to me unclear how this discourse plays out in the Middle

² Adele Reinhartz, "The Vanishing Jews of Antiquity," *Marginalia: LA Review of Books* June 24 (2014), <http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/vanishing-jews-antiquity-adele-reinhartz/>. *Marginalia*, incidentally, also ran a forum on Baker's book. See: <https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/introduction-forum-on-cynthia-baker-jew/>.

³ See especially Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (eds.), *The Ways that Never Parted*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

Ages (Baker gives little attention to this period) it comes out with a vengeance among modern thinkers, particularly in continental Europe.

Baker focuses particularly on three French writers, Alain Finkielkraut, Alain Baidou, and Jacques Derrida to illustrate the discursive connection between *Jew* and the particular. Each of these writers, in their own way, constructs *Jew* as archetypes and thus enables each to distinguish between “real” Jews (who fit the archetype) and those who don’t. For Finkielkraut, *Jew* “is an identity so fully identified and suffused with ‘Auschwitz’ that it should no longer be available outside that event, not even to those whose psyches are so intimately shaped by its aftermath” (p. 81). Jews are no longer *Jews*, only those who take on that lost identity. Badiou, on the other hand, joyously explodes *Jew*, seeing it as “‘a universalist and egalitarian’ signifier *over against* ‘the Shoah, the State of Israel and the Talmudic Tradition’” (p. 82). It is difficult to know what to make of this claim since his book *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (1997) Badiou develops the dichotomy between Paul’s universalist vision over against Jewish tribalism and exclusivity with such force that it seems almost shockingly medieval. Derrida meditates on the tension between really being a Jew – or maybe better, being a real Jew – and having the identity of a Jew. Of all tensions, this is almost unique in being irresolvable.

This discursive use of *Jew* as typological, pointing to tribalism, and the tension between this use and its use to denote identity seems particularly French, and is echoed in a recent interview with Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a leader in the student revolts of 1968 in France, published in the *New York Book Review*. Asked about his relationship to Judaism, Cohn-Bendit responded:

I have no religious feelings whatsoever... I do feel that I’m rooted in Judaism, but in a cultural, not a religious sense. At the center of it all is my parents’ story of escape: as German Jews and political refugees they had to hide from the Nazis and their collaborators. That’s something I can’t shake off. For a long time I tried, by identifying as a Jew merely in Satre’s sense: it’s the anti-Semite that “makes” the Jew; once anti-Semitism has been overcome, I cease to be a Jew. But no, it’s been a part of my identity since before I was even born... I can be a Jew in Paris, in Frankfurt, in London, in Montreal [but not in Israel]... To put it crassly, to me, Israel represents the end of Judaism. It’s a nation-

state and its inhabitants are Israelis, not Jews. Which is their right, of course.⁴

To be a Jew (or an Israeli), for Cohn-Bendit, requires reflection in a way that being “French” or “American” rarely does. It requires negotiating notions of peoplehood, religion, history, and nationalism. It is enough to make one tired just trying to sort out.

Another manifestation of this tension is the discourse of the “New Jew” in Europe, that is, the discourse that applies *Jew* to persecuted minorities (pp. 110-125). Baker argues that *Jew* has become an icon that stands at the center of a new Europe, constructed out of the ashes of World War II and the Holocaust. New Europe values democracy and inclusivity and abhors differential treatment of minorities; Muslims, for example, become the “new Jews” of Europe. As Baker says,

In this sense, *Jew(s)* belongs to Europe as part of the European Union’s very *raison d’être*, its narrative of origins, its recollection of conscience, its confession of sin, and its promise of redemption.... A major part of what *Jew/new Jew* has come to represent in the New Europe of the European Union, then, is a promised dismantling of the ethnic nation-state model that institutionalizes the privileging and disprivileging of citizens and residents according to race/ethnicity/religion (the opposite of what *Jew* represents in Israel).... The stakes that Europe’s *Jews/new Jews* have in the European Union’s promise are those shared, in theory, by all Europeans (p. 117).

We again see here the deracinated, typological use of *Jew*. Baker proposes that such “new Jews” be seen as standing alongside those who see themselves as historically connected to the people of Israel (p. 117). The latter, however, might watch with concern from the sidelines as their identity is erased. It is, in fact, hard for me to imagine any modern group that bases its identity on ethnic, racial, or gender features not objecting to such an erasure.

⁴ Claus Leggewie and Daniel Cohn-Bendit, “1968: Power to the Imagination,” *New York Review of Books* 65/8, May 10 (2018), 6.

Jews themselves sometimes themselves accepted versions of this binary that linked Jews to particularism. In a forthcoming book (based on a previously published paper) Adi Ophir and Ishay Rosen-Zvi argue that the rabbis, drawing on Paul, invent the concept and category of the *Goy*, which pretty much accepts the Pauline dichotomy wholesale. The world now is understood as divided between Israel (who become for the rabbis the *us*) and everybody else. *Goy* becomes the antithesis to Israel, which in many contexts from antiquity to the present is conflated with *Jew*. The *Goy* is a type of the “universal,” in a sense, but one that is usually marked negatively.⁵ Although Baker does not discuss this, the fact that there is a “Pauline” dichotomy (whether Paul really did invent it and whether the rabbis took it from Paul) at the heart of rabbinic Judaism puts Jews and Christians on the same discursive page for centuries. They both, then, agree that the world is divided (at least roughly) into Jews and Gentiles. They disagree about which one is better.

Baker’s discussions of how Jews have adopted this rhetoric for themselves are episodic and illustrative. These Jewish responses can be plotted along a spectrum from full-throated adaptation to complete transvaluation. Zionism stands as perhaps her most interesting and prominent example of Jews almost embracing the dichotomy (pp.99-104). Zionism’s roots are in both the growing wave of state-nationalism and the racialism inherent in the concept of the *Volk*. If Jews are a distinct race (whether better or worse than other races), then they are, by the criteria of the times, a People. It is here, famously, that anti-Semites and Zionists found common ground. For both, *Jew* became a racial category that can be quantified. Max Nordau thus argued for a new, “muscular” Jew connected to reestablishment of Jews in their land. “Zionism’s new *Jew*,” Baker writes, “is an insurgent, ‘regenerate’ species that would be developed to supersede the ‘degeneration’ caused by millennia of ‘exile’ from a homeland that, as well, needed to be newly reconstituted and regenerated to the standard of its ancient biblical kingdoms.” (p. 102). The *Jew* has become pathologized, albeit for what was understood to be a positive cause.

⁵ Adi Ophir and Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *Goy: Israel’s Others and the Birth of the Gentile*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). They have a few articles already in press on this topic; see Ishay Rosen-Zvi and Adi Ophir, “Paul and the Invention of the Gentiles,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 105 (2015): 1-41.

Baker discusses two other contexts in which the *Jew* is pathologized. One, keying off a book by Sandor Gilman, is the Jewish body.⁶ Gilman investigates the discourse around the body of Jews. In European discourse in particular, the body of the Jew was the object of some fascination. It was marked as different and usually abnormal. In Mitchell Hart's reading of Gilman's book, modern American Jews continue to exercise a fascination with the Jewish body but it is now (as in some Zionist circles) a place of health.⁷ Baker's primary interest in this debate is the way in which scholars discuss the *Jew* today (discussed below), but it is certainly part of the same complex of discursive self-appropriation. The *Jew* is objectified as an object of study by those who don't identify as Jews and soon Jews begin to discuss themselves in precisely the same terms, even if they do not always come to the same conclusions.

The second context in which Baker places the pathologized *Jew* is genomics (104-110, 142-148). There has been an explosion of work on population genetics. Within this work, "Jew" – particularly Ashkenazi Jew – has emerged as a distinct population. While most scientists with whom I have informally talked (including Harry Ostrer and Gil Atzmon, who come under particular critique)⁸ believe that the science of population genetics is entirely solid, Baker is suspicious. "Genome biology," she writes, "has been harnessed to creating and sustaining a Jewish genetic-identity discourse..."(p. 105). Elsewhere, however, Baker seems to retreat: "my interest has been in briefly examining some of the ways in which this new *Jew*, this genomic *Jew*, is being constituted both through the measuring, compiling, and comparing of genetic data and through the framing and narrating of the findings thus derived" (p. 109). I am not sure if Baker fully knows what to do with the science of population genetics, but in truth I am not sure if any of us do. It seems to me that while some on the margins have used it to make ideological claims (whether that Jews don't really exist, as in Shlomo Sand's deeply flawed book,⁹ or that Jews remain relatively "pure"), it has not had an impact on religious law (or the

⁶ Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, (New York: Routledge, 1991)

⁷ Baker, *Jew*, 71-74. See Mitchell B. Hart, *The Healthy Jew: The Symbiosis of Judaism and Modern Medicine*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁸ Harry Ostrer, *Legacy: A Genetic History of the Jewish People*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Gil Atzmon et al., "Abraham's Children in the Genome Era: Major Jewish Diaspora Populations comprise Distinct Genetic Clusters with Shared Middle Eastern Ancestry," *American Journal of Human Genetics* 86 (June 2010): 850-9.

⁹ Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, (New York: Verso, 2009).

Israeli Law of Return) and remains something of a novelty item in general discourse: look how Jewish I am, my friends announce on Facebook, giving the number from the results of their mail-order genetic analysis. They mean nothing by it except for a laugh.

If the Max Nordau is at one end of a spectrum in which Jews embrace the very invidious distinctions that pathologize them, then the use of *yid* in Yiddish is at the other. Her discussion of how Jews used the term *yid* is a refreshing break from an almost exclusive focus on the discourse of a rarefied group of academics (pp. 52-65). *Vos Macht a Yid* is the name of this section, a colloquial term that literally means, “What’s a Jew doing?” (but which we might translate as “what’s up?”). The use of the term *yid* is best understood within the context of an “internal bilingualism.” Whereas Hebrew and Aramaic were the languages of prayer and study, Yiddish marked the secular. There was, however, a gendered catch. Yiddish, the language, is gendered as feminine (as opposed to Hebrew, which was gendered as masculine) but the term *yid*, used as a formal address of one Jew to another, is strictly masculine. So while internally women do not have an identity within the term *yid*, externally even the male speakers of Yiddish are gendered as feminine. The internal/external dichotomy, here and elsewhere, destabilizes the usual dichotomies: “But *yid*, a name for a richly imagined self in an explicitly Jewish (Yiddish) linguistic culture, has never granted its owners (even the Zionists among them) the illusion of autonomy, never provided them a pretense of free self-determination, never pretended to name an ideal – universal or particular – as so many other names for self in other linguistic cultures have purported to do” (p. 63).

Baker is especially interested in how scholars of Jewish studies and Yiddish *create* knowledge about the *Jew* (pp. 65-77). Baker suggests that when Jewish scholars of Jewish studies write about the *Jew*, they are on some level engaged in an act of self-formation. Baker writes:

Scholarship on *the Jew*, as a kind of “cottage industry” within Jewish studies, has served not only as a locus for exploring all of the important subjects and dynamics enumerated in the titles of the books and articles produced under this rubric, but also as a workshop for constructing, deconstructing, examining, and critiquing ideas about *Jew* as self. This

workshop provides space and critical tools by which (primarily) Jewish-identified scholars come to build for themselves (and, perhaps, for others) a “native” discourse about *Jew(s)*. Undoubtedly there is a certain pleasure and satisfaction, as well as a moral and broadly therapeutic dimension, to shaping meaningful discourse around a name whose contours and content have long been set by those who have wielded the name as a weapon (p. 77).

Whether or not this is widely true for the individual scholars she discusses, she does point toward the complicated relationship in that exists in all ethnic studies programs between disinterested academic study and engagement that can easily shade over into advocacy. Aaron Hughes has recently warned about this tendency in Jewish studies but it is by no means limited to it: my own university just began a Native American and Indigenous Studies initiative that privileges partnerships with the Native American communities that it is devoted to studying.¹⁰

So is there any way out of this fundamentally Pauline discourse? Baker seems to think so. At the end she edges toward sympathy for post-modernist, post-denominational, and post-Zionist visions of the Jewish future (pp. 126-48). Here she traces a trend among some writers not only to describe the changing understanding of the *Jew* in the contemporary world – particularly in the United States – but also to promote it. The thrust of this discussion is to break down a notion of Jewish particularity: Jews look like – indeed should look like – “the peoples of all the lands, nations, and families of the earth” (p. 148).

This discourse, of course, makes sense in modern day America. America is the land of mixed identities, choice, and tolerance. It is a place that rejects (at least among many of its intelligentsia) tribalism and territorialism. Yet there is an irony in the construction of this “New *Jew*.” It is at once a product of its time and place while remaining *particular*. The “New *Jew*” does not seem to index a “religion,” like a Christian; an “ethnicity,” like an Italian; or a “race” or

¹⁰ Aaron W. Hughes, *The Study of Judaism: Authenticity, Identity, Scholarship*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), and see my review on H-Judaic: <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28655/reviews/31103/satlow-hughes-study-judaism-authenticity-identity-scholarship>

genomic population, like an “Asian.” We are back to the beginning, with *Jew* remaining *sui generis*.

Baker begins her book with an anecdote about an Israeli student who adamantly rejected identity of *Jew* because, he thought, it was demeaning. (It might be relevant that since 2005 Israeli identity cards have not included a field for “ethnicity,” which further marginalized the term “Jew” in Israeli discourse.) When it comes to *Jew* there can be no end of anecdotes and I end with one of my own.

I recently filled out the U.S. Census test form. I got to a field asking for “origin,” with examples like “Italy” and “Ireland” and was stymied. My family came to the U.S. in the great wave of emigration from the Pale of Settlement. Yet whatever kingdom controlled this area during the time that my ancestors lived there, they were always Jews and *Jews*, defined both internally and externally and marked as Other. Sometimes when asked the question of my origins, I will reply Russian, simply because in context it’s easier. But I know it is not true and this time on the census test I put “Jew.” When telling this story to a friend she told me she opted for the “genomic Jew” designator and put down “Ashkenazic Jew.”

When I called myself a Jew I did not think that I was making a claim of Otherness, whether good or bad. Nor did I think I was mapping myself on a continuum that was any different than my Portuguese neighbors. To be a Jew in this world – in the non-academic world – can be little different than “being” Italian or Portuguese. Yet, probably unlike my neighbors I hesitated before filling in this field, recalling memories of having the word *Jew* spit at me when I was growing up. I suspect that those who call themselves Jews are not unique in juggling these issues and the internal tensions that they cause. As long as we categorize people by “ethnicity,” “religion,” “sex/gender,” and “race” we will always have interstices into which *Jew*, among other terms, fall. The real take-away from Baker’s fine book is that these categories, not *Jew*, may well be the problem.

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