

Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society?

Reciprocity and Solidarity in Ancient Judaism

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Reciprocity and Solidarity

Can a Social History of the Ancient Jews Be Written?

How should we picture an average Jewish man in antiquity?¹ What sort of person was he? How did he express feelings of love, affection, anger, jealousy, pity, and fear? What was his life like? To whom did he feel connected, why, and how? How did he stand when he talked to you, and what language or languages could he talk to you in? Could he read, and if he could, did he bother? Was he free in using his fists, or was he proud of his restraint? Given that he was in all likelihood a small farmer, perhaps on land owned by someone else, did he regard the landlord—or his wealthy neighbor—with fear, react to him with deference, with cheerful bonhomie or chutzpah, with veiled hatred and resentment? Should we imagine him—to set out two extreme stereotypes, neither meant to be taken absolutely literally—as the kind of southern Italian or Greek villager that modern ethnographers, among others, have acquainted us with, shrewd, irascible, zealous for his honor, concerned about his family above all, hostile to or suspicious of authority, prone to think the worst of outsiders and to act on such thoughts—in sum, as a “typical Mediterranean”?² Or should

¹I say “man” intentionally, not to foreshadow any neglect of issues of gender in the book that follows but to make the questions posed in this introductory chapter even remotely answerable. Let me add here a note on terminology and coverage: my focus is on Palestine but does not exclude the major diasporic communities in the Roman Empire (Parthian and Sasanian Mesopotamia are excluded); my chronological range is 200 BCE to some time in late antiquity (a term I use in its ancient historical sense to mean roughly 284–700 CE, and not in its history of religions sense, according to which it begins in the Iron Age). The country roughly corresponding to the contemporary state of Israel, plus the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Golan Heights, plus the strip of land on the east bank of the River Jordan called in antiquity *Peraea* I refer to as Palestine. *Judaea* designates the district of Jerusalem, whose northern border was approximately the modern city of Ramallah and whose southern border was near Beth Zur, just southwest of Bethlehem. To the north lies Samaria and to the south, Idumaea. When I wish to write of the Roman province of *Judaea* (which existed from 70 to 135 CE and was subsequently renamed *Syria Palaestina*), I will call it *Provincia Judaea*.

²The scare quotes are meant seriously here. For a critique of the idea of Mediterranean culture, see the next chapter.

we think of him as a sort of religious kibbutznik, or someone like Tevye the dairyman in Sholem Aleikhem's stories, something of a *naif*, pious and mild, engaged in contemplation of God's laws, hardworking and scrupulously respectful of others, obedient to authority, provided it minimized its interference in his religious life, having a powerful sense of responsibility to other Jews, but as a result of these things ready to give his life—and to take those of others—if his carefully ordered world was threatened?

We might, of course, look to the Hebrew Bible to answer these questions. The Pentateuch seems to provide rules for just about every facet of life, and if one makes the assumption—an assumption that is probably roughly correct for many periods—that by the later Second Temple period (starting, say, around 150 BCE), most Jews tried to lead their lives according to these rules, then it is easy to conclude that we can after all produce a kind of ethnography of the ancient Jews, or at any rate of the pious majority of them. Indeed, the New Testament scholar and ancient Judaist Ed Sanders did something of the sort in his great phenomenology of what he called “common Judaism.”³ Impressive as this account indubitably is, Sanders did not in fact set out to write an ethnography of the Jews in first-century Palestine. It would be best to take the title of the book seriously; it concerns Judaism, a religious system.

I do not know if Sanders assumed that an account of Judaism as practiced is tantamount to an account of the culture or sociology of the Jews, but I would argue that any such assumption is perforce incorrect. A conventional social history or ethnography would begin logically not with an investigation of the ideological center and its mediators (the Torah, the temple, and the priesthood) or with the political leadership (the Roman state, Herod and his descendants, the provincial governors). It would begin with dirt, with what and how much was grown on the land, and by whom; what land tenure arrangements looked like, and as a corollary, how families, village communities, and networks of social dependency operated, if such things existed, and if they did not, what sorts of institutions or practices (warfare, brigandage, or commerce, for example) performed comparable redistributive functions. In other words, the social historian or ethnographer would wonder how or whether people protected themselves from the consequences of drought, crop failure, disease, invasion, or other disasters, or how they coped with the simple fact that they could not always grow enough to sustain themselves. At this point

³*Judaism, Practice and Belief: 63 BCE–66 CE* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992).

social history and ethnography might part company, with social historians tracing redistributive systems and institutions farther up the political ladder and ethnographers pausing to consider what sort of culture went along with the rural socioeconomic regime just investigated. In either case, though, the result would be very different from the center-out method used by Sanders and other students of Jewish religious institutions, however rich their accounts may be.

Easier said than done, though: the Torah makes many assumptions and gives some laws about land tenure and family relations but provides no truly systematic prescription, and even if it did, laws are sometimes made to be evaded. No one has ever seriously suggested that the most far-reaching piece of Pentateuchal legislation about land—that all fields must be returned to their original owners every fifty years (Lev 25.8–12)—was ever, or could ever have been, put into practice. There is other evidence about such issues—late biblical, postbiblical, and rabbinic literature, occasionally helpful or suggestive archaeological remains, and a precious handful of documentary papyri about the business deals and legal activities of a Jewish family resident in the Roman province of Arabia (south and east of the Dead Sea) in the decades before the Bar Kokhba revolt. But with the exception of these documents and the richly detailed if not impeccably reliable writings of Josephus in the later first century CE, this literature provides little more than hints.⁴

Our core problem is that ancient Jewish literature was preserved almost entirely by later religious communities little interested in the sorts of questions that concern modern historians or social scientists. Indeed, the surviving texts were preserved because of their single-minded concentration on religious issues. They are almost all products of what the anthropologist Robert Redfield famously called the “great tradition”—the rationalized and systematized high culture of emerging urban civilizations—and had little concern, and less sympathy, for any rural and supposedly unself-conscious “little tradition” (notwithstanding Sanders’s truly heroic and by no means entirely futile efforts to recover it)⁵ still less did

⁴No polemics except to point out that even the more restrained attempts at writing the social and economic history of Persian, Hellenistic, and later Roman Palestine have relied heavily on unacceptable generalization from scraps of evidence, often based on simplistic application of deterministic economic or sociological models. In the case of the latest period just listed an exception is the sophisticated, cautious, and self-conscious (and therefore to some extent aporetic) work of Hayim Lapin (especially *Economy, Geography, and Provincial History in Later Roman Palestine* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001]). The period from Herod to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE has to be considered separately, for reasons to be specified.

⁵See M. P. Redfield, ed., *Human Nature and the Study of Society: The Papers of Robert Redfield*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 1.342–50. Redfield himself adduced

they provide perspicuous and realistic descriptions of the agrarian life—again, not surprising, given their urban orientation—or for that matter of the urban life, or of the social and political institutions that made rural and urban life possible. By contrast, classical literature was preserved by people interested in literary or rhetorical style, or sometimes practical knowledge (such as medicine and architecture), or by people who even in the Middle Ages found at least elements of ancient intellectual traditions compelling. There was thus reason to preserve not only the writings of such decidedly secular historians as Thucydides and Tacitus but also the richly informative orations of Demosthenes and Isocrates, great corpora of the personal letters of Cicero, the younger Pliny, and Libanius, colorfully evocative novels, such as *Daphnis and Chloe* or the *Golden Ass*, and so on, and this apart from the rich documentary evidence surviving from Hellenistic and Roman Egypt and the several hundred thousands of inscriptions from all over the Roman Empire (though Roman Palestinian epigraphy is unusually poor). And despite all this, much remains unrecoverable about the lives of the inhabitants of the Hellenistic world or the Roman Empire, especially the poorer ones.

To generalize broadly but not, I think, too irresponsibly, the extant parts of ancient Jewish literary tradition conceal the social and cultural conditions that produced them behind a shimmering (to offer a brief homage to Peter Brown) veil of biblicism, archaism, classicism. While this in itself is a highly significant cultural fact about the ancient Jewish “clerisy” that wrote the books, it is hard to avoid the feeling that it does not tell us all we need to know even about that clerisy, let alone anyone else.⁶ It

the Torah as a characteristic product of the “great tradition.” Of course, the point of any functioning great tradition is that it has interpreters whose job it is to mediate it for the practitioners of the “little tradition” (for the Torah’s functioning in this way, see S. Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 BCE to 640 CE* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001; hereafter *IJS*], 49–99); indeed, the relationship between Redfield’s great and little traditions is bound to be reciprocal. Arguably, tension between great and little traditions is thematized more explicitly in rabbinic literature than in Jewish literature written before the destruction.

The exceptional books here, those that may tell us a bit more about the little traditions, may be some of the highly problematic (because their text history is so complicated and poorly understood) magical texts of perhaps late antique origin, such as *Sefer Harazim*, *Harba De-Moshe*, *Sefer Yetzirah*, and the *Hekhalot* texts. For surveys, see P. Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God: Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992); M. Swartz, *Scholastic Magic: Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Y. Harari, *Harba De-Moshe: Mahadurah Hadashah U-Mehqar* (Jerusalem: Akademon, 1997).

⁶I borrow the term “clerisy,” the literate elite and subelite components of the “agroliterate” society, the formulators and mediators of the great tradition, from E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 8–18; according to the *OED* the term was introduced as early as 1818 by S. T. Coleridge to refer more narrowly to a nonreligious intellectual elite.

would be wonderful if we could lift the veil to get a better look at how ancient Jewish society and culture really worked, outside the center, and outside the minds of the priestly and scribal authors. But the fact that, we cannot does not mean we are completely helpless.

In the chapters that follow I explore, through the close reading of three textual corpora, two closely related questions that have both social historical and social anthropological aspects. To what extent were Jews, in their social relations, discourse, imagination, and even cultural practice, “normal” inhabitants of the ancient Mediterranean world? Why was the Jews’ integration in the Roman Empire so much more difficult than that of other provincial populations, and in what ways did it eventually succeed? In this chapter I begin by outlining what I think may have been entailed in “normal” behavior and attitudes. I first discuss institutionalized reciprocity—as exemplified in exchange-based relationships such as friendship, vassalage and clientele—and explain why I think it was an important issue for the ancient Jews, why they had problems with it, and how they coped with those problems. Reciprocity was not the only aspect of the ambient social world the Jews had to confront. They lived in the quite specific environment of the Mediterranean basin. Just how specific this environment was, however, and whether it is really productive to think of the Mediterranean as a single cultural zone is the subject of an enduring debate among historians and anthropologists. We can scarcely afford to ignore this debate, given the Torah’s item-by-item rejection of what appears to be ethnographic mediterraneanism, which is conceptually related to its rejection of reciprocity. Therefore, chapter 2 begins with the question of Mediterranean culture. I argue that the concept retains some heuristic utility if we think of it as a Weberian “ideal type,” not as an actual cultural system widespread transhistorically in the Mediterranean basin and only there. Finally, the Jews lived in the still more specific environment of the Roman Empire, a state commonly thought to have relied for its effective functioning on the mobilization of local networks of social dependency (more reciprocity, then), and of crucial mediterraneanist praxes such as honor. Roman-Jewish relations remain a matter of great interest to historians of either group, and within the constraints of my basic concern in this book, in the second part of chapter 2 I address briefly but systematically the question of the Jews’ integration, initially abortive, into the Roman Empire.

In doing all this I am trying not only to recover lost or concealed components of the Jews’ social relations and cultural practices but also to change the way we think about relations between the Jews and their neighbors and rulers. In my view it is no longer adequate to draw up inventories

of cultural items the Jews are likely to have borrowed from their neighbors and use these to argue about the extent of the Jews' hellenization or acculturation or assimilation. In its most extreme form, this method utterly deprives the Jews of agency: they were acted on by outside influences, playing no role in the formation of their own culture. But even more sophisticated versions of the cultural inventory approach often overlook the fact that the processes of hellenization or assimilation did not occur in a social or political vacuum. It follows that the individual items in the inventory had very varied cultural and political valences: imported tableware meant something different from images on coins or statues or books or political institutions, and these meanings were not stable over time. To make matters worse, many scholars slip all too easily from cultural inventory to politically charged historical judgment: to put it in an extreme way, one can draw up a list of Greek phrases and loanwords in the Talmud, conclude that the rabbis—a fortiori the Jews in general—were hellenized, and move easily from there to a celebration of post-Bar Kokhba Roman-Jewish coexistence. It is characteristic of post-Second World War American Jewish scholarship that the political-historical aspects of this account were rarely explored or spelled out, but they were obvious enough. Indeed, this particular type of argument was probably more common a generation ago than it is today, and there is now no shortage of highly sophisticated analyses of cultural borrowings produced by theoretically aware and politically conscious updaters of Saul Lieberman.⁷ Nevertheless,

⁷ For Joshua Levinson's work, among others, see chapter 5; for an earlier period, see the flawed but still suggestive work of S. Weitzman, *Surviving Sacrilege: Cultural Persistence in Jewish Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Beyond the two seminal volumes written by Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York: JTS, 1942) and *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: JTS, 1950), some important examples of the older scholarship were collected in H. A. Fischel, ed., *Essays in Greco-Roman and Related Talmudic Literature* (New York: Ktav, 1977; with bibliography, pp. xxxi–lxxii). Fischel himself was an ardent advocate of the inventory (xxvii–xxviii) but paid little attention to the political or social implications of the results. Lieberman himself, whose immense learning and prestige helped legitimize the search for "Hellenistic" content especially in rabbinic literature, did not sentimentalize Roman-Jewish relations. Among the many factors in addition to Lieberman's prestige that contributed to the receptivity of mid to late-twentieth-century American Jewish scholars to this project we may also mention Salo Baron's rejection of the "lachrymose" view of Jewish history, especially of the medieval and early modern periods. Since lachrymose history tended to focus on the Jews' allegedly disastrous relations with the state—in other words, with politics—the rejection of lachrymosity sometimes entailed the embrace of a somewhat depoliticized social and cultural history. This tendency is evident even in David Biale's introduction to *The Cultures of the Jews: A New History* (New York: Schocken, 2002), where one might have expected the mildly postmodern orientation (not to mention Biale's own well-known interests—see *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* [New York: Schocken, 1986]) to have encouraged a renewed interest in politics. See S. Schwartz, "Historiography on the Jews

the inventory lives on, especially among empiricist historians. Certainly it is a method shared by scholars as different as Louis Feldman (*Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*) and Martin Goodman (*Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations*).

Shifting the focus from “assimilation” or hellenization to integration allows what in my view is a correct emphasis on power, politics, and social relations, and those hitherto largely overlooked aspects of the culture of the Jews that bear most directly on them. Though some of my argument is pitched at what many historians will undoubtedly regard as an uncomfortably high level of abstraction, I am aiming at the production of a precise and specific account of what I think were politically and socially the most important elements of ancient Jewish culture. I am suggesting that the deep probe is better suited to the construction of such an account than the flattening list.

Reciprocity

In a seminal sociological discussion, Alvin Gouldner declared that reciprocity as a moral norm (“one good turn deserves another”) is, like the incest taboo, likely to be universal.⁸ Such statements are of course very difficult to evaluate, but it must be said that in its most elementary forms, reciprocity is probably very widespread. There is certainly no reason to think that the Israelites or after them the Jews especially resisted reciprocity in this sense, and one of the central theological tendencies of the Hebrew Bible, the so-called deuteronomic theology, is based on the conceptualization of the relations between God and Israel in reciprocal terms: God benefits Israel when Israel treats him properly. And yet it is remarkably difficult to find any positive valuation of human-human reciprocity in biblical texts, except sporadically in wisdom literature. What the Torah offers instead are generalized exhortations to fairness, just treatment of one’s fellows, and so on. Perhaps the closest we can get to reciprocity-based rules are injunctions like that not to loathe the Egyptian, “for strangers [more correctly: resident aliens] were ye in his land” (Dt 23.8), in whose

in the Talmudic Period,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, ed. M. Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 79–114.

⁸ A. Gouldner, “The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement,” *American Sociological Review* 25 (1960): 161–78. On the question of the universality of the incest taboo, see K. Hopkins, “Brother-Sister Marriage in Roman Egypt,” *CSSH* 22 (1980): 303–54, especially 304–12 (but see now S. Huebner, “Brother-Sister Marriage in Roman Egypt: A Curiosity of Humankind or a Widespread Family Strategy?” *JRS* 97 [2007]: 21–49).

conceptual background are rules about the mutual obligations that bind guests and hosts.⁹ In fact, it is largely on this metaphorical or subterranean level that we can detect important traces and more of reciprocity in biblical literature. Strikingly, when Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, declares his rejection of reciprocity as an ethical norm and commands his followers to love their enemies as well as their friends, he achieves the necessary adversative effect (“You have heard it said that. . . . But verily I say to you. . . .”) by misquoting a Pentateuchal verse that itself already constituted a rejection of reciprocity (Lev 19.18: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”).

I would like to introduce a distinction between reciprocity in Gouldner’s sense, as an ethical norm that requires that we return favors or at least refrain from harming those who have helped us, and what I am calling institutionalized reciprocity. In the latter, mutual exchange is thought to create and sustain enduring relationships of dependency, whether between individuals or between groups. The relationships in question may be legal institutions, such as ancient Near Eastern vassalage or debt bondage, or they may constitute social institutions, more or less governed by widely understood norms but not regulated by laws; an example is Roman patronage. Institutionalized reciprocity may be a powerful shaper of social relations.

Though ethical reciprocity is fundamental to institutionalized reciprocity, the opposite is not the case. We, for example, may happily teach our children to express gratitude for acts of kindness while regarding some institutional versions of this impulse, for example political patronage, as corrupt. This book concerns reciprocity in this latter sense. The modern study of institutionalized reciprocity begins with Marcel Mauss’s and Bronislaw Malinowski’s seminal ethnographic and theoretical reflections on gift exchange and has ever since been a major topic of social theoretical and anthropological investigation.¹⁰ Like many such concepts it

⁹The law prohibiting association with Ammonites and Moabites because of their ancestors’ mistreatment of the Israelites may in this case serve as an example of “negative reciprocity” in Gouldner’s, not Sahlins’s, sense of the term. (See M. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* [New York: Aldine, 1972, 195–96]. In Sahlins’s conception, which has not been widely accepted, “negative reciprocity” means “trying to get something for nothing.”) Given that the Egyptians had enslaved and oppressed the Israelites, according to the biblical narrative, the law’s goodwill is rather mysterious.

¹⁰M. Mauss, “Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques,” *L’Année sociologique*, new series, 1 (1925) (*The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls [New York-London: Norton, 1990]); B. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: Routledge, 1922). The subsequent history of the question has been frequently surveyed, in, for example, J. Davis, *Exchange* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 9–27; M. Bloch and J. Parry, Introduction, in *Money and the Morality of Exchange*, ed. M. Bloch and J. Parry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1–32; and H. van Wees,

has come to seem rather unwieldy, and some preliminary pruning is necessary to restore its utility as an analytical tool.¹¹

Exchange of some sort, not necessarily material, is a feature of all human relationships by definition. What is distinctive about the sorts of relationships I am concerned with here—formal friendship, patronage, vassalage, euergetism (in a Roman context, private donation for public benefit reciprocated by honor and loyalty)—is that the exchange involved is ongoing; in theoretical terms this requires that each individual set of reciprocal exchanges be unequal and delayed, because an immediate and perfectly equal return is in danger of bringing the relationship to a close¹²; the inegalitarian potential inherent in all gift exchange, or its competitive quality (which amounts to roughly the same thing), is important for my purposes; I return to it below. In any case, a benefactor who ceases to support his city is no longer its benefactor; a patron might still regard someone he fails to help as his client, but it is obvious that such a relationship will be highly unstable, and the client may feel he has good reason to bolt.¹³

This proviso raises more questions than might be apparent at first glance. How often must exchange occur in order to sustain the relationship, without imposing an excessive burden on one or both parties? What is the status of the initial gift, which is by definition free, in that it is not given in response to anything? Does it create the inevitable obligation to reciprocate (as Mauss, not to mention Cicero [*De Officiis* 1.48], argued), or is it rather the first act of response that constitutes the crucial step toward the establishment of the relationship, not the first donation? The very questions suggest that where such exchange-based relationships exist as culturally validated social institutions, they are bound by norms: the successful patron knows how much to give to and demand of his client, even if, as the French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu insisted, such norms are constituted by, constantly refracted and renegotiated through, and

“The Law of Gratitude: Reciprocity in Anthropological Theory.” in *Reciprocity in Ancient Greece*, ed. C. Gill, N. Postlethwaite, and R. Seaford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 13–49.

¹¹ For a critique of reciprocity’s analytic utility, see Davis, *Exchange*, 22–27.

¹² This was noted already by Seneca, *De Beneficiis* 6.35.3. “Balanced reciprocity,” or reciprocity in which equality of exchange is required, is ethnographically attested, but for very limited and specific purposes. It tends not to establish the types of relationships with which I am concerned. Ethnographers often classify it as trade. See Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, 194–95; on the inegalitarian character of most reciprocity, see 206–10.

¹³ Though there is ethnographic evidence that patrons and clients might retain the ceremonial aspects of the relationship even in the absence of meaningful exchange; see S. Silverman, “Patronage as Myth,” in *Patrons and Clients in Mediterranean Societies*, ed. E. Gellner and J. Waterbury (London: Duckworth, 1977), 7–19. This warns us that such relationships, once institutionalized, might take on a life of their own, only loosely anchored in the material conditions that generated and were supposed to sustain them.

sometimes evaded or simply ignored in, actual practice.¹⁴ In other words, Bourdieu's skepticism about observers' attempts to extract rules from practice—or indeed about actors' claims that there exist rules they always follow—should not be confused with the vulgar claim that “everyone was making it up as they went along.” In a Bourdieuan scheme, structures may constantly crystallize and decay, or indeed may exist only infinitesimally, in the act, or in the purely notional moment of stasis between crystallization and decadence (and so not really be structures at all), but social life may still be shaped by the constant and productive tension between ostensible norms, objective material constraints, and practice.¹⁵

Institutionalized Reciprocity in Antiquity: Three Arguments

Such relationships, I argue, constituted an important part of the social, cultural, economic, and political landscape in the Mediterranean world in which the ancient Jews lived, but the Jews were heirs to a set of strongly antireciprocal cultural imperatives. The importance of such relationships can be argued on several different though interrelated levels of generality. In this chapter and the next I explore each of these in some detail, starting with the most abstract argument. First, though, I present each in brief.

On the lowest level of abstraction, it may be sufficient, especially for patronage and euergetism, to restate what anyone who has ever studied Roman history knows: they were important practices in the Roman Empire, and probably even—to adopt a structural-functionalist pose—played an important role in making the empire work.¹⁶ An investigation of their reception by the Jews thus constitutes a good, solid historical project.

¹⁴ P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977 [first published 1972]), 1–32.

¹⁵ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 78: “The habitus, the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations, produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle, while adjusting to the demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation, as defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the habitus.” Bourdieu's habitus is comparable, though not identical, to A. Giddens's notion of structuration. Both refer to the sense of practice—human social behavior—as a system of constrained contingencies. For a discussion of the relationship between Giddens's and Bourdieu's ideas, see L. Wacquant, “The Structure and Logic of Bourdieu's Sociology,” in P. Bourdieu and L. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3–4.

¹⁶ See R. Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), and P. Veyne, *Bread and Circuses: Historical Sociology and Political Pluralism* (London: Penguin, 1990). Veyne would not accept the structural-functionalist argument, though.

At a higher level of abstraction, we may observe that such relationships have tended to be conspicuous in the Mediterranean societies studied by ethnographers, as well as in many of those of the region's pre-ethnographic past, not just Rome.¹⁷ In such societies they have frequently been associated with ideas like honor and revenge. This entire cultural complex is demonstrably important in all the texts I study in this book, which in any case are not all products of the Roman imperial period, so it seems reasonable to consider our problem also as one of Mediterranean, not just Roman, culture, whatever that controversial term might mean. (I try to clarify this issue in chapter 2).

At the highest level of abstraction, we may consider the following. Mauss had argued that gift exchange was the primitive equivalent of trade. To be sure, Mauss was mainly concerned with the cultural aspects of the gift, with its relationship to competitive display, with the idea that the gift contained as it were a part of the giver and so was in some sense inalienable. Nevertheless, he also believed it functioned as a form of redistribution, the main form available in primitive or prerational societies, with the consequence that the development of trade marked an evolutionary step forward and reduced gift exchange from central social ritual to trivial ceremonial adjunct of an economy based on rational contractual exchange. After more than eighty years of criticism, this position is no longer tenable. Most critics have regarded the inalienability of the gift as an ethnographic peculiarity Mauss was incorrect to generalize. Furthermore, in most societies, gift exchange and trade have demonstrably coexisted; it will simply not do to speak of two types of society in polar opposition, though it may be possible to imagine a spectrum of options, with Mauss's Pacific islanders or Kwakiutl Indians, who supposedly lived in societies dominated by ceremonial gift exchange, at one end and contemporary bourgeois citizens of the First World at the other. Nor, as a corollary, should we think of an opposition between gift and contract (the latter rational, concerned with precise equivalency, and thought precisely not to establish an enduring relation between the parties). For our purposes it is important to observe that even today, even apart from the obvious fact that routine business deals often are fraught with wholly affective or emotional issues, such as a sense of loyalty, certain highly complex, partly reciprocity-based, personal relationships, such as that between husband and wife, may be established by contract. In the pre Hellenistic Near East,

¹⁷J. Davis, *People of the Mediterranean: An Essay in Comparative Social Anthropology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 132–50—a not wholly satisfactory survey.

even such fully reciprocal relationships as friendship and vassalage were established by contracts (which were not necessarily written).

Nevertheless, Mauss was surely right to perceive something fundamentally premodern (“primitive,” in his terms) in institutionalized gift exchange, in the sense that it tends to be marginalized, or at any rate to play a very different role, in stable, relatively technologically advanced states.¹⁸ Historians of ancient Greece have made fertile use of Mauss’s opposition between gift exchange and trade as a way of explaining aspects of the politics and culture of the emerging city-state of the late archaic period.¹⁹ This hypothesis has also made excellent sense of some difficult biblical episodes. For example, in Genesis 23, Abraham insists on paying Ephron the Hittite for the Cave of the Machpelah rather than receiving a burial cave as a gift, presumably because he is reluctant to become embroiled in a relationship of dependency with the Hittites.²⁰ This suggests that Mauss’s view retains some heuristic utility. Later I apply aspects of this model where it is most appropriate, in the biblical book of Proverbs and the apocryphal Wisdom of Ben Sira. I show that it does not work; that is, Ben Sira does not oppose gift and trade but conflates them and is warily accepting of both. This suggests a limitation on the heuristic utility of Mauss’s thesis and resonates instead with Bloch and Parry’s demonstration that gift exchange and trade have in most societies been incompletely differentiated, and in any case are by no means in opposition.

Be this as it may, we may posit a reason for the association of the gift-based relationship with premodernity. The ideal premodern state was necessarily weaker than the ideal modern one: if states are defined by their monopolization of legitimate violence, as Weber observed, modern states, with higher population densities, better technology and communications, and enhanced ability to mobilize and organize manpower, have

¹⁸This is not to say that it has become wholly unimportant: one need only think of the impact on the U.S. economy of the institution of the Christmas gift. Of course, this does not imply that gifts are necessarily economically significant for the givers or the recipients. But there remain subcultures even in the most up-to-date corners of the United States in which gift exchange of a type that resonates strongly with many of the ethnographic varieties continues to play a very important (and highly fraught) social and cultural role, and a by no means negligible economic one. This is certainly true of the New York Jewish world in which I live. For general discussions of gift exchange in the contemporary world, see Davis, *Exchange*, and A. Komter, *Social Solidarity and the Gift* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁹Earliest, of course, was M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (New York: Viking, 1954). More recently, see L. Kurke, *Coins, Bodies, Games, and Gold: The Politics of Meaning in Ancient Greece* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); and S. von Reden, *Exchange in Ancient Greece* (London: Duckworth, 1995).

²⁰See C. Hinnant, “The Patriarchal Narratives of *Genesis* and the Ethos of Gift Exchange,” in *The Question of the Gift: Essays Across Disciplines* ed. M. Osteen (London: Routledge, 2002), 105–17.

more violence to monopolize.²¹ Premodern states had to work harder to more limited effect. They were necessarily less centralized, less able to control the lives of their constituents, had to cede power to local authorities, and aspired at best to co-opt them. The weakness of the state meant the importance of the local grandee. He, for his part, had good reason (survival, competition with his peers for power and prosperity) to try to bind his neighbors to himself with ties of dependency based on unequal reciprocal exchange, and to turn his equals into friends and allies. As for the dependents, they were still more vulnerable, and so had reasons of their own for submitting to the oppressive ministrations of a successful neighbor. In weaker states such grandees might be something like warlords or feudal noblemen, or even brigand chiefs, their position quite directly dependent on their access to armed force and control of resources.²² Successful or more centralizing premodern states, though, co-opted such grandees, made their positions quasi-official, and used them to mediate the power of the state to its subjects. In the high Roman Empire such men often became city councillors, responsible for raising taxes to be transmitted to the state. The role of the patron shifted slightly: while it continued to include exploitation and protection of clients, intermediation between client and state now became important, too (a similar shift occurred in early modern Western Europe).²³ The patrons for their part were happy to be co-opted because their association with a powerful state enhanced their position at home and also opened new opportunities at the center: a local grandee might hope to marry up, for example, or form other sorts of partnerships or alliances that could propel him or, more likely, his children to higher positions.

Two Theories of the Integration of Society

Highly localized systems of exchange and dependency—based on ties such as clientele, vassalage, and friendship, and probably most of all (though of secondary importance in my account) family and clan—in a premodern environment thus appear to have a certain inevitability. In principle, this sense—which is implicit in the functionalism of the account—must be

²¹ See M. Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, G. Roth and C. Wittich, eds. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 54.

²² See M. Sahlins, "Poor Man, Rich Man, Big-man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia," *CSSH* 5 (1963): 285–303.

²³ For patronage as mediation, see the fundamental article of S. N. Eisenstadt and L. Roniger, "Patron-Client Relations as a Model of Structuring Social Exchange," *CSSH* 22 (1980): 42–77.

resisted. First of all, the local systems just described, and the states into which they were assembled, frequently failed. In fact, they were systems only from the reductively schematizing perspective of the distant observer; to the participants they must have seemed unstable mixtures of common sense (“we’ve always done things this way”), improvisation (“and yet new situations always arise”), and accidental contingency (drought or invasion leading to the dissolution of a patronage network, clan, or village).²⁴ Furthermore, there were other ways, not necessarily inherently more or less “functional” than the patronage network, of doing things. I do not know whether truly egalitarian rural communities (not actually controlled by a rich proprietor) have ever been common in any society, but they are not wholly unattested in the ethnographic past (how reliably I have no way of knowing).²⁵ In any case, it is certainly possible to imagine communities based in part on generalized reciprocity, what Sahlins called “pooling,” in which individual exchange relationships matter less than the regular pululation of goods and benefits through the group as a whole.²⁶ Also, in the Mediterranean, the Middle East, Europe, and India, for example, there have long existed religious communities that have at least partly avoided organization along patronal or feudal lines. Sometimes even entire pre-modern states—admittedly normally very small or otherwise unusual ones—have attempted to opt out of organization based on local clan or patronal structures: one thinks here of democratic Athens.

In fact, we may formulate this point more sharply. Let us posit that there exist two ways of imagining societies. In the first conception, societies are bound together by densely overlapping networks of relationships of personal dependency constituted and sustained by reciprocal exchange. This may sound like modern social theory, but in fact there is ample ancient attestation for it, especially in Greece (especially in more aristocratic circles) and Rome. Certainly it was shared by such diverse thinkers as Aristotle (*Eudemian Ethics* 7.1.2; 7.10.14ff.) and Seneca (*De Beneficiis* 1.4.2; cf. Cicero, *De Officiis* 1.22).²⁷ In this view, reciprocity

²⁴ Cf. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 78–95.

²⁵ See discussion in Davis, *People of the Mediterranean*, 75–89.

²⁶ Such a conception of the Jewish town underlies the remarkable rabbinic rule that a man who forbids his wife to visit mourners is required to divorce her (that is, liberate her by paying the debt stipulated in their marriage contract as marking the conclusion of their marriage), “for when the time comes that her dead relation is stretched out before her, not a creature will come to care for her”; similarly, he is forced to divorce her if he forbids her to lend her sieve, “because he is thereby damaging her reputation among her neighbors” (Y. Ketubot 75, 31b). The rabbis sought to discourage “free riding” or, rather, assumed it could not be counted on to be rewarded.

²⁷ See M. Griffin, “*De Beneficiis* and Roman Society,” *JRS* 93 (2003): 92–113, especially the survey of Aristotelian and Stoic thought at 92–93. B. Inwood, “Politics and Paradox in Seneca’s *De*

generated primarily social cohesion, and though its tendency to inegalitarianism was acknowledged, the latter was thought theoretically subordinate to the exercise of individual self-control and wise government. In the second conception, societies are bound together not by personal relationships but by corporate solidarity based on shared ideals (piety, wisdom) or myths (for example, about common descent). This too resonates with modern social theory, for example, the influential work of Benedict Anderson, but is very amply attested for antiquity. The Torah is one proponent of such a theory; Plato was another. Both theories have emotional content: one is expected or even obligated to love, or at least have amicable or loyal feelings toward, those to whom one is connected. But this factor is responsible for a significant practical difference between the two, for the first theory requires you to love your patrons, clients, kinsmen, and friends, but not all members of your nation, though it may be expected that your connections will love their connections, and so on, so that everyone is ultimately bound together in an indirectly solidary, segmented society. It may alternatively be thought that your friendship, kinship, and patronage networks are in the aggregate coextensive with your state, a concept only slightly unrealistic for an Aristotle, writing about the relatively small-scale classical polis, but certainly a fantastic idea if applied to the Rome of Cicero or Seneca, with its population of one million.²⁸ By contrast, the second theory requires you to love all members of the group whether or not they are personally connected to you. The Torah commanded all Israelites to love their fellows, and Pericles urged his Athenian compatriots to be *erastai*, lovers, of their polis (so Thucydides wrote, 2.43.1, right after having Pericles claim that at Athens, unlike most other places, friendship was based on feelings of fellowship, not on reciprocal obligation). In this scheme, kinsmen, patrons, and friends enjoy no advantages.

Thus, although the two approaches are not irreconcilable, they are definitely in tension with each other. In fact, an Aristotle might assume a hierarchy of solidarities, and thereby reconcile loyalties to or affection toward household, patronage network, and polis. Furthermore, all theorists,

beneficii,” in *Justice and Generosity: Studies in Hellenistic Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. A. Laks and M. Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 241–42 (article: 241–65), discusses the Aristotelian background of the idea that certain things “hold together” (*sunekein*) a state.

²⁸ In Stoic thought, one was expected to love and be prepared to be generous to all of humanity, in a way that in principle blunted or neutralized the political force of the sentiment entirely. But Seneca or Cicero could write about humanity but clearly intend Rome, and a small but privileged slice of Roman society at that.

ancient and modern, recognized that states need laws and a sense of order, the effect of which is necessarily to restrain the untrammelled operation of institutionalized reciprocity; the latter is thus understood to be on some fundamental level antithetical to the interests of the state, even as it is thought to constitute an advance over the primordial or presocial Hobbesian “warre of all against all” (see below on mediterraneanism as antithesis of order).²⁹ But adherents of the second social theory might find it more challenging to incorporate local loyalties in their system without subverting it completely. In some sense the whole point of the theory is to overcome the clan-group and patronage network³⁰: it derives its emotional strength from its rejection of reciprocity-based loyalties and imagines that it is pursuing a “higher” set of ideals. If, as suggested above, gift exchange has an inescapable tendency to be inequalitarian, the relationships created by it will slip inexorably into exploitation and injustice. The point of the second theory thus may be precisely to pursue equality and justice, and pure love of one’s fellow, by rejecting reciprocity a priori. The not insignificant corollary of this is that the solidarity-based theory tends to construct the reciprocity-based theory as normal, and itself as revolutionary or countercultural.

Notwithstanding the tension between them, neither theory is entirely self-sufficient; they need each other. This implies that in their real-life manifestations, and even in their most highly elaborated theoretical expositions, the two positions are not always far apart.³¹ The reciprocity-based theory needs the solidarity-based theory in two ways. First, reciprocity works best for small, localized, “face-to-face” societies, since it leaves un-

²⁹ Contrast Gouldner, “The Norm of Reciprocity,” 176. But he also characterizes reciprocity as a “starting mechanism” that logically and chronologically precedes the development of “a differentiated and customary set of status duties.” In Gouldner’s view, it is thus, I would infer, formative of society but prior to the state. More explicitly: Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, 168–71.

³⁰ See E. Leach, *The Political System of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*, LSE Monographs on Social Anthropology 44 (London: Athlone Press, 1970 [first published 1954], 197–204, on the countercultural or revolutionary nature of the republican (*gumlao*) Burmese villagers, who, even according to their own corporate mythology, claimed to have rebelled against the hierarchical and exchange-oriented (the latter point noted by Leach in passing but not emphasized) norms of general Kachin society. The obvious comparison here is with Athenian and Roman stories of the establishment of democratic or republican regimes following the expulsion, respectively, of the tyrannical Peisistratids and the monarchical Tarquinius. The Jews had no such myth (the story of the Exodus is hardly comparable), since the Babylonians had ended their monarchy for them. But they had stories opposing monarchy (for example, 1 Sam 10.17–27) and laws restricting it (Dt 17.14–20).

³¹ Cf. Leach, *The Political System of Highland Burma*, 197. In general, my argument here is structurally indebted to Leach’s discussion (on pages 197–212) of the analytical antinomy between hierarchically organized (*gumsa*) and republican or egalitarian (*gumlao*) Kachin (Burmese hill country people) and its tension with the practical tendency of the two systems to merge into each other.

clear why anything larger than the local network should cohere. Or, to put it differently, a complex society that possesses no ideological foundation beyond gratitude and loyalty to benefactors and kinspeople will in short order dissolve into its segments.

Solidarity based on ideals rather than exchange was an important feature even of states that embraced reciprocity as a fundamental value. For example, though benefaction and gratitude were crucial components of the Roman system, the success of the Roman state lay precisely in its ability to organize this sense of personal loyalty pyramidally: modest subjects were expected to feel gratitude toward benefactors (governors, senators, emperors) who had given them nothing, whom they had never even seen. And this success was bolstered by a flow of propaganda from the center that presented the Roman state and the emperor as embodiments of ethical and cultural values. A state that allowed reciprocity free rein could never survive.

In addition to providing the ideological structure for the integration of local patronage and kinship systems into larger societies, nonreciprocal ideologies might perform a secondary function in reciprocity-based ideological systems; as I discuss in more detail in the next chapter, they might provide an escape valve. As already indicated, reciprocity-based systems tend toward inequality; they are often experienced—and not only by those in the position of client or vassal—as oppressive; furthermore, they consume resources mercilessly. Indeed, in Mauss's scheme destruction of wealth was one of the essential features of the gift exchange economy, and this appears to have been as true of Roman euergetism as of native American potlatch. Therefore, there are always people who wish to opt out. The French historian E. Leroy Ladurie provided a fine example in the form of the Duc de Saint-Simon, a noble beneficiary of the highly elaborate systems of patronage and precedence that prevailed at Louis XIV's court. Fearing that he was being crushed by a system even he had difficulty navigating, Saint-Simon dreamed of life in a Carmelite monastery, whose inhabitants "dwell in perpetual silence, in the poorest of cells . . . [and] take common meals in the refectory, which are very frugal, and exist in a state of almost perpetual fasting, strictly observing [liturgical] office, and sharing their time between manual work and contemplation." This was, in sum, the polar opposite of the toxic little society of Versailles, with its endless conspiratorial chatter, debt-inducingly competitive displays of luxury, and obsessive anxiety about honor and access.³² For Roman-era examples

³²E. Leroy Ladurie, "The Court Surrounds the King: Louis XIV, the Palatine Princess, and Saint-Simon," in *Honor and Grace in Anthropology*, ed. J. G. Peristiany and J. Pitt-Rivers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 51–78. Saint-Simon's letter is quoted on page 71.

of antireciprocal solidarity-based organizations serving as escape hatches, we might consider the attractiveness, by no means especially to the poor, of philosophical sects, mystery cults, Christianity, and even diasporic Judaism itself.

Like the reciprocity-based theory, the solidarity-based theory in its purest form works best in small groups. Such groups can easily attain through self-selection a sense of solidarity derived from shared purpose and an equitable distribution of resources, without needing to rely on relationships of personal dependency. In larger entities, the only way at least partially to enable a more or less reciprocity-free society might be by assuring that the need rarely arise for people to rely on the personal generosity of their neighbors.³³ This is the purpose of much Pentateuchal legislation. All Israelites are required to support all their fellows by leaving behind parts of their harvest, by periodically handing over to the poor ten percent of their agricultural production, by the obligatory provision of interest-free loans to those who have become impoverished, and, most radical of all, by the septennial cancellation of debts and manumission of debt bondsmen and, twice a century, by the redistribution of landholding. The Bible's elaborate rules are meant to ensure that the charitable donation (and likewise the donations meant to form the livelihood of the priestly and levitical temple staff) never degenerates into the dependency-generating gift. The pauper, like the priest, is meant to feel no gratitude—at least not toward the donor. Rather, charity is a prime expression of Israelite corporate solidarity, of the obligation of all Israelites to love one another regardless of familial or other connection.

But here, too, there are problems. First, given the ostensible naturalness of ethical reciprocity, or at least the fact that even small, hyperegalitarian societies have trouble eradicating it, there is an inexorable tendency for charitable donation to turn into gift. In other words, the donors might expect the poor to show gratitude, and the poor might comply, because common sense tells them, or because they feel constrained, to do so. James Laidlaw's analysis of the priestly *dan* (a charitable gift loosely comparable to the biblical *terumah*—"heave offering"—given to priests) among the Jains is important for demonstrating how much work it takes to ensure that charitable donation retains its "purity."³⁴ Historically, among Jews and Christians, there has almost always been slippage between charity and gift. On the one hand, the sense persists in both communities that

³³ See Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, 188–91, on the distinction between reciprocity and "pooling," and for a fundamental account of the social and symbolic aspects of the latter. My discussion here is anticipated by Sahlins's account of the "sociology of primitive exchange" (185–275).

³⁴ "A Free Gift Makes No Friends," in Osteen, *The Question of the Gift*, 45–66.

the best and purest donation is one that cannot be reciprocated, and ideally is even anonymous. At the same time, Jewish and Christian charity adopted features of Greco-Roman patronage and euergetism at a very early date; since then (if not even before), Jewish communal life—to focus more narrowly on our subject—has never lacked reciprocal elements.³⁵

A second problem with ideologies of nonreciprocal solidarity is that in large-scale societies, the only way to impose truly effective, as opposed to mainly symbolic, nonreciprocal redistributive systems such as charity is through the functioning of a powerful state, or something similar. The Pentateuch's redistributive laws may or may not have been sufficient in principle to reduce the roles of clans or patronage networks. But without a strong state administering the rules, that is, with the rules being practiced on what amounted to a voluntary basis, reciprocity could not be eliminated. (Important historical questions remain and are addressed later: What form might reciprocal institutions take in such a case? What sort of symbolic validation might they enjoy in a society that professes to reject them in principle but remains in some measure reliant on them?) Indeed, the Pentateuch itself makes allowances for institutions that it clearly opposes, such as debt bondage, and it is not clear whether the biblical legislators meant periodic redistribution of land as anything other than a utopian ideal.

Given, then, both the conflict between ideals of reciprocity and solidarity and their mutual dependence in practice, how did the Jews, as adherents of a strongly antireciprocal normative system, cope with life in a world in which institutionalized reciprocity was very hard indeed to escape?

In the core of this book I discuss three textual corpora that have turned out to be profoundly concerned with both normative and descriptive aspects of the question of how Jews should cope with institutionalized reciprocity. Ben Sira wrote about gift exchange itself and about all sorts of social relationships generated by it, though with perhaps a slight emphasis on friendship. Josephus had much to say about friendship and patronage³⁶ but his comments on euergetism are in some ways of special interest, in

³⁵ On the relationship between Jewish charity and Greco-Roman euergetism, see S. Schwartz, *IJS*, 275–89. For an account of a Christian society that convincingly treats charitable donation under the rubric of gift exchange while noting the ways in which it does not fit, see N. Z. Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

³⁶ I have written about these issues elsewhere: "Josephus in Galilee: Rural Patronage and Social Breakdown," in *Josephus and the History of the Greco-Roman Period: Essays in Memory of Morton Smith*, ed. F. Parente and J. Sievers (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 290–308; "King Herod, Friend of the Jews," in *Jerusalem and Eretz Israel: Arie Kindler Volume*, ed. J. Schwartz, Z. Amar, and I. Ziffer (Tel Aviv: Rennert Center, Bar Ilan University / Eretz Israel Museum, 2000), *67–*76.

part because they have been so little noticed and are of peculiar historical importance. For its part, the Palestinian Talmud struggled to come to grips with all sorts of issues of social hierarchy but seems especially concerned with patronage in all its ceremonial trappings. I am not proposing that the texts reflect an evolutionary development in Jewish thought about these issues, only that they constitute successive attempts to adapt the Torah's utopian antireciprocity to altered political and social realities. None of these texts addresses reciprocity in a cultural vacuum. All of them, like the Hebrew Bible itself, understand the relationships they are concerned with as embedded in various complexes of cultural practice, and here is where mediterraneanism enters the picture, because the cultural complexes they write about bear a striking resemblance to the historical and ethnographic construct (as I think we must describe it). In particular the sense of honor or shame, a central concept in mediterraneanist ethnography, plays a peculiarly important but very varied role in each of these texts: Ben Sira, who associates it with domination, embraces honor but insists it is conferred by wisdom or piety above all; Josephus claims the Jews reject it; rabbinic texts (which also tend to associate it with domination) display great anxiety and confusion about it. This is all somehow connected to the fact that the Bible is reticent about ascribing honor to any humans. But there is more: the Bible often reads like an item-by-item rejection of the ethnographers' Mediterranean culture. Why?