Jonathan Z. Smith

imagining
Religion

From Babylon to Jonestown
should be added, "she lived a good life in Judaism" (CIJ 537). In none of these is there a suggestion of the older ethnogeographical sense of Judaean. The term is entirely reserved for the religious sphere into which one can be born and to which one can convert. There is a unique compound formula on one of the Roman inscriptions. "Irene, foster child, proselyte, her father and mother Jewish, an Israeliite, lived three years, seven months, and one day" (CIJ 21). "Jew" in this text would appear to refer to the foster parents' status as birthright Jews. What meaning "Israeliite" has for a proselyte cannot be determined, in part because this is the only occurrence of the designation in the entire corpus. "Israel" occurs several times, although never as a designation (e.g., CIJ 349, 526) as well as the.

The data shows it as a minor determinant in the economic factors of who became Jewish. There is an accident of preservation except in cases where "Jew" is an excuse to prove the intent of every other Jewish person.

The picture shows that there remains a specific problem in relating who is Jewish, and it is impossible to rough out a precise definition. The study of the synagogues, cemeteries, and other data has no specific reflections and is not as easy to understand. We need to abandon the notion of early Judaism as a monolithic and early as well as the notion of a system of a system that is messy. We need to map the cultural and shifting cluster of characters.

As the anthropologist has begun to abandon the traditionalist view of culture as a well-articulated, highly integrated mechanism and has slowly turned to accepting the sort of image set forth by E. E. Williams of culture as a "heap of rubbish," a "tangle," a "hotch-potch," only partially organized, so we in religious studies must set about an analogous dismantling of the old theological and imperialistic impulses toward totallization, unification, and integration. The labor at achieving the goal of a polythetic classification of Judaisms, rather than a monothetic definition of early Judaism, is but a preliminary step toward this end.

2 In Comparison a Magic Dwell

If I read a myth, select certain elements from it, and arrange them in a pattern, that "structure" is bound to be in the material unless I have misread the text or demonstrably misrendered it. The fact of its being there does not, however, indicate that my arrangement is anything more than my personal whim.

... A myth is therefore bound to have a number of possible "structures" that are both in the material and in the eye of the beholder. The problem is to decide between them and to determine the significance of any of them.

David Maybury-Lewis

We stand at a quite self-conscious moment in the history of the study of Judaism. There are a variety of ways of articulating this self-consciousness, perhaps the most relevant formulation being our awareness that our scholarly inquiries find their setting (indeed, their legitimacy) within the academy. This provides not only the context for our endeavors, but their raison d'être. This is to say, no matter how intrinsically interesting and worthwhile the study of the complex histories and varieties of the several Judaisms may be, they gain academic significance primarily by their capacity to illuminate the work of other scholars of other religious traditions, and by the concomitant desire of students of Judaism to be illuminated by the labors of these other scholars. Judaism, for the academy, serves as exempli gratia. In the words of Jacob Neusner:

I believe that section meetings in the history of Judaism [at the American Academy of Religion] should be so planned as to interest scholars in diverse areas of religious studies. If these [section] meetings do not win the attention and participation of a fair cross section of scholars in the field as a whole, then they will not materially contribute to the study of religion in this country. There is no reason for the study of
Judaism to be treated as a set of special cases and of matters so technical that only initiates can follow discussion—or would even want to.

This, I would submit, is a new voice and a new confidence. It is that of the study of Judaism come of age. To accomplish such an agendum, it is axiomatic that careful attention must be given to matters of description and comparison—even more, that description be framed in light of comparative interests in such a way as to further comparison.

I

For a student of religion such as myself to accept willingly the designation “historian of religion” is to submit to a lifelong sentence of ambiguity. I cannot think of two more difficult terms than “history” and “religion.” Their conjunction, as may be witnessed by every programmatic statement from this putative discipline that I am familiar with, serves only to further the confusion. It is necessary to stress this at the outset. If Judaism may assert no special privilege, neither can the historian of religion. The reflections embodied in this essay make no claim to be the result of clear vision from the “head of Pisgah.” It is not the case that there is a model “out there” that needs only to be applied to the study of Judaism. There is no consensual format into which the scholar of Judaism needs only to feed his data. To the contrary, I intend this essay to be an exercise in collaboration. We need to think together about the issues presented to us by the assignment to be attentive to description and comparison. For me, this implies some attempt to map out the options in order to clarify what is at issue. The issues might as well be discussed in terms of Judaism.

I take my point of departure from the observation that each scholar of religion, in his way, is concerned with phenomena that are historical in the simple, grammatical sense of the term, that is to say, with events and expressions from the past, reconceived vividly. The scholar of religion is, therefore, concerned with dimensions of memory and remembrance—whether they be the collective labor of society or the work of the individual historian’s craft.

The earliest full theory of memory (setting aside the Platonic notion of anamnesis) is in Aristotle’s De memoria et reminiscencia 451b which describes memory as an experience of “something either similar or contrary to what we seek or else from that which is contiguous to it.” Within discourse on memory, this triad remains more or less intact through a succession of writers as distinct in character but as similar in excellence as Augustine (Confessions 10.19) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Biographia Literaria, chap. 5–7). In the complex literature on mnemotechnics, it led to the elaborate Late Antique through Renaissance handbooks on visualization and topoi, while, shorn of its specific context in memory, it was developed into the notion of the Laws of Association which so preoccupied the philosophical generations of Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Hartley, and Mill, receiving its definitive history in the famous appendix, “Note D**,” in William Hamilton’s edition of the Works of Thomas Reid.

As many will recognize, the formulation of the Laws of Association has played a seminal role in the development of theory in the study of religion. E. B. Tylor, in his first comparative work, Researches into the Early History of Mankind (first edition, 1865), postulated that a “principle of association” supplied the underlying logic for magical praxis: “any association of ideas in a man’s mind, the vaguest similarity of form or position, even a mere coincidence in time, is sufficient to enable the magician to work from association in his own mind, to association in the material world.” J. G. Frazer, building explicitly on Tylor, developed a typology of magic:

If my analysis of the magician’s logic is correct, its two great principles turn out to be merely two different misapplications of the association of ideas. Homoeopathic magic is founded on the association of ideas by similarity; contagious magic is founded on the association of ideas by contiguity.

And Frazer repeats Tylor’s charge that magic is a confusion of a subjective relationship with an objective one. Where this confusion is not present, the Laws of Association “yield science; illegitimately applied they yield magic.”

It requires but a small leap to relate these considerations of the Laws of Association in memory and magic to the enterprise of comparison in the human sciences. For, as practiced by scholarship, comparison has been chiefly an affair of the recollection of similarity. The chief explanation for the significance of comparison has been contiguity. The procedure is homoeopathic. The theory is built on contagion. The issue of difference has been all but forgotten.

Regardless of the individual scholar’s theoretical framework, regardless of the necessary fiction of the scientific mode of presentation, most comparison has not been the result of discovery. Borrowing Edmundo O’Gorman’s historiographic distinction between discovery as the finding of something one has set out to look for and invention as the subsequent realization of novelty one has not intended to find, we must label comparison an invention. In no literature on comparison that I am familiar with has there been any presentation of rules for the production of comparisons; what few rules have been proposed pertain to their post facto evaluation.
Perhaps this is the case because, for the most part, the scholar has not set out to make comparisons. Indeed, he has been most frequently attracted to a particular datum by a sense of its uniqueness. But often, at some point along the way, as if unbidden, as a sort of déjà vu, the scholar remembers that he has seen "it" or "something like it" before: he experiences what Coleridge described in an early essay in *The Friend* as the result of "the hooks-and-eyes of the memory." This experience, this unintended consequence of research, must then be accorded significance and provided with an explanation. In the vast majority of instances in the history of comparison, this subjective experience is projected as an objective connection through some theory of influence, diffusion, borrowing, or the like. It is a process of working from a psychological association to an historical one: it is to assert that similarity and contiguity have causal effect. But this, to revert to the language of Victorian anthropology, is not science but magic. To quote from a masterful study of this issue from a representative of one of the more lively and unembarrassed of the comparative disciplines, comparative literature:

> When we say that $A$ has influenced $B$, we mean that after ... analysis we can discern a number of significant similarities between the works of $A$ and $B$. . . . So far we have established no influence; we have only documented what I call affinity. For influence presupposes some manner of causality.

We are left with a dilemma that can be stated in stark form: is comparison an enterprise of magic or science? Thus far, comparison appears to be more a matter of memory than a project for inquiry: it is more impressionistic than methodical. It depends on what Henri Bergson, in his study of memory, termed:

> an intermediate knowledge, [derived] from a confused sense of the striking quality or resemblance: this sense is equally remote from generality fully conceived and from individuality clearly perceived.

This may be tested against a review of the major modes of comparison.

In an essay written some years ago (and rather sarcastically entitled, to translate the tag from Horace, "When you add a little to a little, the result will be a great leap"), I tried to map out a paradigm for comparison, based on a survey of some 2500 years of the literature of anthropological comparison. Four basic modes or styles of comparison were isolated: the ethnographic, the encyclopaedic, the morphological, and the evolutionary.

The ethnographic is based essentially on travelers' impressions. Something "other" has been encountered and perceived as surprising either in its similarity or dissimilarity to what is familiar "back home." Features are compared which strike the eye of the traveler; comparison functions primarily as a means for overcoming strangeness. As such, ethnographic comparisons are frequently idiosyncratic, depending on intuition, a chance association, or the knowledge one happens to have. There is nothing systematic in such comparisons, they lack any basis, and so, in the end, they strike us as uninteresting, petty, and unrevealing. In Levi-Strauss's critique of Malinowski, such comparison loses "the means of distinguishing between the general truths to which it aspires and the trivialities with which it must be satisfied." 10

The encyclopaedic tradition was not limited by the external circumstances of travel or contact. Rather than presenting items from a single culture that had been encountered by the author, as the ethnographic mode characteristically did, the encyclopaedic style offered a topical arrangement of cross-cultural material culled, most usually, from reading. The data are seldom either explicitly compared or explained. They simply cohabit within some category, inviting comparison by their coexistence, but providing no clues as to how this comparison might be undertaken. The encyclopaedic mode consists of contextless lists held together by mere surface associations in which the overwhelming sense is that of the exotic. Malinowski's description remains apt when he wrote of "the piece-meal items of information, of customs, beliefs and rules of conduct floating in the air" joined together in "lengthy itinaries of threaded statement which make us anthropologists feel silly and the savage look ridiculous." 11

The morphological approach is more complex with regard to the theoretical assumptions that are entailed (largely derived from Romantic *Naturphilosophie*). For the purposes of this essay, we can largely abstain from a consideration of these matters. Fundamentally, morphology allows the arrangement of individual items in a hierarchical series of increased organization and complexity. It is a logical, formal progression which ignores categories of space (habitat) and time. It has as its necessary presupposition an a priori notion of economy in which there are relatively few "original elements" from which complex systems are generated: the "all-in-all" and the "all-in-every-part." Both internal and external forces operate on these "original elements" to produce variety and differentiation in a manner which allows the morphologist to compare individuals in a morphological series using rubrics such as "representative/ aberrant," "progressive/degraded," "synthetic/isolated," "persistent/prophetic," and to compare the individual with the generative "original element" (the archetype), either through direct comparison or as "recapitulation" or "repetition." The discovery of the archetype, as represented in the literature, has a visionary quality; it appears to be the result of a sudden, intuitive leap to simplicity. Characteristic of morphological presentations will be a dated account of the vision—Goethe gazing at a palmetto while strolling in an Italian botanical garden on 17 April 1787: Lorenz Oken
accidentally stumbling over a deer’s skull while walking in the Harz Forest in the spring of 1866. Nevertheless, in both the biological and the human sciences, morphology has produced major comparisons that have stood the test of time.

The evolutionary approach, which factors in the dynamics of change and persistence over time in response to adaptation to a given environment, has produced useful theory and comparisons in the biological sciences. I know of nothing in principle that would prevent fruitful application to the human sciences as well. However, what is usually known as the evolutionary approach within the human sciences, related inextricably to what the late nineteenth century termed “The Comparative Method,” is not fruitful, nor does it represent a responsible use of evolutionary theory. Evolution, as represented by the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century practitioners of anthropology and comparative religions, was an illegitimate combination of the morphological, ahistorical approach to comparison and the new temporal framework of the evolutionists. This impossible and contradictory combination allowed the comparativist to draw his data without regard to time or place and, then, locate them in a series from the simplest to the more complex, adding the assumption that the former was chronologically as well as logically prior. While such approaches to cultural materials are still practiced, albeit on a more modest scale, such attempts came quickly under the sort of criticisms leveled by F. Boas:

Historical inquiry must be considered the critical test that science must require before admitting facts as evidence. By means of it, the comparability of the collected material must be tested and uniformity of processes must be demanded as proof of comparability . . . comparisons [must] be restricted to those phenomena which have been proven to be the effects of the same cause.

I suspect that the majority of my readers would agree with this statement as well as with its concomitant stricture that comparison be limited to cultural artifacts contiguous in space and time—the method of “limited” or “controlled” comparison. Unfortunately, these statements and structures have also been used as the smug excuse for jettisoning the comparative enterprise and for purging scholarship of all but the most limited comparisons. As the Stranger from Elea reminds us, “A cautious man should above all be on his guard against resemblances; they are a very slippery sort of thing” (Sophist 231a).

We stand before a considerable embarrassment. Of the four chief modes of comparison in the human sciences, two, the ethnographic and the encyclopaedic, are in principle inadequate as comparative activities, although both have other important and legitimate functions. The evolutionary would be capable in principle of being formulated in a satisfactory manner, but I know of no instances of its thorough application to cultural phenomena. What is often understood to be the evolutionary method of comparison embodies a deep contradiction which necessitates its abandonment. This leaves only the morphological, carried over with marked success from the biological to the cultural by O. Spengler, and which has a massive exemplar in religious studies in the work of M. Eliade, whose endeavor is thoroughly morphological in both presuppositions and technical vocabulary, even though, in specific instances, its principles of comparison remain unnecessarily obscure. Yet, students of religion would be attracted by this alternative. Because of the Romantic, Neoplatonic Idealism of its philosophical presuppositions, because for methodologically rigorous and internally defensible reasons, it is designed to exclude the historical. The only option appears to be no option at all.

In the past two decades, three other proposals have been made: the statistical (especially as embodied in the HRAF model), the structural, and “systematic description and comparison.”

The statistical methods proposed are, without doubt, essential for evaluating comparisons in any mode, but they provide little, in themselves, by way of rules for the generation of comparisons. The only programmatic proposition, the HRAF project, is essentially a refinement of the encyclopaedic mode and is subject, with appropriate qualifications, to the strictures recited above. However, the various discussions generated by this approach have yielded, as an urgent item on any comparativist’s agenda, the question of the isolation of a unit for comparison with an invariant frame of reference. At present, the answers are too easily divided into those that resemble the ethnographic and those that resemble the encyclopaedic.

Structuralist comparison is more complex, and I shall be exceedingly brusque lest I distract from my theme. In terms of the descriptions presented above, I would classify structuralism as a subset of morphology, although with Marxist rather than Idealist presuppositions. The formal, comparative procedures of structural analysis appear to me to be identical with those in morphology. While I welcome the shift to Marx, who seems to me to be the necessary base for any responsible anthropological approach to culture, I do not find, as yet, that the structuralist program has come to clarity on the historical. To the degree that it is comparative, it falls prey to the strictures on morphology already presented: to the degree that it has been interestingly historical (e.g., M. Foucault), the comparative has been largely eschewed.

This leaves the proposal for systematic description and comparison which will be the subject of the third portion of this essay. To anticipate, although this is the least developed of the recent proposals, it is my
suspicion that this may be but an elegant form of the ethnographic to the degree that the descriptive is emphasized, and the comparisons thus far proposed remain contiguous.

The new proposals have not allowed us to escape our dilemma. Each appears to be but a variant of one of the four modes of comparison. The embarrassment remains. The only mode to survive scrutiny, the morphological, is the one which is most offensive to us by its refusal to support a thoroughly historical method and a set of theoretical presuppositions which grant sufficient gravity to the historical encapsulation of culture. Therefore, I turn briefly to a consideration of an historical proposal from within the morphological mode.

II

Perhaps the most difficult literature from the past history of the human sciences for the modern reader to appreciate is the vast library that might be assembled on the hoary question of diffusion versus parallel or independent invention. It is a matter which has preoccupied comparatists from Herodotus to the present, and it is one of the few places where the validity of comparative evidence has been explicitly and continuously debated. From the perspective of our endeavor, this debate becomes of interest to the degree that it can be seen as a tension between a concession to the centrality of historical processes over analytical constructs such as the “psychic unity of mankind.”

It is to be regretted that much of this debate is so arid. Where there has been color and interest, it is usually the product of a long line of distinguished monomaniacs from G. Elliot Smith and W. J. Perry through Thor Heyerdahl. But there is one group among this number that I would want to argue deserves further attention, not so much for accomplishment as for endeavor. I refer to the Pan-Babylonian school, whose name is sufficient to drive usually calm scholars to a frenzy of vituperation. “Pan-babylonianism”—the word awakens the idea of an extreme generalization... of fantastic audacities.” From our perspective, their prime “audacity” was the daring attempt to historicize morphology from within.

To put the matter as succinctly as possible, what the Pan-Babylonian school introduced was the notion of a total system, to use their favorite word, a Weltschauung. The importance of this cannot be overstated. Culture was removed from the biological to the realm of human artifact. It is man’s intellectual and spiritual creation. Concomitantly, the object of religion, for them the most total expression of “world view,” is man’s cultural and intellectual world, not the world of nature. It is the inner relationships of the “elements,” their system, their internal logic and coherence, that validates a “world view,” not conformity to nature. Therefore, the “world view” may be articulated in a rigorously systematic manner. Hence the “audacity” of the founder of the school, Hugo Winckler:

I claim to have established a formula which explains every conception of Babylonian theology. In mathematics, a formula is a general expression for the reciprocal connection of isolated facts, which, when it has been stated once for all, explains the phenomenon and settles the question. One may prove the truth of a formula by countless examples, illustrate it and show its practical utility, but when once the root principle has been found, there is nothing further to discover.”

The school—and in what follows I will summarize the work of Alfred Jeremias as a typical and eloquent example—takes its departure from the fact that, while anthropology brings ever new evidence for the contemporary “Stone Age” man (the “savage”), the newly recovered and deciphered literature of ancient Near Eastern civilizations reveals a cultured, urban, rational, and spiritual man. Jeremias argued that we find, “not hordes of barbarians, but an established government under priestly control” in which “the whole thought and conduct of the people were governed by a uniform intellectual conception... a scientific and, at the same time, a religious system.” This “system” had, as its chief aim, “to discover and explain the first causes of visible things,” these being discerned as a “microcosmic image of the celestial world.”

Jeremias concludes that the evolutionists are factually wrong, for there is no sign of nature worship and the like in the Near Eastern materials, no sign of slow development. Of more gravity, the evolutionary approach failed to account for the “inner unity of the cults” or, when they did, turned to notions of independent or parallel development based on a presupposition, which lacks all basis in fact, of the “psycho-mental unity” of mankind.

Common to both these critiques, is the Pan-Babylonian notion of a complex, well-integrated, primordial system at the base of culture. The incremental hypothesis of evolution can be rejected because it cannot yield this whole, but rather only a series of parts; the thesis of independent or parallel development can be rejected because it cannot account for systematic similarity (i.e., it can point only to highly general resemblances or parallel single motifs, not to their similar formal combination). Hence the school’s preoccupation with diffusion.

The ancient Oriental conception of the universe entirely precludes the possibility of independent origin in different places by the exact repetition of certain distinctly marked features that only migration and diffusion can satisfactorily explain. In his argument, Jeremias breaks with a set of explanations which have hitherto characterized most comparative endeavors: single trait compar-
Of course, the Pan-Babylonian school was wrong. At the factual level, its exponents placed too great a reliance on the high antiquity of Near Eastern astrological texts, dating them almost two thousand years too early. On the theoretical level, they placed too great a reliance on diffusion. Yet, in many ways they were right. They saw clearly the need to ground comparison and patterns in a historical process, saw clearly the need to develop a complex model of tradition and the mechanisms for its transmission, saw clearly the need to balance generalities and particularities in a structure which integrated both, saw clearly the priority of comparative systematics over the continued cataloging of isolated comparative exempla, saw clearly the power of pattern (and hence, of comparison) as a device for interpretation. They bequeathed to us this rich heritage of possibilities—and they bequeathed to us the problems as well. The two chief options followed by students of religion since then have been either to continue its diffusionist program shorn of its systematic and theoretical depth (e.g., the Myth-Ritual school) or to cut loose the pattern and the systematics from history (e.g., Eliade). We have yet to develop the responsible alternative: the integration of a complex notion of pattern and system with an equally complex notion of history.

As will be detected, with my evocation of the ghost of the Pan-Babylonian school, I have been slowly moving closer to the matter of systematics and to the particularized portion of this essay, that of description and comparison in the history of Judaism. Not that the preceding has been remote. For example, I know of no idea so influential on biblical scholars, students of Judaism and of religion than the groundless distinction, first generated by the Pan-Babylonian school, between cyclical and linear time, the former associated by them with the Near East and myth, the latter, with Israel and history.24

It is most likely an accident, but it is also a fact, that three of the most distinguished, creative, native-born American historians of religion should have devoted substantial portions of their academic careers to undertaking systematic descriptions and comparisons of early Judaism: George F. Moore, Erwin R. Goodenough, and Jacob Neusner.

It is the task of the third part of this essay to review their work from the limited perspective of the considerations on comparison already advanced.

Considering its date of publication (1927) in the midst of the controversies over the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule and his own considerable comparative labors as the holder of one of the first endowed chairs in history of religions in this country, George Foot Moore’s Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim is remark-
ably, in fact deliberately, free from explicit comparisons. Indeed, one of Moore’s central theses (against Bousset and other members of the school) is that Judaism is incomparable as a religious system. An examination of his work with an eye toward comparison reveals a consistent pattern. (1) “Normative Judaism” is autochthonous. Any comparisons which imply significant borrowing are to be denied. (2) Therefore, the largest class of comparisons to normative Judaism are negative. They are used to assert the difference, the incomparability of the tradition. (3) The second largest group of comparisons are internal, to other forms of Judaism: the biblical, the Alexandrian or hellenistic, the Samaritan. These comparisons are occasionally used to measure the distance from the normative, but are more usually employed to assert the overall unity of the system. (4) Where non-Jewish parallels can be adduced, where borrowing may be proposed, it always in the area of “nonnormative” Judaism, in those materials “ignored” or rejected by the normative tradition. Hence, the greatest concentration of comparisons will be found in the seventh part of Moore’s work, devoted to “the hereafter,” which focused on apocalyptic and pseudographic literature. In other rare instances, when borrowing or imitation is postulated, Moore emphasizes that it occurs in “late” post-Tannaitic texts, materials presumably “leaking” out from under control. (5) A final class of comparisons may be called pedagogic. These result from Moore’s presumption that he is writing for a largely Christian audience. Thus, while he is usually at pains to deny Jewish precedents for Christian doctrine (especially those associated with elements in Roman Catholic dogma), he is prepared to offer analogies to Protestant religious doctrines, presumably to help his reader understand. 

I can find only two interesting theoretical statements on comparison within the three volumes of Judaism. Both raise the question of the systematic, although in quite different ways. The first is the last paragraph of the work, the conclusion of the section on the nonnormative “hereafter”: 

Borrowings in religion, however, at least in the field of ideas [as a note Moore writes, “the adoption of foreign rites and the adaptation of myths are another matter”] are usually in the nature of the appropriation of things in the possession of another which the borrower recognizes in all good faith as belonging to himself, ideas which, when once they become known to him, are seen to be the necessary implications or compliments of his own. [For example] the Persian scheme must have been most strongly commended by the fact that it seemed to be the logical culmination of conceptions of retribution which were deeply rooted in Judaism itself.

While I do not quarrel necessarily with the notion in this passage (it reminds me of the exciting work of scholars such as Robin Horton), Moore nowhere clarifies the meaning of terms such as “necessary implication” or “logical culmination,” which hint at a generative, systematic logic. Rather, one feels when reading this paragraph as if one is in the presence of that remarkable figure in Borges’s narrative, “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote,” who labored for years to produce a manuscript which repeated, word-for-word, Cervantes’s masterpiece. Jews did not borrow, for what they “borrowed” turned out to be already their own. The second passage is the closest Moore comes to the articulation of an indigenous system—alias, it concerns the Levitical Code and not Tanaitic materials:

They were ancient customs, the origin and reason of which had long since been forgotten. Some of them are found among other Semites, or more widely; some were, so far as we know, peculiar to Israel; but as a whole, or, we may say as a system, they were distinctive customs which the Jews had inherited from their ancestors with a religious sanction in the two categories of holy and polluted. Other peoples had their own [systems] and these systems also were distinctive.

But the thought remains undeveloped. We are left with only the atomism: each religion has one or more systems; they are each distinctive; they are each incomparable.

Neither of these statements is developed further in Moore. They remain as hints of the possibility of describing systems with generative logics of their own.

What Moore did accomplish in Judaism in an explicit fashion requires no rehearsal. Despite his statement that he has “avoided imposing on the matter a systematic disposition which is foreign to it and to the Jewish thought of the times,” Moore applied to the Tanaitic documents a traditional Christian dogmatic outline (“Revealed Religion,” “Idea of God,” and the like), arranging his materials in a synthetic sketch in which the discrete items, despite his historical introduction and his catalog of sources, are treated ahistorically without individuality. Moore’s Judaism, although confined to a single tradition, is clearly in the encyclopaedic mode. What he produced, in a most elegant and thoughtful form, was, essentially, an expanded chapter on Judaism from his two-volume textbook, History of Religions. The suppressed member of the comparison throughout Moore’s work is Protestant Christianity; it is this comparison that provides the categories for description and the occasions for exegesis. But, as it is suppressed, we are left with a dogmatic formulation of incomparability and an equally dogmatic description. Moore’s work is unfortunately typical of most Jewish and Christian handbooks on Judaism.
It is the supreme achievement of this genre, but it provides no model for our inquiry.

The work of Erwin R. Goodenough richly deserves a monograph that has yet to be written. From our limited perspective, he presents himself—perhaps, the most interesting single author. For, unlike Moore, from whom he self-consciously distances himself, comparisons abound, between Judaism and other Mediterranean cults, between “hellenistic” and “normative” Judaism, between iconographic and literary materials. The comparisons are in the service of both a complex (and largely psychological) general theory of religion and of an equally complex historical reconstruction of Judaism. “I have not spent thirty years as a mere collector; I was trying to make a point.”

Fortunately for the reader’s patience, it is not necessary to produce such a monograph at this time. From the various methodological statements Goodenough issued in the course of his long career, a consistent set of assumptions may be gleaned. He was successful in making his “point.”

(1) Any given symbol (and it was crucial to Goodenough that one was dealing with an exceedingly economical group of symbols) had wide currency in the Mediterranean world; that is to say, it was part of a Mediterranean “lingua franca.” The fact of currency could be established by the enumeration of examples drawn from the ancient Near East, Egypt, Greece, Rome, the Iranian empire, and the religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity. (2) The same symbol possessed a “common meaning,” and this meaning was singular. He insisted that this meaning could be recovered by the (usually cultic) setting of the iconic symbol, as well as by its occurrence in texts (especially ritual materials). On occasion, a meaning may be explicitly given a symbol in literary materials (here, “theological” statements were given priority). Goodenough also held that symbols were effective primarily through “emotional impact,” that they retained this capacity for the modern interpreter as well as for the ancient religious, and thus could directly “give” their meaning to the modern student “attuned” to their “language.” The contemporary scholar “must let the lingua franca speak to him . . . directly . . . . If this be subjectivism, let my critics make the most of it.”

And so we should! (3) The symbols have been taken over in “living form” from the general milieu by Judaism.

(4) They have retained the same “value” in Judaism when borrowed. (5) Although they retain this common “value,” they have been subjected to a specifically Jewish “interpretation” (here, Philo and the rabbinic materials have priority). (6) In addition, there are a few specifically Jewish symbols, but these participate in the same general system of value and the same framework of meaning as those symbols which are part of the lingua franca. Around this skeleton, the vast exegetical and comparative labors of Goodenough on text and symbol are articulated.

I would hope that, in this summary, the reader would have anticipated my judgment. Shorn of his idiosyncratic psychology (itself a powerful ahistorical presupposition), Goodenough’s work is a variant of what has been previously described as the attempt to historicize morphology as exemplified by the Pan-Babylonian school. The system of “life” and “mysticism” at the level of the lingua franca functions as an analogue to “world view.” Judaism and other national and religious systems which stamp their own peculiar understanding on this “common language” function as analogues to “culture complexes.” The particular expressions, be they the writings of Philo or the murals at Dura Europos, function as analogues to the “linguistic” formulations.

I intend no criticism of Goodenough by labeling him a morphologist or by comparing him to the Pan-Babylonian school. He has opted for the most promising, but most unattractive, of the modes of comparison. In the same way that the structuralists have attempted to modernize the presuppositions of morphology by turning to Marx, Goodenough turned to his own understanding of Freud and Jung. This allowed him to affirm a generally ahistoric point of view, while asserting a modified diffusionism in specific instances (as when he described “syncretism” or the “Orphic reform”). However, he stands under the same strictures already articulated for both classical morphology and the Pan-Babylonian variant.

The last proposed to be passed under review is that by Jacob Neusner. While much that he has written is of direct relevance, he has summarized his program in an important essay, “Comparing Judasits,” which is also a review of E. P. Sanders’s massive work, Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion.

Neusner takes as his starting point Sanders’s introduction, where, after criticizing the frequent comparativist tactic of reducing the various world religions to “essences” which are then compared and the alternative comparativist device of comparing single, isolated motifs between religions, Sanders ventures a proposal for what he terms the “holistic comparison of patterns of religion.” This is to be the comparison of:

an entire religion, parts and all, with an entire religion, parts and all; to use the analogy of a building, to compare two buildings, not leaving out of account their individual bricks. The problem is how to discover two wholes, both of which are considered and defined on their own merits and in their own terms, to be compared with one another. I believe that the concept of a “pattern of religion” makes this possible.

Allowing, for the moment, the language of “entire” and “wholes” to stand unquestioned, and setting aside the difficulty, indeed the impasse-
bility, of comparing two different objects, each "considered" and "defined in their own terms"—a statement which he cannot mean literally, but which he gives no indication as to how he would modify—Sanders compounds confusion by further defining the notion of pattern. It is not a total, historical entity (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, Islam), but "only a given more or less homogenous entity." How much "more," how much "less," is needed to posit homogeneity and, hence, a pattern is left unclear. It is a matter of seeing "how one moves from the logical starting point to the logical conclusion of the religion." But the notion of "logic" is nowhere clarified. Indeed, it seems thrown aside by Sanders's exclusion of what the terms "speculative matters" of methodology and by his strange insistence that the logic is one of "function." Given these restrictions, I am baffled by what "entire religion, parts and all" could possibly mean for Sanders. I find no methodological hints on how such entities are to be discovered, let alone compared. His results give me no grounds for confidence.

It is at this point that Neusner joins the discussion. He affirms the enterprise of comparing "an entire religion, parts and all, with other such entire religions" and goes on to state its prerequisite for such "systematic comparison" (the term Neusner substitutes for Sanders's "holistic comparison") "systematic description." Who could disagree? We must describe what we are comparing before we compare. But much hinges on the meaning of the term "systematic." In Neusner's generous, initial proposal:

Systematic description must begin with the system to be described. Comparative description follows. And to describe a system, we start with the principal documents. ... Our task then is to uncover the exegetical processes, the dynamics of the system, through which those documents serve to shape a conception, and to make sense of reality. We must then locate the critical tensions and inner problematic of the system thereby revealed: What is it about? Here the difficulties begin. Despite the how to the notion of the social construction of reality, for Neusner, a system is a document, located at a quite specific point in space and time. A system is the generative logic (in Neusner's term, the "agendum") of a quite particular document, its "issues." The more one goes on with Neusner, the more it becomes clear that each important document may well be a system in itself. How, then, is each documentary system to be compared with each other? Let alone, with "an entire religion, parts and all"? I can find no answer to these questions in Neusner. Rather I find an elegant ethnography of Mishnah, and, to some degree, of Tosefta and Sifra. As I have argued above, comparison in such an ethnographic mode is necessarily accidental.

It would appear that Neusner has proposed what might be taken for an effort in historicizing atomism, a proposal for comparing "Judaisms," an enterprise seen as problematic by Neusner. He appears to eschew wider comparison which he views as that which often "compares nothing and is an exercise in the juxtaposition of incomparables." If this be an exaggeration, and there is much in Neusner's recent writings that suggests that it is, what in method and theory prevent it? We are left with the dilemma shrewdly stated by Wittgenstein:

But isn't the same at least the same? We seem to have an infallible paradigm of identity in the identity of a thing with itself. ... Then are two things the same when they are what one thing is? And how am I to apply what the one thing shows me to the case of two things? Wittgenstein's last question remains haunting. It reminds us that comparison is, at base, never identity. Comparison requires the postulation of difference as the grounds of its being interesting (rather than tautological) and a methodological manipulation of difference, a playing across the "gap" in the service of some useful end.

We must conclude this exercise in our own academic history in a most unsatisfactory manner. Each of the modes of comparison has been found problematic. Each new proposal has been found to be a variant of an older mode: Moore, of the encyclopaedic; Goodenough, of the morphological; Neusner, of the ethnographic. We know better how to evaluate comparisons, but we have gained little over our predecessors in either the method for making comparisons or the reasons for its practice. There is nothing easier than the making of patterns; from planaria to babies, it is done with little apparent difficulty. But the "how" and the "why" and, above all, the "so what" remain most refractory. These matters will not be resolved by new or increased data. In many respects, we already have too much. It is a problem to be solved by theories and reasons, of which we have had too little. So we are left with the question, "How am I to apply what the one thing shows me to the case of two things?" The possibility of the study of religion depends on its answer.
by force on Jewish youths by Syrian officials. The alternative understanding of 1 Mac. 2:46 to that offered above would be that force was applied against the Syrian officials who sought to prevent circumcision. See Josephus Ant. 12.278. Such an interpretation, in Mac- cabbic, seems unlikely on the basis of context.


33. It is striking that most of the scholars from G. F. Moore to E. P. Sanders, who have pursued the mirage of "normative Judaism" (see below, chap. 2), have failed to note the nature of the passages and options considered above.

his is not to make some facile argument that the inscriptions provide a "window" on the practice of Judaism as opposed to the elitist texts. In fact, the majority of the inscriptions studied elitist.

the Jewish inscriptions from Rome. I have used J. B. Frey, Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum (Rome, 1936), vol. 1, numbers 1-532, with the important corrections by B. in the reprint of this volume (New York, 1975). I have also compared Frey's texts in reciting in H. J. Leon, The Jews of Ancient Rome (Philadelphia, 1960), pp.

34. The Inscription from Beth She'arim, I have used M. Schwabe and B. Beth She'arim, vol. 2: The Greek Inscriptions (New Brunswick, 1974), designated important section on the Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions from catacombs 20 in N. Avigad, Beth She'arim, vol. 2: The Excavations, 1953-1958 (New Brunswick, 1975), pp. 230-58, designated BSR.

the Jewish inscriptions from Egypt. I have used J. B. Frey, Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum (Rome, 1952), vol. 2, numbers 1424-1539, as recited by D. M. Lewis in Jr. A. Fuchs, and M. Stern, Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum (Cambridge, Mass., 1968-70). I have identified these inscriptions, CJQ.

Hii, "Hesiion, Hosion," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, 1944), 5:489-92, for the basic bibliography and summaries of the various scholarly contributions.

39. S. Lieberman, Greek in Jewish Palestine (New York, 1942), pp. 69-78, esp. p. 71. L. H. Feldman, "Jewish 'Sympathizers' in Classical Literature and Inscriptions," Transactions of the American Philological Association 81 (1950): 200-208, esp. 204-5, discussing Hesiion, but not in funerary inscriptions, sets forth the odd notion that there were people who were "simply and literally 'pious' Jews in the general and not the technical sense." I have no notion of the two senses of pious to which he alludes.

40. There is no necessity for a full set of references. R. Lattimore, Themes in Greek and Latin Epigraphy (Urbana, 1962), pp. 266-300, esp. pp. 290-99, provides an excellent overview.

41. CJQ 1452-54, 1456, 1458, 1460, 1466, 1468-71, 1473-76, 1480-87, [1491], 1492, 1494-1504, 1514, 1519, 1521, 1522, 1525-27, 1530.

This is to support Frey's contention (Corpus, I:xxxi) that the language of the Hebrews belonged, at least at its origin, to a community which came from Judaeans in contradiction to the "Vernacular" Synagogue which he understands to have been formed by "indigenous" Jews, born in Rome. I find this more compelling than the alternative.

linguistic understanding which is forcefully argued by A. Momigliano, "I nomi delle prime sinagoghe" (Miletina and la condizione giuridica della comunità in Roma sotto Augusto," Rassegna Mensile di Israel 6 (1931): 283-92, esp. 290-91.

43. E. E. Williams, "The Vellburg Madness" and Other Essays (Honolulu, 1977), pp. 404-5.

Chapter 2

1. On these handbooks, see H. Hadji, Das mosenische Schriften des Mittelalters (Vienne, 1932): P. Rossi, Clavis Universaller ad munitio et legato comparataria da Libro a Librario (Milan and Naples, 1960); F. Yates, The Art of Memory (Chicago, 1966). I should note that I was led to take the starting point in memory for this essay by rereading the classic study by M. Holzbach, Les codes secrets de la memoire (Paris, 1952).


4. Note that David Hume, in his discussion of the Law of Associations in the third chapter of An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, writes of the similarity between words in different languages "even where we cannot suspect the least connection or communication," and thus moves from association as a matter of individual psychology, to association as an anthropological issue (in the edition by C. W. Hendel [Indianapolis, 1955], the passage quoted occurs on p. 232).

5. E. O'Gorman, Le idee del descumbrimiento d'América (Mexico City, 1951). Compare his own English language version, The Invention of America: An Inquiry into the Historical Nature of the New World and the Meaning of Its History (Bloomington, 1961). I have oversimplified O'Gorman's important argument as to the nature of invention. He maintains that the "New World" was invented over time as explorers came to realize that it was a world that their traditional world view had not anticipated. See further, M. Weishar, "The Meaning of 'Discovery' in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries," American Historical Review 68 (1962): 1-21.


7. Ihab H. Hassan, "The Problem of Influence in Literary History: Notes toward a Definition," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 14 (1955): 66-76. I quote p. 68. At the present, comparative law and comparative literature are the only two humanistic enterprises that function in such a way as to merit the title discipline. The question of "influence" has been much debated in comparative literature. In addition to Hassan, I have been much influenced by C. Guillén, "Literatura como sistema: Sobre fuentes, influencias y valores literarios," Filologia romana 4 (1957): 1-29, in its clarification of the psychological nature of the postulation of influence—although, I dissent from the conclusions he reaches.


15. HRAF comparison is embodied in G. P. Murdock's classic Social Structure (New York, 1949) and his proposal "World Ethnographic Sample," American Anthropologist 59 (1957): 664-87. For the methodology, see W. Moore, ed., Readings in Cross-Cultural


19. A. Jeremias, Das Alte Testament im Lichte des Alten Orients (Leipzig, 1904). For the historian of religion, the most important edition of this work is not one of the three German editions (Leipzig, 1904, 1906, 1916), but rather the English translation by C. L. Beaumont, Old Testament in Light of the Ancient East (London, 1911), vols. 1–2, with new materials added by Jeremias. The bulk of vol. 1 constitutes a major essay by Jeremias on the Weltbild which was not incorporated into the German version.


21. Ibid.


25. Moore, Judaism, 1:16, 115, 135; 2:295; 3:154–viii. It should be understood that the passages in Moore cited in notes 26–33 are intended as clear examples of the point in question and do not constitute exhaustive lists.


29. Moore, Judaism, 1:551.

30. Moore, Judaism, 1:332, 417, 544–66. Whether this is Protestant bias or a caution of his own formulation of the “church” of Judaism, or “catholic (universal) Judaism” (1:111)—a formulation which is derived from S. Schechter—I cannot determine. I suspect the former.


35. Moore, Judaism, 1:21–22 (emphasis mine). Note that the first sentence is a statement of the doctrine of “survivals,” on which see 2:8.


41. I have combined two passages, one from “Evaluation of Symbols,” p. 298, the other from Jewish Symbols, 8:20.


45. Sanders, Paul, pp. 16–18.


47. Ibid., p. 179.

48. On the problem of defining and classifying early Judaisms, see chap. 1, above.


Chapter 3


9. In this paper, I focus on the exegetical. See chap. 4, below, for a preliminary redescriptions of ritual.

