

# JEWISH SPIRITUALITY

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FROM THE BIBLE  
THROUGH THE MIDDLE AGES

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# Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism

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In the world to come each person will have to give an accounting for everything which his eyes saw but he did not eat. *y. Qidd.*  
4:12 (66d)

Whoever accepts the pleasures of this world is denied the pleasures of the world to come. And whoever does not accept the pleasures of this world is granted the pleasures of the world to come.

*Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* 28

## Posing the Problem

“ASCETICISM,” AS THE TERM is most commonly employed in the study of religion, is a *modern* construct identified with a set of diverse phenomena, which are thought collectively to constitute a coherent way of viewing the world and acting in it.<sup>1</sup> How one defines “asceticism” is determined by one’s choice of which of the constituent elements are essential to the encompassing construct and which are not. “Asceticism,” thus, is used to differentiate those religious systems and their components that satisfy the definition by including its essential elements from those that do not. Unfortunately, there is no scholarly consensus concerning how “asceticism” (and its related terms) should be defined when employed in the study of religion, nor are the ways in which it is defined, whether explicitly or implicitly, consistently applied in the comparison of religions and religious traditions. This is due to a number of factors:

First, definitions of asceticism are often based on the salient characteristics of a particular, *familiar* model. For instance, someone familiar with the

example of the Christian "desert fathers," who flourished in Egypt during the third and fourth centuries,<sup>2</sup> might consider as a definitive component of asceticism practices of self-inflicted bodily suffering that are not as characteristic of other pietistic systems generally labeled ascetic (e.g., ancient Syrian Christianity, Buddhism, and varieties of ancient Judaism to be discussed below). Thus, a particular form of asceticism becomes the model against which others are judged; if they differ too much from the model, they are said to be "diluted" forms of asceticism, or not properly ascetic at all. Obviously, scholars who begin with different models will end up with different definitions, including and excluding different religious systems under the rubric of asceticism. The arbitrariness of these choices should be apparent.<sup>3</sup>

Second, the word "asceticism" (and its relatives) has assumed in modern parlance negative connotations. By "asceticism" is often understood an extreme, *pathological* pattern of self-abnegation and flight from the world in the face of a less than hospitable social and historical environment.<sup>4</sup> In particular, such simplistic psychologizing is anachronistically introduced into the contexts of ancient cultures, which presupposed notions of psychic (that is, spiritual) well-being different from those of modern cultures. Such negative views of asceticism find their way into the arsenal of weapons employed in interreligious polemic and apologetic, even as practiced by scholars of religion. Given the prevalence of such negative views of asceticism, scholarly claims that a religious tradition, especially if that of the author, is free from or only slightly blemished by asceticism need to be examined critically.<sup>5</sup>

Third, many definitions and descriptions of asceticism are at fault not for deriving from too limited a model (the first point above) but for corresponding to no significant historical model at all, being rather *caricatures* of asceticism, whose features have been exaggerated under the influence of prevailing negative prejudices and polemical motivations (the second point above).<sup>6</sup>

Fourth, scholars frequently argue that the extent to which a particular religious practice (or complex of practices) is considered ascetic is determined by the purpose that motivates that practice. Unfortunately, motivations for particular religious practices are frequently difficult to discern. They are most often left unarticulated, and when articulated are either ambiguous, manifold, fluid, or inconsistent within a particular religious system. The criterion of motivation of purpose provides a window through which the subjective predispositions discussed in the previous points are bound to enter. For instance, some argue that to be *truly* ascetic, abstinence and self-imposed hardship require *complete* contempt for the body, its

needs, emotions, and worldly surroundings as an "end in itself." Abstinence or self-imposed hardship that is not so total or permanent or is undertaken for the sake of moral or spiritual advancement, or in response to specific historical circumstances or in conformity with religious law, is determined not to be ascetic.<sup>7</sup> Not only do such narrow views of what constitutes asceticism omit from consideration varieties of religious life that could shed valuable light on the phenomenology of asceticism, but they are predicated on ascetic models that (as stated in the previous point) are caricatures, unrepresentative of even the more severe varieties of asceticism of any historical consequence.

An alternate course has been charted by those scholars of religion, usually of a sociological bent, who view asceticism as a broad phenomenon comprising several types. Such typologies recognize that asceticism can include religious systems with differing degrees of abstinence, of distrust of bodily needs and material "goods," of exclusivity and separatism vis-à-vis the world and its immediate social contexts, of individualism and communalism, and may be motivated by a variety of "ends." Thus, Max Weber developed a typology that distinguishes "innerworldly" from "otherworldly" asceticism, and J. M. Yinger distinguished the asceticism of the "church" from that of the "sect."<sup>8</sup> Although these typologies derive from models within the history of Christianity and therefore do not transfer smoothly to varieties of ancient Judaism,<sup>9</sup> they begin to move away from the preoccupation with defining a single ascetic archetype, against which religious systems or subsystems as wholes are judged to be *either ascetic or nonascetic*.<sup>10</sup> Rather, they view asceticism as representing a *side* of religion in general, being variously manifested in different religious systems, as determined in part by their different social and historical contexts. Asceticism, then, is descriptive of important *aspects* of a religious system but not of its *whole*.

This broader understanding of asceticism sees it as responding, in a variety of ways, to a *tension* inherent in all religious systems: humans (whether individually or collectively) aspire to advance ever closer to an ideal of spiritual fulfillment and perfection, while confronting a self and a world that continually set obstacles in that path, whatever its particular course. How can one proceed along that path with a whole, undivided, undistracted "heart" (all one's energies and intentions) while living among the distractions of the present world?<sup>11</sup> How can one relate to and commune with a transcendent, supernatural order, to submit wholeheartedly to the divine will, while living a worldly existence ruled by appetites and archons? These are the broad religious issues, with obvious social and psychological implications, which the ascetic aspects of a religious system address.<sup>12</sup>

This approach allows ascetic responses to the above mentioned tensions to assume a variety of social shapes and to be motivated by a variety of religious ends or ideals, which are roughly divisible into three categories: (1) fellowship or communion (whether ecstatic or rational) with the transcendent order (God in theistic religions); (2) disciplined, correct (moral, righteous) behavior; and (3) reparation of ruptures in the individual's or community's fellowship with the transcendent order caused by failures (conscious and intentional or not) to behave correctly.<sup>13</sup> In different religious systems these ideals may be variously combined and emphasized and the ascetic methods for achieving them may vary in kind or intensity.

Having recognized some of the pitfalls of too narrow a definition of asceticism, we should beware of a definition that is so broad as to make it indistinguishable from religion in general, which thereby renders it meaningless as a useful descriptive term in the comparative study of religions. Before attempting to chart a course between too narrow and too broad an understanding of asceticism, it is important to recognize that this is not a problem invented by modern scholarship, but a tension inherent in the term "asceticism" and its Greek root *askēsis*, as a brief history of the ancient usage of the latter will demonstrate.<sup>14</sup>

The Greek noun *askēsis* derives from the verb *askeō*, whose etymology is unknown, and which first appears in Homer meaning to "work" or "fashion" raw materials so as to manufacture a handiwork.<sup>15</sup> The verb and its derivatives soon come to mean exercise or training, both of soldiers at war and of athletes for games.<sup>16</sup> It then comes to refer to practice and exercise that leads to moral as well as physical excellence.<sup>17</sup> As athletic and military training require both the positive strengthening of one's physical faculties and the negative abstention from weakening habits, so too philosophical and spiritual training require both affirmation and renunciation. This dual sense of *askēsis* is particularly popularized by Stoics and Cynics and is increasingly applied to the exercise of religion: spiritual training requires a constant guard against the distracting and weakening influences of the passions.<sup>18</sup> Although several Greco-Roman philosophical schools shared this twofold ideal of *askēsis*, they differed sharply, even internally, regarding the recommended extent and manner of the renunciation that was required.

The understanding of *askēsis* as disciplined, willful religious practice is evidenced among Greek-speaking Jews in Greco-Roman times, especially the Alexandrian Jewish Bible exegete Philo.<sup>19</sup> It is from Philo, most likely, that this sense of *askēsis* is adopted by early Christian church fathers.

place increasing emphasis on its negative side of self-control (*egkrateia* and *aprosynē*).<sup>20</sup> Eventually, the word is more fully identified with the suppression of desire and becomes a technical term for the austerity of eremitical and monastic life and practices.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, from early in its history *askēsis* carried the broad sense of exercise and self-discipline, and soon acquired the concomitant meaning of self-control and self-denial with respect to physical and sensual impulses which were thought to hamper the attainment of moral and spiritual excellence. Although radical dualism is an important component in some ancient expressions of *askēsis* (Orphism, Platonism, and Pythagoreanism), it neither defines the term nor the point of view it denotes.<sup>22</sup> For the ancients, including Jews, *askēsis* was not simply the negative denial of world, sense, pleasure, and emotion, but the willful and arduous training and exerting, often through abstention from what was generally permitted, of one's creaturely faculties in the positive pursuit of moral and spiritual perfection.

A definition of religious asceticism, therefore, should be specific enough to include its two main components: (1) the exercise of disciplined effort toward the goal of spiritual perfection (however understood), which requires (2) abstention (whether total or partial, permanent or temporary, individualistic or communalistic) from the satisfaction of otherwise permitted earthly, creaturely desires.<sup>23</sup> Within such a broad definition the ascetic aspects of different religious systems may be seen to exhibit different patterns, which in being compared can shed light on the complex role of asceticism in religion in general. This role is complex in that asceticism is most often manifested not as a simple creed but as a tension between these two positive and negative components, both of which are in constant tension as well with the personal and social exigencies of worldly existence, and neither of which is ever fully realized in life, except perhaps in theory.

I turn now to the question of whether it is fruitful to look at ancient Judaism (and by extension, although not to be treated here, Judaism of later periods) in terms of its ascetic aspects. The question is not: Is ancient Judaism ascetic or nonascetic? but: How is asceticism, as defined above, manifested and responded to in the ancient varieties of Judaism, including that of the rabbis? Is the generally accepted and often repeated view that Judaism in its early stages eschewed asceticism root and branch to be perpetuated? The fact that I have already rejected the question that premises this view should by now tip the reader to my negative response. But how much can positively be said and what historical implications are then to be explored are still to be explored.

I will introduce the application of these methodological observations to the study of ancient Judaism with a summary of the views of two eminent Israeli scholars of classical Judaism who provide two very different pictures.

Yitzhak Fritz Baer, in a Hebrew book titled *Israel Among the Nations*, put forward the radical thesis that Judaism of prerabbinic times, especially in the period between Alexander's conquest of Palestine in 331 B.C.E. and the Maccabean revolt in 167 B.C.E., was typified by an ascetic idealism that, although later diluted, left its permanent mark on rabbinic law and belief. Baer argues that the *hasidim rishonim* ("early pietists") of rabbinic literature were a circle of Jews who in the early Hellenistic period forged a religious ideology based on the social and spiritual ideals of Israelite prophecy plus the Greek ascetic ideals of Plato, the Cynics, the Stoics, and the Pythagoreans. That ideology required living one's life in relation to heavenly laws, constantly striving toward moral, spiritual, and intellectual advancement through various forms of self-discipline: the practice of purity, abstinence, renunciation of material goods, and even martyrdom. All this was to be in the context of an ideal society (fellowship) based on mutual trust and a natural economy. These ideals were expressed in a pietistic, ascetic legal code or "Torah" (proto-Mishnah).

According to Baer, the "early pietists" saw in the Maccabean uprising and the consequent restoration of Jewish sovereignty an opportunity to put their idealistic program into practice through the creation of a truly theocratic state. However, as ideals met the realities of obstacles to their implementation, the former were gradually compromised until finally, after the destruction of the Temple and the ascendancy of rabbinic Judaism, they were deferred to a future-worldly realization. However, remnants of the original "ascetic Torah" lie embedded in the corpora of rabbinic literature, especially the Mishnah and *barayot* (mishnaic traditions outside the Mishnah), waiting to be culled and combined so as to reconstruct the original, uncompromised ascetic ideal. According to Baer, this ascetic ideal was held also by circles influenced by the "early pietists": Philo, the Essenes, the Pharisees, and, eventually, early Christian monastic groups. These Jewish pietists are a historical bridge between the asceticism of Hellenism (particularly Pythagoreanism) and early Christianity.<sup>24</sup>

Ephraim E. Urbach responded negatively to Baer's thesis, arguing that much of what Baer refers to as asceticism in ancient Judaism is far from it. According to Urbach, where truly ascetic movements and practices do appear in ancient Judaism they are narrow, short-lived, and syncretistic. What is most important, they need to be understood as responses to specific historical events: the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., the Hadrianic persecutions and failed Bar Kokhba revolt of 135, and the anti-Jewish

decrees of amoraic times. They are, then, idiosyncratic intrusions into an otherwise nonascetic, even antiascetic, tradition.

Classical Judaism's greatness, says Urbach, was its rejection of what Baer calls the "ascetic Torah." Real asceticism, as exemplified in Philo, Hellenism, and throughout the church fathers, is based on the dualistic opposition of soul and body and is aimed at liberating the former from the latter, which is without value. This notion, says Urbach, is *absolutely* absent from rabbinic writings. Rabbinic forms of abstinence and acceptance of suffering are motivated, rather, by a fear of sin, a need to combat one's impulse to do evil, and a need for acts of atoning penitence, especially after the destruction of the Temple. They are not performed as acts of worship "for their own sakes." They are part of the *halakhah* (rabbinic law), which runs counter to asceticism. Most telling for Urbach is the fact that three distinguishing characteristics of Hellenistic and Christian asceticism are virtually absent from rabbinic Judaism: self-inflicted physical injury (except for fasting), celibacy, and the establishment of separate ascetic societies or orders.<sup>25</sup>

Here, then, are two strikingly different views of the place of asceticism in ancient Judaism. Although both contribute to our understanding, each is seriously flawed in its methodology. For my present purposes only the following points need be made:

Baer and Urbach implicitly presuppose very different definitions of asceticism. Baer understands it principally in its broader, positive sense of moral and spiritual self-discipline and exercise, whereas Urbach understands it in its narrower, negative sense of dualistic abnegation of the body.

Baer's attempt to extract the teachings of third-century B.C.E. pietists from third-century C.E. collections of rabbinic teachings and laws is methodologically dubious. It is not at all clear that the "early pietists" of rabbinic literature refer to a separate group in pre-Hasmonean (or even Hasmonean) times.<sup>26</sup> Baer's understanding of *askēsis* as spiritual and moral self-discipline is at times so broad that virtually any aphorism recommending correct living can be included under it. In fact, several of the examples from rabbinic literature which he adduces for a prerabbinic "ascetic Torah" fail to convince for this reason.<sup>27</sup>

Urbach's implied definition of *askēsis*, on the other hand, is unrepresentative and somewhat of a caricature. It does not do justice to Philo, Hellenistic *askēsis*, or the church fathers from which it is said to derive. As I have argued, radically dualistic renunciation of the body is an important part of some varieties of asceticism, but is not definitive of them or of asceticism in general. Nor for that matter is abstinence, when motivated by the fear of sin, the desire to curb the impulse to do evil, or the need for

atonement, necessarily nonascetic. A careful examination of Urbach's many references to extensive rabbinic fasting and other forms of abstinence and to positive rabbinic views of suffering suggests that these are more than isolated responses to a few specific historical events. And even if, as is certainly the case, catastrophic events engender ascetic responses, these responses need to be viewed as sharpened expressions of tensions and tendencies already present, if perhaps dormant or held in check, but no less ascetic. Urbach's *own* evidence suggests a more complex and diverse attitude among the rabbis toward asceticism.

Despite these criticisms, both Baer and Urbach make valuable contributions to the discussion of asceticism in ancient Judaism. Baer is correct in suggesting that *askēsis* in ancient Judaism needs to be taken more seriously, not as something uniform or static but as an important and vital component in the development of Judaism in its varieties, as it was for other Greco-Roman religions with which ancient Judaism both shared and competed. The predominantly negative view of *askēsis*, which Jewish scholars hold in common with modern culture and which they appropriate for their own apologetic purposes, blinds them either to admitting its existence or to according to it anything but a negative role. Urbach is correct in suggesting some of the significant ways in which Jewish *askēsis* differed from that of other Greco-Roman religions and in showing, albeit unintentionally, that it was not so totally suppressed by the rabbis as Baer argues.

In combination, the views of these two scholars suggest the need for a new approach. Ancient Jewish "asceticism," as I have argued the term should be defined, cannot be interpreted simply as a reflex of specific historical events or foreign influences, both of which are important to consider, but as a perennial side of Judaism as it struggles with the tension between the realization of transcendent ideals and the confronting of this-worldly obstacles to that realization. There is no simple way to resolve that tension either for Judaism in general or for any of its ancient varieties. How much abstinence and hardship, both for individuals and for a society, should be advocated or tolerated in furthering those ideals and removing those obstacles? It is the *variety* and *complexity* of responses to that never-answered question that should be the proper subject for the study of the place of *askēsis* in Judaism.

A number of recent scholarly advances make the subject of this essay all the more pertinent today: knowledge of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a library of an Essene, separatist, pietistic community having ascetic characteristics; burgeoning interest in other Jewish literatures of Second Temple times, with their often pietistic, apocalyptic, and ascetic leanings; greater willingness to view even rabbinic Judaism as residing in a Hellenistic neighborhood; the

growing recognition that rabbinic Judaism could include within its walls more mystical speculation (at least), magical praxis, and general diversity than was formerly admitted; renewed interest in the ascetic side of early Christianity, East and West, and the question of its Hellenistic and *Jewish* connections; and the growing sense that all of the above are interconnected and not simply isolated and heretical embarrassments.

Obviously, in the space remaining a systematic treatment of these issues is impossible.<sup>28</sup> Rather, I shall illustrate through exemplification the path that such a treatment should follow: first, a brief sketch of prerabbinic Jewish manifestations of the "ascetic tension," which will serve as a backdrop for the examination of a select number of rabbinic passages that exemplify that tension, both between rabbinic Judaism and its predecessors and within the ranks of the rabbis.

### *Askēsis* in Prerabbinic Judaism

The Jewish literature that falls roughly between the last books of the canonical Hebrew Bible (200 B.C.E.) and the earliest rabbinic collections (200 C.E.) comes from a variety of social and religious contexts which scholars are only now beginning to reconstruct; it is not of one cloth. Still, in a survey as brief as this one must be, we may discern in this literature some general developments pertinent to our topic: first, an increasing preoccupation, among individuals and religious groups, with the dichotomy of this-worldly life and otherworldly demands and hopes; and, second, an increasing resort to ascetic practices as responses to that tension. The following is intended merely to exemplify and not to exhaust the evidence.

### *The Books of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*<sup>29</sup>

This literature evidences a growing concern with living in accordance with the high moral and spiritual demands of the Torah and Prophets, with transcending mortality and living in communion with God's will and wisdom, and at the same time with the formidable obstacles of human sin and the forces of evil. Repeatedly, ascetic practices are depicted as means to living such lives, to obtaining such access, and to overcoming such obstacles.

These practices are employed for such purposes as: (a) preparing to receive a revelation or vision; (b) accompanying supplication to God, whether for revelation, wisdom, divine protection, or healing; (c) repenting for intentional and unintentional sins; (d) curbing the appetites and passions

and guarding against sin.<sup>30</sup> The specific practices mentioned include the following, often in combination: (a) fasting; (b) other forms of voluntary dietary restriction (e.g., no wine or meat); (c) abstaining from washing or anointing; (d) sexual continence (temporary or permanent); (e) simple, coarse dress; and (f) flight to an uninhabited "wilderness."<sup>31</sup>

It would be naive to attempt to explain each of the above, but the following points, suggested by the same literature, are pertinent: (1) By doing without something that is otherwise permitted, a person demonstrates humility and self-sacrifice before God, appearing, as it were, cap in hand.<sup>32</sup> (2) In desiring access to God, one hopes to approach the realm of the sacred or holy (like the Temple) and therefore must prepare by separating from what renders impure (e.g., sex) and mortal (e.g., food).<sup>33</sup> (3) Even if one's self has been prepared, the surrounding human society may not be a fitting environment for attaining divine fellowship; a desert or a mountaintop is better suited, and the simplicity of primitivistic dress or diet is appropriate as well.<sup>34</sup> (4) Although Israelite dualism is, in general, not as radical as certain Greek forms which influenced it, it does presuppose a "spirit" that links humans with God and a "body" that links them with the earth and animals, and it favors the former over the latter. Access to God may be thought to require a strengthening of the former by weakening and guarding against the impulses of the latter. The greater the grip of those impulses, the greater the need for measures to break their hold.<sup>35</sup> (5) One of the frequently heard answers to the question of theodicy ("Why do the righteous suffer?") is that such suffering is a test of faith, testing the pious ones' acceptance of God's inscrutable will. It is only a small step to welcome such suffering and then another step to seek (even if unconsciously) it and the reward for its acceptance.<sup>36</sup> (6) Such ascetic practices could be resorted to temporarily, during times of particular need or danger, or permanently, in constant preparation for and expectation of otherworldly contact during life and finally at death.

We find frequent references, as in the prophets, to the sincerity and singleness of heart that distinguish the truly pious abstinent from the one who mistakenly believes that such practices by themselves "work." Despite such concerns that ascetic practices not be for show, it was inevitable that they served as signs that a person or group of persons was committed wholeheartedly to a life of righteousness and piety, distinguished by simplicity, purity, temperance, and self-sacrifice. Such were the signs of having surrendered into God's hands, as it were, and not into those of worldly passions and powers. Such practices when adopted by a group served not only to mark a collective path to the sacred but also to mark off the group from the surrounding society and its perceived dangers.<sup>37</sup>

What relation such ascetic practices had to the official Temple cult, which similarly promised access to the sacred, atonement from sin, and respite from the dangers and impurities of the world and likewise required abstinence of those who entered, especially of its officiants, is not clear. It should not be assumed, however, that these practices reflect an alienation from the Temple, a lack of confidence in it, or a protest against it. It could just as easily be said that they were often thought to complement and supplement the Temple rites. If their proliferation is explained by the failure of the centralized cult to do its job, this may be because that job of reconciling heaven and earth, life and death, had grown too enormous and pressured for one centralized institution to perform.<sup>39</sup>

The following three examples are offered as a sampler:

*2 Baruch* 20:5-6:

Therefore, go away and sanctify yourself for seven days and do not eat bread and do not drink water and do not speak to anybody. And after this time come to this place and I shall reveal myself to you, and I shall speak to you true things, and I shall command you with regard to the course of times, for they will come and will not tarry.<sup>40</sup>

*1 Enoch* 108:8-9:

Those who love God have loved neither gold nor silver, nor all the good things which are in the world, but have given over their bodies to suffering—who from the time of their very being have not longed after earthly food, and who regarded themselves as a (mere) passing breath. And they have observed this matter, the Lord having put them through much testing; then he received their pure spirits so that they should bless his name.<sup>41</sup>

*Testament of Joseph* 3:4-5 (Joseph upon being lured by Potiphar's wife):

But I recalled my father's words, went weeping into my quarters, and prayed to the Lord. For those seven years I fasted, and yet seemed to the Egyptians like someone who was living luxuriously, for those who fast for the sake of God receive graciousness of countenance. If my master was absent, I drank no wine; for three-day periods I would take no food but give it to the poor and the ill.<sup>42</sup>

### *Philo Judaeus (20 B.C.E.—ca. 50 C.E.)*<sup>43</sup>

Although the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher and Bible exegete Philo may or may not be representative of the attitudes of his hellenized Jewish contemporaries in Egypt, his writings are an excellent illustration of what I have called the "ascetic tension" in Judaism.

Philo inherits from Plato a radically dualistic conception of the universe. In this view, the material world of sense perception is an imperfect reflection of the intelligible order which emanates from God. The human soul

finds its fulfillment through separation from the world of material desires, a world that lacks true reality, and through participation in the life of the spirit and divine intellect; the soul finally reunites the true self with its divine source and thereby achieves immortality.<sup>44</sup>

Like Cynics and Stoics, Philo views this process as a long, gradual, and arduous one. The ability of the body with its desires and of the material world with its allurements to entice and entrap the higher self is considerable. Life correctly lived is a constant combat against the principal enemies of pleasure, desire, and impulse, the principal weapons in this struggle being reason, temperance (*egkrateia*) and moral effort (*ponos*). This battle takes the form of repetitive preparatory exercises, or wrestling bouts, which gradually strengthen the soul and its virtues, force pleasure and the senses into submission, and convert passion (*pathē*) into emotional tranquillity (*apatheia* and *eupatheia*). Abstinence is an important element in this program of training. Through such a program the soul, like plaster (*Agr.* 37.160), gradually becomes settled and solid, in preparation for an eventual life devoted to contemplation of and ultimate mystical reunion with the universe's spiritual source. But this is not a struggle in which the human will can succeed unassisted. It needs the guidance of divinely originating wisdom in overcoming the passions. But even so, the soul needs a foretaste of the mystical outcome of the struggle, which it receives through divine grace, if it is to have the courage and energy to sustain the struggle. To what extent it is, in reality, possible fully to win the contest during one's lifetime is unclear, since Philo suggests that even the best are at times overcome by the false attractions of worldly goods and are unable to escape sin. Thus far, Philo's view of ascetic perfection is highly individualistic and world denying.

Philo, however, does not expound his philosophy primarily in the abstract, but in the context of commenting on the Bible (in Greek translation) and on Jewish life of his time. And here his denial of value to the body, its material needs and pleasures, and to social life is not as absolute and consistent as the above summary of his ideals would suggest. Whereas Moses and the Therapeutae represent the ideal of complete victory over the passions and lives totally committed to the contemplation of the divine truth and mystery,<sup>45</sup> Jacob and the Essenes represent the more realistic intermediary stage of the "man in progress," engaged in spiritual training in the context of an "active life."<sup>46</sup> Although Jacob is the embodiment of Philo's ideal of the life of training, wrestling, or *askēsis*, being called *ho askētēs* ("The Practicer"), he is not yet ready fully to engage pleasure in battle, fleeing the contest for a while until he is stronger.<sup>47</sup>

Such strength is only *gradually* achieved with the help of the commandments of the Torah, which are often interpreted by Philo as exercises intended to strengthen the soul by repeatedly accustoming it to abstinence from and moderation of desires for food, drink, sex, etc.<sup>48</sup> Thus, although Philo's dualistic ideal leads him to idealize virginity as a precondition of communion with God and to claim that the wise person nourished by study has no need for even the most necessary food and drink, the reality of active life necessitates all of these, moderated, to be sure, through constant self-discipline and temporary abstinence.<sup>49</sup> Even the impulses may serve positive functions if harnessed by reason (*Mos.* 1.26).

Similarly, although Philo idealizes flight to the wilderness so as to engage in total contemplation, this should not be attempted until one has developed the necessary self-discipline *within* the context of a socially and politically active life. Those who think that they can shortcut the process by prematurely fleeing society or by undertaking severe, sullen practices of self-abnegation before they are spiritually prepared display a false and vain *askēsis*:

If then thou observest anyone not taking food or drink when he should, or refusing to use the bath and oil, or careless about his clothing or sleeping on the ground, and occupying wretched lodgings and then on the strength of all this fancying that he is practicing self-control (*egkrateia*), take pity on his mistake, and show him the true method of self-control; for all these practices of his are fruitless and wearisome labours, prostrating the soul and body by starving and in other ways maltreating them. (*Det.* 19-21)

Truth would probably blame those who without examination abandon the transactions and business activity of civic life and profess to despise fame and pleasure. For they are pretending, and do not really despise these things; they are only putting forward their filthiness as a bait, on the pretext that they are lovers of propriety and self control and patient endurance. (*Fug.* 6.33-34)

First enter practical business life, household-management and statesmanship—master each domain—only then are you qualified for your migration to a different and more excellent way of life. For the practical comes before the contemplative life; it is a sort of prelude to a more advanced contest; and it is well to have fought it out first. (*Fug.* 36).

After citing the example of the Levites, who served in the Temple until the age of fifty (*Num* 4:3) before earning the prize of a contemplative life, Philo continues:

And apart from this, it is a vital matter that those who venture to make the claims of God their aim and study should first have fully met those of men;



for it is sheer folly to suppose that you will reach the greater while you are incapable of mastering the lesser. Therefore first make yourselves familiar with virtue as exercised in our dealings with men to the end that you may be introduced to that also which has to do with our relation to God. (*Fug.* 38).<sup>50</sup>

Thus, Philo scorns the ascetic who thinks that *askēsis* consists simply in the practice of self-abnegation and flight from the world. Anyone who must *display* feats of self-denial does not practice true self-control, which is an inner struggle, a long, gradual process that must first be fought amidst society's temptations. I detect in this tension between a radically dualistic, contemplative ideal and a more moderate, socially engaged life of self-discipline a tension within Philo's own life. Although he desires (having tasted) the life of the Therapeutae, he feels obliged to shoulder political responsibilities on behalf of the Jewish community of Alexandria; he frustratingly defers the contemplative life to a "future" realization.<sup>51</sup> However, to reduce the ascetic tension in Philo's writings to being autobiographically determined is a mistake since it is a tension that is very much evident in the Greek philosophical and Jewish biblical traditions on which he is dependent: believing in one's heroic spiritual potential, yet realizing the limitations of one's present self; yearning to obtain the rewards of a different "world," yet being consumed by the demands of this.<sup>52</sup>

### *The Essenes*<sup>53</sup>

Ever since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 and increasingly as their contents have been published and interpreted, scholars have begun to acknowledge that the ascetic tendencies exhibited by certain Jewish writings of the Second Temple period are neither as theoretical nor as idiosyncratic as had once been thought. For now we have a picture, albeit fuzzy, of a Jewish group rooted in the Hebrew Bible and committed to the fulfillment of its precepts (of course, as they understood them), which incorporated many ascetic practices into its *communal* way of life.<sup>54</sup> Those practices included celibacy (at least for a major segment of the movement), a materially simple life free of private possessions, temperance in food and drink, avoidance of oil, simplicity of dress, reserve in speech, desert separatism (for those at Qumran), strict rules of ritual purity and of Sabbath observance—all part of a collective and individual discipline that made them in Philo's eyes "athletes of virtue" (*Prob.* 88).

The ascetic leanings of the Essenes—and here I will focus on the evidence of the Dead Sea Scrolls—need to be understood in relation to three inter-related aspects of their ideology: their dualistic view of the world, their

eschatological view of their place in Israelite history, and their view of themselves as a Temple and priesthood in exile from Jerusalem.

Although the dualistic leanings of the Dead Sea Scrolls are not entirely consistent throughout, which suggests development over time or internal diversity, they may be summarized as follows: The natural world is God's creation and is to be celebrated, but it has come under the rule of demonic forces of evil, both spiritually and politically. Humans as flesh (*basar*) come under that rule, being lured from the righteous and pious observance of God's Torah. God comes to the aid of His elect (the Qumran sectarians) by bestowing His guiding spirit (*ruah*) upon them. This spirit cleanses them of sin, enables them to overcome successfully the forces and temptations of evil, leads them to true knowledge of God through the correct interpretation of His revealed truth (Scriptures). God also provides the community with teachers (particularly the Teacher of Righteousness) who are especially imbued with the divine spirit and who guide the community in its practice and study. The community is an outpost of the divine "spirit of truth" in the midst of a world ruled by the "spirit of falsehood."<sup>55</sup>

The Qumran group understood itself to be living in the last days of the present age, awaiting a final battle between itself ("the sons of light") and the forces of darkness, in which the latter would be destroyed and the world would be restored to the rule of God's spirit, messianically embodied. Thus, their disciplined way of life was intended to ensure their constant preparedness, individually and communally, for that seismic event, for which they would provide the ranks of pure, holy warriors.<sup>56</sup>

The Essene community seems to have originated, at least in its move to Qumran, in a split from the priesthood in Jerusalem. In their view, even the Temple had come under the rule of evil forces (the Wicked Priest), which negated its role as the atoning medium for Israel. The Qumran group was organized hierarchically, with priests filling the central functions of teachers, judges, and officiants in the ritual. The community as a whole viewed itself as containing the divine sanctuary, much like the wilderness camp of the Israelites during the journey from Egypt to Canaan. They believed their camp, like the holy sanctuary, to be a fitting dwelling place for the divine spirit, through the intermediacy of angels. Although it is doubtful that the Dead Sea sectarians conducted sacrificial rites, their *discipline* and *suffering* were viewed as having atoning power, both for themselves and for Israel. They were a spiritual Temple awaiting and preparing for the restoration of the true Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>57</sup>

These preoccupations give the ascetic practices of the Essenes a particular flavor different from the ascetic aspects of other varieties of ancient Judaism previously discussed, but not without similarities. These peculiarities,

however, make the practices no less ascetic: abstinence is an important component in their disciplinary training leading to spiritual perfection. What is significant is the degree to which the ascetic aspects of Essene practice and ideology are communalistic in focus. They distinguish less the practicing (in Philo's sense) individual from his or her society than the unity of the sanctified community (*yahad*) from the outside world. They are concerned less with the fate of the individual soul than with the role and vindication of the community as a whole in the larger national and cosmic redemption. It is through participation in the discipline of the exclusive community that the individual member is "cleansed" by the divine spirit.

One of the aspects of the Essenes which most distinguishes them from other varieties of ancient Judaism—and this was noted long before the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered—is their celibate nature, at least as reported by the ancient observers, Philo, Josephus, and Pliny.<sup>58</sup> These explain Essene celibacy as being motivated by a desire to avoid the lure of sexual desire represented (according to them) by women and marriage, a lure that threatens to compromise the Essenes' ascetic liberty, their wholehearted pursuit of piety and study, and the bonds of their community. Josephus, however, states that the Essenes are not categorically opposed to marriage in principle and that "another" order of Essenes, valuing the obligation to procreate, do marry and have children but adopt an ordered sexuality which guards against sexual self-indulgence.

However, one of the interesting ways in which the Dead Sea Scrolls do not fully agree with the reports of the ancient observers is that they seem to *assume* the existence of women and marriage within the order and do not speak of permanent celibacy, being instead careful to exclude women from aspects of the community's life in which they might threaten its ritual purity.<sup>59</sup>

Some scholars have suggested that this discrepancy between the Qumran scrolls and other ancient sources indicates diversity within the movement with regard to the practice of celibacy. Others suggest that the observers projected a Cynic-Stoic ideal of celibacy onto the movement. Most recently, some scholars have suggested that the rule of celibacy was only incumbent upon a man when he had reached the age of twenty-five, the age at which he would enter service in the holy "army" and be eligible for other offices within the community. Before this (from the age of twenty), he would have been free to marry and to fulfill the obligation of procreation, perhaps in a location other than the central camp at Qumran.<sup>60</sup>

While this thesis does not yet represent a scholarly consensus, it raises the possibility that the ascetic ideals of the Qumran group had to be adjusted to the *community's* ability to fulfill them (as well, perhaps, to the scriptural

mandate to procreate). This could be done by assigning to a suborder the complete fulfillment of some of the group's ideals which all of its members were not yet ready to fulfill. In other words, the Essenes institutionalized an "elitist" *askēsis* within the community which did not threaten the community's ideal image of itself but served to fulfill that ideal on the community's behalf.

This same phenomenon of an "elitist *askēsis*" as a way of bridging the gap between the movement's ideal and its ability to fulfill it is reflected, I believe, in the following passage, which describes the Qumran "Council" (1QS 8:1-19):

In the Council of the Community there shall be twelve men and three Priests, perfectly versed in all that is revealed of the Law, whose works shall be truth, righteousness, justice, lovingkindness, and humility. They shall preserve the faith in the Land with steadfastness and meekness and shall atone for sin by the practice of justice and by suffering the sorrows of affliction. They shall walk with all men according to the standard of truth and the rule of the time. . . . It shall be an Everlasting plantation, a House of Holiness for Israel, an Assembly of Supreme Holiness [Holy of Holies] for Aaron. They shall be witnesses to the truth at the Judgement, and shall be the elect of Goodwill who shall atone for the Land and pay the wicked their reward. . . . It shall be a Most Holy Dwelling for Aaron, with everlasting knowledge of the Covenant of justice, and shall offer up sweet fragrance. It shall be a House of Perfection and Truth in Israel that they may establish a Covenant according to the everlasting precepts. And they shall be an agreeable offering, atoning for the Land and determining the judgement of wickedness, and there shall be no more iniquity.<sup>61</sup>

The practice of a collective religious, ascetic discipline that provides room for and perhaps encourages a more rigorous discipline on the part of the collective's elites is also a focus of "ascetic tension" within rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity, the former of which we will now consider.

### Ascetic Tensions in Rabbinic Judaism<sup>62</sup>

The relation of rabbinic Judaism, which formally begins with the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. and the gathering of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai and his students at Yavneh (Jamnia), to earlier varieties of Judaism is a complex matter that does not yield to simple formulas. The prerabbinic group with which the rabbinic movement has the greatest affinities is that of the Pharisees, whose name, Hebrew *perushim*, originally meant something like "separatists."<sup>63</sup> The exact character of this group—which is mentioned in the New Testament, by Josephus, and in early rabbinic writings, but which did not leave us any of its own writings—is a matter

of scholarly controversy and is probably impossible to determine with certainty.<sup>64</sup> What seems clear is that the Pharisees dedicated their lives to the careful study and strict practice of Torah precepts received from earlier generations of pietists. They organized themselves separately but not in isolation from the larger Israelite society, which they sought to influence, whether directly or indirectly. The Pharisees are noted for having been scrupulous in the practice of ritual purity, especially at meals: they ate their common meals as though they were priests eating sanctified offerings, being especially careful to protect the table from impurity.<sup>65</sup> They are also reported to have been particularly careful concerning Sabbath observance and tithing and were known for their fasting, simple living, and close-knit communities. According to one later rabbinic tradition (*Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* 5), they expected their self-denial in this world to be rewarded in the future world.

The ideal of *perishut*, for which the Pharisees were named, is also a positive value in rabbinic literature, where we find *perushim* used to describe the holy vocation of Israel as a *people*:

"You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Lev 19:1): You shall be separate/abstinent (*perushim*). (*Sifra Qedoshim* 1)<sup>66</sup>

"You shall be to Me a Kingdom of Priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:6). "Holy nation": The Israelites were fit to eat Holy Things before they made the Golden Calf. After they made the Calf this privilege was taken from them and given to the priests. . . . "Holy nation": Holy and sanctified, separated (*perushim*) from the nations of the world and from their abominations. (*Mek. Bahodesh* 2)<sup>67</sup>

Thus, the Israelites in ideally being a holy nation, a priestly people, are to aim to be priestlike, that is, consecrated to God. They are to be *perushim* in the double sense, first, of being separate and distinct from the other nations and, second, by virtue of abstaining from their indulgences.

In another context, *perishut* is a *stage* in the attaining of spiritual perfection:

It is taught: "Be on your guard against anything evil" (Deut 23:10): A person should not have impure thoughts during the day, lest he encounter impurity at night. From here R. Phineas ben Jair says: Heedfulness leads to cleanliness, cleanliness leads to abstinence (*perishut*), abstinence leads to purity, purity leads to holiness, holiness leads to modesty, modesty leads to fear of sin, fear of sin leads to saintliness, saintliness leads to the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit leads to the revivification of the dead. . . . (*b. Avod. Zar.* 20b)<sup>68</sup>

Yet in still other contexts it is suggested that, although *perishut* remains an ideal, not all who aspire to it do so in the right way or with the correct

motivation. In learning of Rabbi Akiba's martyrdom, during which he finally had the opportunity to love God with all his soul by dying for the Torah, we are told that there are seven types of *perushim*. The first six perform abstinences ostentatiously, overzealously, in order to gain merit, or mechanically. The seventh and highest level of abstinence is that of one who is abstinent out of love of God, like Abraham, who turned his impulse to do evil into an impulse to do good.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, we find a clear tension within rabbinic literature between the promoting of abstinence as an ideal to which all of Israel should, in fact be commanded to, aspire and the realization that many who undertake forms of *perishut* do so for vain, self-serving reasons.<sup>70</sup>

This tension is evident, in even more striking fashion, in another rabbinic tradition that employs the word *perushim*:

Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel (var.: Rabbi Ishmael) said: From the day when the Temple was destroyed, it would have been reasonable not to eat meat, and not to drink wine. But a court only decrees for the community things which they can bear. He said: Since they are ordering us not to study Torah, let us decree for Israel that they not marry. But then Israel will be desolate and the seed of Abraham will cease. Rather, they allowed Israel [these things], since it is better that they err unintentionally than intentionally. When the Temple was destroyed abstainers (*perushim*) multiplied in Israel, who did not eat meat, nor drink wine. R. Joshua confronted them saying: My sons, why do you not eat meat? They said to him: How can we eat meat when every day a Continual Burnt Offering was offered on the altar, and now it has ceased? He asked them: Why do you not drink wine? They answered him: How can we drink wine, which was poured on the altar, and now has ceased? He said to them: So too we should not eat figs and grapes, from which First Fruits were offered on the festival of 'Azeret [*Shavuot*], and we should not eat bread, from which were brought Two Loaves and the Show-bread, and we should not drink water, from which was poured the Water-offering on the Festival [*Sukkot*]. They were silent. He said to them: Not to mourn at all is impossible, for it has already been decreed, and to mourn too much is impossible. Rather, the sages have said: A person should plaster his house but leave a small area uncovered, as a memorial to Jerusalem.<sup>71</sup>

Once again *perushim* are identified with abstinence, now in response to the catastrophe of the destruction of the Temple. According to the view attributed to Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel (or Rabbi Ishmael), their response is logical. They deny themselves pleasure out of a sense of mourning and probably penitence in the face of this tremendous event.<sup>72</sup> Their reported response is a common one, and many examples could be brought from rabbinic *halakbah* and *aggadah* in which similar reactions to catastrophe are mentioned approvingly: in the face of such divine judgment against the people how can one continue "business as usual"?<sup>73</sup> What

bothers the rabbis is the fact that a *group* of Jews undertakes a theoretically proper course of abstinence which the *community as a whole* cannot bear. The rabbis prefer a milder and more symbolic form of self-denial which the whole community can successfully sustain and legally institutionalize (under rabbinic authority).

The relation of the *perushim* mentioned in this text to the Pharisees mentioned by Josephus and the New Testament is difficult to determine. Many scholars, beginning with the presupposition that rabbinic Judaism is antithetical to asceticism, assume that here (and elsewhere) *perushim* associated with ascetic practices cannot have anything to do with "our" Pharisees and must be "heretics." However, it is possible that the Pharisaic movement, which Josephus calls a philosophy and which modern scholars call a sect, was more diverse than is commonly presumed and was not wholly or immediately absorbed by the rabbinic movement. Some Pharisees moderated their asceticism in the process of trying to fill the vacuum of national leadership created by the destruction of the Temple.<sup>74</sup> Such rabbis knew that for their authority and program to be accepted they had to adapt their ideology to the needs and capabilities of the whole people, ideally expected to be a people of *perushim*. Other Pharisees may have persisted in a more elitist and voluntaristic asceticism, against which the rabbis had to turn, even while admitting the theoretical correctness of their ascetic ways. Thus, *perushim* and *perishut* remained rabbinic ideals. However, now they were no longer the ideals of a separatist group within Israel but of a separatist Israel, struggling to find new means to remain separate from the nations and consecrated to God, despite the loss of Temple and national sovereignty.

This tension was resolved neither easily nor quickly, but was internalized within the rabbinic movement. The rabbis differed regarding the extent to which a rabbinic elite should itself adopt an abstinent course of conduct more demanding than what could be expected of the people under its authority. Did the *halakhah* determine both the norms and *limits* of abstinence, or were individuals free to abstain from what was otherwise permitted, thereby separating themselves from the community for purposes of penitence, mourning, self-discipline, overcoming the impulse to do evil, or preparing for prayer, study, a vision, or death? This question, never answered within rabbinic Judaism, was inherited by medieval Jewish philosophers, mystics, and legal authorities.<sup>75</sup>

A few more examples will have to suffice for now, which illustrate some other aspects of the ascetic tension within rabbinic Judaism:

Said Simeon the Righteous [high priest, ca. 190 B.C.E.]: In all my life I ate the Guilt Offering of a Nazirite only once. It happened that a man came to me from the south, and I saw that he had beautiful eyes, a handsome face, and curly locks. I said to him: "My son, why did you want to destroy such lovely hair?" He said to me: "I was a shepherd in my village and I came to fill water from the river. When I looked at my reflection my impulse to do evil overcame me and sought to drive me from the world. I said to him: 'Evil one, you should not pride yourself in something which is not yours, in something which is destined to become dust and worms. Behold I vow to shave you off for the sake of heaven.'" I patted his head and kissed him, saying: "My son, may there be many like you who do God's will in Israel. In you is fulfilled what Scripture says: 'If anyone, man or woman, who distinctly utters a Nazirite vow, to set himself apart *for the Lord*. . . .' (Num 6:2)" (*t. Nazir* 4.7)<sup>76</sup>

There is ample evidence that the practice of Nazirite vows, biblically prescribed in Numbers 6, was widely undertaken in Second Temple times for various durations and for a variety of reasons: penitence, divine favor, self-discipline.<sup>77</sup> It was a way for an Israelite man or woman to achieve a high, priestly (even High Priestly) level of holiness through abstaining for a given period (according to the Mishnah, a minimum of thirty days) from wine, grape products, contact with the dead, even of one's immediate family, and cutting of one's hair. At the end of the vowed period, or should contact with the dead cancel the vow, the hair was shorn and offered with other sacrifices on the altar.<sup>78</sup>

Simeon the Righteous's general reluctance to accept the offerings of a Nazirite probably stems from a strong tendency in rabbinic literature, going back to the Mishnah, of viewing the Nazirite negatively. Apparently, many who enthusiastically vowed to undertake this obligation did so impulsively, for an inappropriate reason and without seriously considering whether they would be able to fulfill the vow.<sup>79</sup> This negative view is consonant with rabbinic concerns about vowing in general: it is better not to vow than to vow and not fulfill.<sup>80</sup> The rabbis go so far as to call the Nazirite a "sinner":

"And [the Priest] shall make expiation on his behalf [on account of contact with a corpse]" (Num 6:11): For he sinned against his soul (*nefesh*). R. Eleazar Hakappar says: Against which soul did he sin that he needs expiation? For he denied his soul wine. And we can argue *a fortiori*: If one who denies his soul wine needs expiation, how much more so one who denies himself everything. R. Ishmael says: Scripture [in speaking of expiation] refers only to the impure Nazirite, as it says: "And shall make expiation on his behalf for the guilt that he incurred through the corpse," for he became impure from contact with the dead. (*Sifre Num.* 30 and parallels)

Such radical exegesis, taking a biblically prescribed institution which declares the abstinent Nazirite to be "Holy to the Lord," in some ways equal to the *high priest*, and declaring him a sinner, can only be understood as a polemic. We probably have here a polemic either against the continued practice of Nazirite vows (unlikely in the absence of the Temple), or of individualized vows of abstinence in general, which the Nazirite comes to represent.<sup>81</sup> To be sure, Rabbi Ishmael rejects this exegesis, arguing that Scripture speaks only of the *defiled* Nazirite as a sinner.<sup>82</sup>

It is interesting that despite such negative views of the Nazirite, other rabbis are said to refer to the Nazirite as "holy" and "saintly": "And if one who denies himself only one thing [wine] is called 'holy,' how much more so one who denies himself every thing" (*b. Ta'anit* 11a-b). It would seem impossible to reconcile this view with that of Rabbi Eleazar Hakappar. How can the Nazirite, and by extension other abstainers, be called both "sinner" and "holy"?

Taken as a whole, the tradition may be suggestive of a middle path, distinguishing, as does Simeon the Righteous, between those who undertake the Nazirite vow, and vows in general, rashly or for vain reasons and those who do so only after having considered their ability to complete the vow as a form of religious self-discipline: their goal is not to be noticed, not to gain merit, but to control or convert their impulse to do evil.<sup>83</sup> As one later rabbi explains, the Nazirite whom Simeon the Righteous praises vows with complete integrity: "his mouth and his heart are in full consonance" (*y. Ned.* 1.1, and parallels).

Finally, two texts which deal with sexual abstinence:

It is taught: R. Eleazar says: Whoever does not engage in being fruitful and multiplying is like one who sheds blood, as it says: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed" (Gen 9:6), and immediately thereafter it says: "Be fruitful and multiply" (9:7) . . . [R. Simeon] ben Azzai says: It is as if he sheds blood and decreases the (divine) likeness, as it says "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28) [after saying "in the image of God He created him" (1:27)]. They said to Ben Azzai: There are those who interpret well and perform well, those who perform well and do not interpret well, but you interpret well and do not perform well [he was celibate]. He said to them: What can I do? My soul clings in love to the Torah; let the world be sustained by others.<sup>84</sup> (*b. Yebam.* 63b)

Although Ben Azzai's path of permanent continence is rejected by rabbinic law, which affirms the obligation of procreation for all, his reasoning, or that attributed to him, is reflective of an aspect of the ascetic tension within Judaism: If the central religious obligation is that of study of Torah (and attachment to God through it), then worldly preoccupations such as family

are bound to be distracting, for reasons of time, energy, and purity.

It is interesting that elsewhere the ideal of complete, ascetic, continent availability to Torah is articulated in the *aggadah*. But halakhically such a "division of labor" as Ben Azzai proposes, which the Essenes seem to have adopted, is rejected in favor of an ordered sexuality which, although it affirms the ideal of sexual abstinence as a way to spiritual perfection, recommends moderate sexual activity, especially for the sage.<sup>85</sup> Sanctification was possible both through *temporary abstinence* and through *moderation* in what was permitted. The idea that one could sanctify oneself through engaging in permitted sexual intercourse with a correct religious intention is, to my knowledge, unique among the varieties of ancient Judaism.<sup>86</sup>

Thus, a tension is exhibited between the ideals of the study of Torah in purity and complete attachment, and of fulfilling one's duties as a father and husband, a tension that is differently resolved by different rabbis:

Once R. Judah had a seminal emission while walking along the river shore. His students said to Him: Our teacher, instruct us in the laws of *derekh erez* ("proper manners"). He went down to the river and immersed himself and then taught them. They said to him: This is not what you have instructed us concerning the teaching of laws of *derekh erez* [that they do not require ritual purity]. He said to them: Even though I am lenient with others, I am strict with myself. . . . Our sages teach: Someone who has a seminal emission and has nine kabs of water poured on him [rather than fully immersing himself in forty se'ahs of water] is purified. Nahum of Gimzo whispered this to R. Akiba, R. Akiba whispered it to Ben Azzai, and Ben Azzai went and taught it to his students in the market. Two Palestinian Amoraim disagreed about this: . . . One said he [Ben Azzai] taught it, one said he whispered it. The first said he taught it so that neither Torah nor procreation would be neglected. The other said he whispered it so that the students of the sages would not hang around their wives like roosters. R. Jannai said: I have heard of some that are lenient [requiring only nine kabs] and of others who are strict [requiring forty se'ahs]. Whoever is strict with himself in this regard will have his days and years prolonged. (*b. Ber.* 22a)

Thus, although rules of sexual purity were liberalized for men—presumably so as not to discourage marital relations—some sages continued to impose upon themselves a stricter rule. The tension between sexuality and a sage's preoccupation with Torah study is unresolved.<sup>87</sup>

Many other aspects of the ascetic tension in rabbinic Judaism could be discussed: the degree to which voluntary abstinence is a fitting accompaniment to study and prayer, yet in excess lessens one's energy to serve the Master (*y. Dem.* 7.4); traditions of sages who undertake extensive fasts as penance for seemingly minor wrongdoings (*b. B. Mes.* 85a); fasting as a substitute for sacrifice (*b. Ber.* 17a); the practice of regular fasting twice a

week;<sup>88</sup> the physical dangers of extreme abstinence to the individual and the burdens he places thereby on the community (*b. Ta'anit* 11b; 22b); the value of suffering as a form of atonement for one's sins, a sign of God's love, and a guarantee of reward in the world to come (*b. Qid.* 40b); piety beyond the law as a way of guarding against sin (*b. B. Mes.* 35a); abstinence as an aid in mystical experience (Hekhalot texts, e.g., *Hekhalot Rabbati* 30; cf. *y. Kelim* 9.3); ascetic tensions in the observance of the Sabbath (*b. Shabb.* 11a).<sup>89</sup>

For now, however, the presence of an ascetic tension within rabbinic Judaism has been well enough demonstrated. This tension never disappeared.<sup>90</sup> In many ways it is strikingly similar to such tensions in pre-rabbinic varieties of Judaism and within early Christianity (which could not be treated here). Yet in other ways the ascetic tensions within rabbinic Judaism are distinctively rabbinic.

Like the authors of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, the rabbis are acutely aware of the dichotomy between people's spiritual potential and the obstacles to the realization of that potential presented by their inner impulses and the lures of the world. Penitential abstinence is one way of dealing with that tension if not of resolving it. Like the literature of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, rabbinic writings know of some who desired more direct experience of heaven, either in life or at death, and employed ascetic means to that end. Maintaining a separation between heaven and earth while allowing each to influence the other is a common religious problem for which different ascetic responses were sought. Sanctification of oneself through abstinence is common to rabbinic and pre-rabbinic Judaisms (e.g., *2 Baruch* 20:5, cited above). Sanctification through ordered and directed indulgence in pleasure (though not for pleasure's sake) is, as far as I can tell, a distinctive rabbinic contribution to the history of Judaism.

Late biblical and postbiblical Judaisms, by increasing the ethical, pietistic, and legal expectations placed on the *individual*, had to find ways of dealing with the psychic and social pressures thereby created. Ideals of perfection are one thing; dealing with an individual's and a religious society's continuing failure to realize them is another. One of the ways in which asceticism deals with this problem is by defining discrete areas of self-control in which the individual's (and society's) will can be exercised successfully in fulfillment of transcendent purposes.<sup>91</sup>

Like the writings of Philo, rabbinic traditions exhibit a tension between a radically ascetic (even dualistic) ideal and the need to fulfill that ideal within society. They too are critical of those who seek a quick, and overly individualistic, ascetic path to the realization of that ideal, if only because

it was a path not open to them as community leaders. Unlike the writings of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha and Philo, and like the Dead Sea Scrolls, rabbinic writings express concern for the spiritual perfection of the individual and the ascetic means to that end primarily within the context of a communal, institutionalized discipline. This creates tensions between the desires and abilities of (and perhaps needs for) pietistic circles which adopt levels of asceticism beyond that prescribed by custom and law ("elitist *askēsis*") and the dangers of separatism within Jewish society. This tension is particularly acute if those pietists wish to serve not only as religious models but as religious and communal leaders as well. The solution to this tension sought by a movement eventually dispersed over continents, living in the midst of other peoples, and wishing to bring all of Israel under its wings was to be much more complex than that "achieved" by a relatively small group, living in the desert, with control over who entered and left, and preparing for an imminent end of history. For the rabbis, it was a tension, as expressed in the *Mekilta* (*Bahodesh* 2), between being both a "kingdom of *priests*" and a "holy *nation*": sanctified to God while living among yet apart from the nations and their ways.

These, then, are only some of the ascetic aspects of the history of ancient Judaism, with implications for the historical study of later varieties of Judaism. The tensions that I have described never disappeared. At times they produced movement that revitalized Jewish life and institutions, but at times that movement threatened to upset the difficult equilibrium of Jewish pietism and Jewish society. Future scholarship will have to delve deeper and more systematically into these ascetic aspects of Judaism, free, it is hoped, from the fog of interreligious polemic and apologetic.

#### Notes

1. This is not to deny that the term "asceticism" has ancient semantic roots, a subject to which I will return shortly. Much the same can be said for mysticism, apocalypticism, and gnosticism, with which asceticism often overlaps. Limitations of space have prevented me from providing a full scholarly apparatus in this and the notes that follow. This lack will be rectified in a monograph which I am preparing on the subject of this essay.

2. All dates are C.E. unless otherwise noted.

3. The alternative of defining "asceticism" so broadly as to be meaningless will be discussed below. I wish to stress that the fact that different scholars differently define and apply the term "asceticism" is not simply a problem of semantics, but of historical interpretation, as I will show below for the case of ancient Judaism.

4. Others have criticized this bias against asceticism: J. Evola, *The Doctrine of Awakening: A Study on the Buddhist Asceticism* (London: Luzac, 1951) 3-15; Oscar

Hardman, *The Ideals of Asceticism*, 3-4 (with examples); William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902; reprint, New York: Modern Library, 1936) 291-304, 352-61; James A. Montgomery, "Ascetic Strains in Early Judaism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 51 (1932) 183-87. Hardman (p. 14) cites Sir Bernard Shaw's definition of asceticism: "thinking you are moral when you are uncomfortable."

5. This tendency is evidenced among scholars who argue that Judaism in general and Judaism of the rabbis in particular is antithetical to asceticism. They often appear to be implicitly responding to Christian anti-Jewish polemics going back to the New Testament which portray Judaism as the "legalistic" enslavement to this-worldly rules of the flesh. The argument that Judaism is defined by the centrality of legal observance and therefore contains no asceticism is used, interestingly, both by those who make of this a virtue and by those who make of it a weakness. For example, see Emil G. Hirsch, "Asceticism," *Jewish Encyclopedia* (London and New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1902-) 2:166-67; M. Lazarus, *The Ethics of Judaism*, trans. H. Szold, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1900-1901) 2:119-22; A. E. Sufferin, "Asceticism (Jewish)," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Scribner, 1910) 2:97-99; H. Strathmann, "Askese," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1950) 1.1:750; idem, *Geschichte der frühchristlichen Askese* (Leipzig: A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung Werner Scholl, 1914) 16-40 ("Der unasketische Grundzug der palästinensisch-jüdischen Frömmigkeit"). The Jewish-Christian polemic with regard to asceticism is more complex than here indicated, and I hope to return to it in a projected monograph on the subject of this essay.

6. Examples will be provided below. For now, note how the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1:483) defines "ascetic" and "asceticism" in terms of "extreme" and "severe" abstinence and austerity, begging the question: At what point is abstinence "extreme," except as subjectively determined? Such definitions, however, do follow common popular usage, as exemplified by the earliest English use of "asceticism" cited by the *OED*: "Doomed to a life of celibacy by the asceticism which had corrupted the simplicity of Christianity" (Sir Thomas Browne, 1646).

7. Such are the arguments most often adduced in denying asceticism a place in the history of ancient Judaism. For examples, see the sources cited above, n. 5, and my discussion below of E. E. Urbach's position on the matter. For a classic statement of the antithesis between the motives of asceticism and the principles of classical Judaism, see George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927-40), 2:263-65. For the same view in homiletical form, see Ahad Ha-'Am (Asher Ginzberg), "Flesh and Spirit," in *Selected Essays of Ahad Ha'am*, trans. and ed. Leon Simon (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1962) 139-158. For a denial of motivation as a criterion in determining whether a pattern of abstinence and self-imposed hardship is a form of asceticism, see Bernhard Lohse, *Askese und Mönchtum in der Antike und in der alten Kirche* (Munich and Vienna: R. Oldenbourg, 1969) 12.

8. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. E. Fischhoff from the 4th rev. German ed., 1956 (Boston: Beacon, 1963) 164-81; J. Milton Yinger, *Religion, Society and the Individual: An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1957) 417-20, 519-21. For another review of the literature on asceticism and Judaism, see Allan Lazaroff, "Bayha's Asceticism Against its Rabbinic and Islamic Background," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 21 (1970) 11-20.

9. Weber in fact denies asceticism any place in Judaism, since Judaism does not conform fully enough to his model of "innerworldly" asceticism derived from Puritanism,

with its religious vocation of socially transforming the present world. See Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, trans. Hans H. Gerth (New York: Free Press, 1952) 403-10; idem, *Sociology of Religion*, 246, 256-58.

10. Weber is inconsistent here; see preceding note.

11. The ideal of an "undivided heart" in service of God is discussed by Peter Brown (*Virginity and Society: Sexuality and its Renunciation in Late Antiquity*, forthcoming) as a central factor in the development of early Christianity's preoccupation with sexual continence.

12. For other exponents of this broad view of asceticism, see Oscar Hardman, *The Ideal of Asceticism*; James A. Montgomery, "Ascetic Strains in Early Judaism"; Bernhard Lohse, *Askese und Mönchtum*, 11-15; Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. O. Wyon, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1931) 1:102, 239, 245; M. Olphe-Galliard, "Ascèse, Ascétisme: II. Développement historique," in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, 1: 938-60; Joseph Bonsirven, *Le Judaïsme Palestinien au Temps de Jésus Christ*, 2:280-91. This view of asceticism was long ago articulated by Emil Durkheim (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology*, trans. J. W. Swain [New York: Macmillan, 1915] 309-17): "Asceticism is not a rare, exceptional and nearly abnormal fruit of the religious life, as some have supposed it to be; on the contrary, it is one of its essential elements." For most of the above, except where caricatures of Judaism still cloud the picture, a broader view of asceticism permits a more balanced assessment of its place in Judaism.

13. This division is from Oscar Hardman, *Ideal of Asceticism*.

14. For the following survey I have benefited from Bernhard Lohse, *Askese und Mönchtum*, 12-14; M. Olphe-Galliard, "Ascèse, Ascétisme: II. Développement historique," 939-41; Joseph Ward Swain, *The Hellenic Origins of Christian Asceticism* (Diss., Columbia University; privately published, New York, 1916) 47; H. Strathmann, "Askese," in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 1.1: 749-50; Hans Windisch, "askēō," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-) 1:494-96.

15. *Iliad* 3.388; 4.110; 10.438.

16. Thucydides 2.39, 5.67; Xenophon *Hipparchicus* 8.1.

17. For example, Hesiod *Opera et dies* 287ff.; Democritus *Frag.* 242; Herodotus 1.96, 7.209; Plato *Euthydemus* 283A, *Gorgias* 527E, *Republica* 7.536B; Aristotle *Ethica Nicomachea* 9.9.7.

18. For example, Isocrates *Busiris* 26; Epictetus *Discourses* 3.12 and *Enchiridion* 47; Strabo *Geographus* 15.1.29, 61. For the analogy between physical and spiritual training, see Epictetus *Discourses* 3.12.16; Diogenes Laertius 6 (Diogenes) 70-71.

19. See 2 Macc 15:4 (*observance* of the Sabbath); 4 Macc 12:11 (*observers* of righteousness); 4 Macc 13:22 (*observance* of God's law). Similarly, Josephus speaks of Jewish knowledge and interpretation of the Law as *askēsis* (*Antiquities* 20.12.1 §§264-65). For the discipline of the Essenes and Therapeutae referred to as *askēsis*, see Josephus *War* 2.8.10 §§150-53; Philo *Hypothetica* (in Eusebius *Praep. Evang.* 8.11); Eusebius *Church History* 2.16-17. Philo's frequent use of *askēsis* and related words to describe religious "practice," will be discussed below. The argument that scrupulous Jewish observance of the commandments is incompatible with asceticism (see above, n. 5) finds no basis in ancient testimonies. Note, for instance, Col 2:16-23.

20. Clement of Alexandria *Paedagogus* 1.7, *Stromateis* 1.5; 4.22; Origen *Against Celsus* 7.48. It is interesting that *askēsis* appears only once in the New Testament, in Acts 24:16, in the general sense of exerting oneself religiously. The *idea* of self-discipline

(*egkrateia*) and renunciation of bodily needs as a requirement of spiritual contest is expressed by Paul in 1 Cor 9:25-27 and 1 Tim 4:7-8.

21. See G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 244, s.v. *askēsis*, 6.

22. See E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: University Press, 1968) 27-42; Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1978); Henry A. Fischel, *Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy: A Study of Epicurea and Rhetorica in Early Midrashic Writings*, *Studia Post-Biblica* 21 (Leiden: Brill, 1973) 80 n. 100.

23. "Otherwise permitted" is intentionally vague, leaving open the possibility of its applying to both individuals in relation to their immediate societies and communities in relation to the broader society. Of the many definitions of asceticism that have been proposed, ranging from overly broad to overly narrow, that of Arthur Vööbus agrees most closely with the one I have proposed: "Asceticism, in religion, is the practice of the denial of physical or psychological desires in order to attain a spiritual ideal or goal" ("Asceticism," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., 2:135).

24. Yitzhak Fritz Baer, *Yisra'el ba-'Amim*, 20-57; Baer wrote also a series of articles in the Hebrew quarterly *Zion*: 17 (1952) 1-55, 173; 18 (1953) 91-108; 27 (1962) 117-55. Baer's thesis is developed by Zeev Falk, "From the Mishnah of the Pious Ones," [Hebrew] in *Benjamin De Vries Memorial Volume*, ed. E. Z. Melamed (Jerusalem: University of Tel Aviv, 1968-69) 62-69. Much the same view of the "early pietists," similarly extracted from later rabbinic texts but lacking Baer's emphasis on *askēsis*, is found in Adolph Büchler, *Types of Jewish-Palestinian Piety* (London: Oxford University Press, 1922).

25. Ephraim E. Urbach, "Ascesis and Suffering in Talmudic and Midrashic Sources," (Hebrew) in *Yitzhak F. Baer Jubilee Volume*, 48-68; summarized in Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. I. Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975) 12, 443-48.

26. See S. Safrai, "The Teaching of the Pietists in Mishnaic Literature," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 16 (1965) 15-33; idem, "The Pharisees and the Hasidim," *Service International de Documentation Judeo-Chrétienne* 10 (1977) 12-16.

27. For example, the statement attributed to Simeon the Just, "By three things is the world sustained: by the Law, by the [Temple]-service, and by deeds of loving-kindness" (*m. Abot* 1:2), is considered by Baer to be a cornerstone of the "ascetic Torah."

28. I shall discuss the first two points, and I shall duly treat the others in a monograph on the subject of this essay.

29. Although the ascetic practices recounted in these books are generally associated with biblical or legendary figures and are not presented as descriptions of or prescriptions for contemporary society, they presumably are projections from current practices and attitudes of the author's milieu. For a treatment of our topic in this literature, focusing on the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, see Robert Eppell, *Le Piétisme Juif dans les Testaments des douze Patriarches* (Strasbourg: Imprimerie Alsacienne, 1930) 112-13, 147-57.

30. For (a) see Dan 9:3; 10:2-3, 12; *Apocalypse of Abraham* 9; 4 Ezra 5:13ff.; 5:20; 6:30, 35; 2 *Baruch* 9:2; 20:5-6; *Martyrdom of Isaiah* 2:7-11; 1 *Enoch* 83:2; 85:3. For (b) see Jud 4:9-13; 1 Macc 3:47-51; 2 Macc 13:10-12; Tob 12:8; 2 *Baruch* 9:2. For (c) and (d) see 4 Macc 1:31-35; *Apocalypse of Elijah* 1:13-22; *Life of Adam and Eve* 5-6; *Testament of Joseph* 3:4-5; 4:8; *Testament of Judah* 15:4; *Testament of Reuben* 1:10; *Testament of Simeon* 3:4; *Testament of Moses* 9:1-7; *Letter of Aristeas* 15-55. The lines between these purposes

are not always distinct. Thus, it is sometimes unclear whether abstinence is intended to atone for a past sin or to guard against a future sin.

31. For (a) see most of the sources listed in the previous note. For (b) see Dan 10:2-3, 12; *Apocalypse of Abraham* 9; 4 Ezra 9:26; 12:51; *Martyrdom of Isaiah* 2:7-11; *Testament of Joseph* 3:4-5; *Testament of Judah* 15:4; *Testament of Reuben* 1:10; cf. Matt 3:4 (John the Baptist). For (c) see Dan 10:2-3; *Apocalypse of Abraham* 9. For (d) see Jud 8:4-8; *Wisdom of Solomon* 3:13; *Jubilees* 50:8; *Testament of Naphtali* 8:8; *Testament of Issachar* 2; 3:5; 7:2, 3; *Testament of Joseph* 3:4-5; 4:1-2; 9:2. On sex as a source of ritual impurity, see below, n. 33. A frequent theme is of sex for procreation alone and not for lust. See Tob 8:7 (cf. 6:17). For sexual morality setting Israel apart from other peoples, see below, n. 41. For (e) see *Martyrdom of Isaiah* 2:7-11; *Testament of Issachar* 4:2; cf. Matt 3:4 (John the Baptist); Josephus *Life* 2.11 (Bannus). For (f) see 1 Macc 2:29; *Martyrdom of Isaiah* 2:7-11; 4 Ezra 9:26; 12:51.

32. Many of the ascetic practices, especially those connected with penitence, are common to mourning customs. Both require visible signs of self-denial and humility. It is not always possible to determine when the motivation for an ascetic practice is mourning, when penitence, and when another form of petition before God, since they are often intertwined.

33. On sexual intercourse rendering one ritually impure, see Lev 15:18; 1 Sam 21:5-6. On priestly abstinence prior to officiating, see Lev 10:9. According to the Mishnah (*Yoma* 1:1), the high priest separated from his wife seven days before the Day of Atonement. Similarly, Exod 19:10, 15 relates that the Israelites prepared for the revelation at Sinai by being continent for three days, thereby "sanctifying" themselves. Moses is said to have fasted the whole time he was on the mountain (Exod 34:28; Deut 9:9, 18; cf. Elijah, 1 Kgs 19:8; Daniel, Dan 9:3; 10:2-3, 12). *Testament of Naphtali* 8:8 recommends a time for intercourse with one's wife and a time to abstain for prayer. For examples of abstinence in preparing for the receiving of a revelation or vision, see the examples in n. 30, above.

34. For examples, see above, n. 31. The obvious biblical antecedent is Israel's experience in the wilderness, romanticized by the prophets as a place of intimacy with God and of future redemption (Hos 2:14-17; Isa 32:16).

35. See above, n. 22. Note 4 Macc 1:1, 13, 31-35, where the dietary commandments of temperance assist in establishing inspired reason's rule over the passions and appetites. The goal of this type of ascetic dualism is not the destruction of the flesh but its harnessing by the spirit. The strongest dualism expressed in this literature is in *Wisdom of Solomon* 9:15, where a corruptible body weighs down the soul, preventing it from discerning wisdom, which comes through the spirit from God. This is still not Plato's image of the soul imprisoned in the body.

36. On the importance of accepting suffering as God's gracious chastening of the righteous and as a means of atonement, see *Psalms of Solomon* 3:3-9; 7:3-8; 8:29-40; 10; 13:5-9; 16:14-15; and 1 *Enoch* 108:7-10, quoted below.

37. Ben Sira 34:25-26; *Testament of Asher* 2:8; *Testament of Judah* 13; cf. Isa 58; Jer 14:12; Zech 7:3-9.

38. On Israel's being distinguished from the other peoples by its sexual morality, see *Letter of Aristeas* 150-55; *Sibylline Oracles* 3:594-95.

39. Note the example of the institution of the *ma'amadot*, which according to the Mishnah (*Ta'anit* 4:2-3) existed in Second Temple times as an opportunity for the Israelites to fast in their towns for four days of the week during which the priestly course representing them offered sacrifices in the Temple. Undoubtedly, some groups favoring ascetic practice, such as the Qumran sectarians, were alienated from the



Temple priesthood, and their practices may be seen as an *alternative* to participation in the official cult. However, this need not have been true for asceticism in general.

40. Translation from *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983) 1:627.

41. *Ibid.*, 1:88.

42. *Ibid.*, 1:820. On the shining faces of the abstinent, see 4 Ezra 7:125.

43. Treatments of Philo's ascetic side can be found in the standard works on his philosophy. Of particular value are: Thomas H. Billings, *The Platonism of Philo Judaeus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1919) 68-87; Henry Chadwick, "Philo and the Beginnings of Christian Thought," in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge: University Press, 1967) 137-57; John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists: 80 B.C. to A.D. 220* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977) 139-83; Erwin R. Goodenough, *The Politics of Philo Judaeus: Practice and Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1938) 28-29; 66-76; Marguerite Harl, "Adam et les deux Arbres du Paradis chez Philo d'Alexandrie," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 50 (1962) 321-88; David Winston, "Was Philo a Mystic?" in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, 15-39, as well as Winston's essay in this volume, chapter 8. For an understanding of the Greek philosophical roots of Philo's asceticism, see Clifford Herschel Moore, "Greek and Roman Ascetic Tendencies," in *Harvard Essays on Classical Subjects*, 97-140; and the literature cited above, n. 14. The citations and translations from Philo's writings that follow are from the Loeb Classical Library edition. In addition to the abbreviations of works of Philo listed in the preceding chapter, n. 1, the following abbreviation is used in this discussion: *Agr.* = *On Agriculture (De Agricultura)*.

44. For the Platonic notion of the soul imprisoned in the body, see *Her.* 68, 85, 273; *Mut.* 173; *Som.* 1.139, 181; *Deus* 111-15; *Ebr.* 101; *Abr.* 9. For the constant vigilance of the mind against the passions, see *LA* 2.27-30: when the one is awake the other sleeps.

45. Both have treatises devoted to them: *The Life of Moses* and *The Contemplative Life*. For a statement of Moses' subjugation and eradication of the passions through the practice (*askēsis*) of temperance, see *Mos.* 1.25-29.

46. The expression "man in progress" is a Stoic tag, applied by Philo to Jacob in contrast to Moses, the "perfect man," in *LA* 3.140. Philo contrasts the "active life" of the Essenes with the "contemplative life" of the Therapeutae in *Cont.* 1.

47. Whereas Moses rids himself of all pleasure, Jacob, the man of gradual improvement, does not reject pleasure in its entirety, rather "welcoming simple and unavoidable pleasure, while declining that which is excessive and over elaborate in the way of delicacies" (*LA* 3.140). On Jacob's initial flight from confronting pleasure, see *Fug.* 7.39, 43, 45. For a Greek parallel, see Epictetus *Discourses* 3.12.12. For Philo, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob represent respectively the three Sophist components of moral education: acquired learning (*mathēsis*), nature (*physis*), and practice (*askēsis*).

48. See for example his interpretations of the laws of the Seventh Year (*Spec.* 2.104-9), of the Nazirite (*Spec.* 1.247-54), of Yom Kippur (*Spec.* 2.194-98), of firstfruits (*Spec.* 4.98-101), and of unleavened bread (*Spec.* 2.159-61). Whereas the "perfect man" denies pleasure of his own initiative, "the practitioner" must be commanded what to do, thereby guided by divine reason.

49. For the ideal of virginity as a precondition of communion with God, see *Cher.* 50 and *Mos.* 2.68-70. See also his explanation of Essene continence (*Hypothetica* in Eusebius *Praep. Evang.* 8.11). The celibate Therapeutae, Philo says, chose wisdom alone as their life mates: *Cont.* 68. On Moses' abstinence from food and drink as a way of cleansing himself of pleasure in preparation for receiving revelation, see *LA* 3.141-42.

50. For other rejections of excessive abstinence or world flight, see *Mig.* 90-91; *Fug.*

4.25; 5.28-31; 6.33; *Spec.* 4.102. Note in these Philo's favoring of an Aristotelian "middle way": Do not reject wealth but use it charitably. Do not hesitate to attend a luxurious repast, but drink in moderation, etc. For remarkably similar rejections of excessive asceticism, see Seneca *Epistulae* 5.1-6.

51. For this tension within his own life see *Spec.* 3.1-6; *LA* 2.84-88.

52. This tension between the ideal of world renunciation and the role of the philosopher in politically transforming society is evident in Plato as well. Cynics and Stoics are similarly torn between the ideal of complete rejection of passion and an acceptance (if not valuing) of those "natural" impulses that require satisfaction. For a succinct statement of the Stoic attitude to passion and pleasure, see F. H. Sandbach, *The Stoics, Ancient Culture and Society* (New York: Norton; London: Chatto and Windus, 1975) 59-68.

53. I assume here that the Jewish sectarians at Qumran were at the center of the Essene movement described by Josephus, Philo, and Pliny. The Therapeutae, referred to above in my discussion of Philo (nn. 45, 46, 49), will not be dealt with here since Philo's idealization of them is our only source of information. For the abbreviations of the titles of the Qumran writings, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Major Publications and Tools for Study* (Sources for Biblical Study 8; Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature and Scholars Press, 1975) 3-8.

54. As noted above, n. 19, the term *askēsis* was used by Greek-speaking Jews and Christians in referring to the Essenes' discipline.

55. See David Flusser, "The Dualism of 'Flesh and Spirit' in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 27 (1957-58) 158-65. For good examples, see 1QS 3:13-4:1; 4:19-22; 1QH 11:10-14.

56. See Matthew Black, *The Scrolls and Christian Origins: Studies in the Jewish Background of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner, 1961) 16, 29-30; idem, "The Tradition of Hasidæan-Essene Asceticism: Its Origins and Influence," in *Aspects du Judéo-Christianisme*, 19-33. Black's reconstruction of a Nazirite background for the Essene holy warrior is highly speculative.

57. The Qumran camp is to be kept pure from defilement, since the holy angels dwell with the congregation: 1QSa 2:3-9. On the presence of angels amidst the congregation see 1QM 7:1-7; 1QH 11:10-14. On the sexual purity of the camp, see below, n. 59.

58. See Pliny *Nat. Hist.* 5.13.73; Josephus, *War* 2.8.2 §§ 119-21; 2.8.13 §§ 160-61; Philo *Hypothetica* (in Eusebius *Praep. Evang.* 8.11).

59. See above, n. 33. On the sanctity of the camp, see Deut 23:9-14; 2 Sam 11:7-13. For the Essene concern that the Temple in Jerusalem had been defiled by sexual contamination, see CD 5:6-7. Similarly, 1QSa 1:26 requires that when the whole assembly gathers for judgment, or for the Council of the Community, or for war, each member must prepare by being "sanctified" the previous three days. This is taken to refer to sexual abstinence, following the model of the revelation at Sinai (Exod 19:10-15). In 1QM 7:1-7 boys and women are forbidden from entering the camps during war, as are those with blemishes and men who have had night emissions. The recently published *Temple Scroll* (45-46) spells out similar measures for protecting the purity of the "Temple City."

60. According to Num 1:22 men enter the holy army at twenty. Yet 1QSa 1:8-11 states that the Qumran sectarians are enrolled in the community at twenty, at which age they are first permitted to marry since they can then distinguish between good and evil. At twenty-five, the age at which Levites begin their service, they enter the lowest rank of office within the community/army (see 1QM 7:1-7). For this thesis, see Abel Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple* (Lund: Gleerup, 1965) 45-65. On

the relation of Qumran celibacy to ritual purity, see Antoine Guillaumont, "A propos du celibat des Esseniers," in *Hommages à André Dupont-Sommer* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1971) 395-404; A. Marx, "Les racines du célibat essénien," *Revue de Qumran* 7 (1970) 323-42. On the question of Qumran celibacy, see now Lawrence H. Schiffman, *Sectarian Law in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Courts, Testimony and the Penal Code*, Brown Judaic Studies 33 (Chico: Scholars Press, 1983) 13, 64, 214-15. Scholars of Syrian Christianity have recently drawn attention to the parallels between Essene celibacy and that of the Syriac *Qyama*; see Antoine Guillaumont, "Monachisme et éthique judéo-chrétienne," in *Judéo-Christianisme*, 199-218; Robert Murray, "The Exhortation to Candidates for Ascetical Vows at Baptism in the Early Christian Church," *New Testament Studies* 21 (1974-75) 59-80.

61. Translated by Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962) 85.

62. Because of the volume and diversity of the rabbinic corpus and the present limitations of space, the following discussion must be selective and not systematic. My thesis, proposed in the introduction and to be illustrated now, is that there is no single rabbinic view of asceticism. Rather, asceticism has to be viewed as one important aspect of rabbinic Judaism, often in tension with others. Therefore, future study will have to focus on the degree to which these aspects and tensions are differently expressed in specific rabbinic corpora, in association with particular circles of sages, and in relation to specific areas of law and lore.

63. For the most recent discussion, see A. I. Baumgarten, "The Name of the Pharisees," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 (1983) 411-28. Baumgarten's argument that the name Pharisees meant "interpreters" is not to my mind convincing. It is based largely on Josephus's use of the Greek *akribēia*, often translated "exact," in describing the Pharisees as "exact interpreters of the law." However, *akribēia* when used in relation to law often has the sense of "strictness," as in Josephus *Antiquities* 20.2.4 §43, and in Acts 26:5, the latter referring to the Pharisees. In patristic Greek *akribēs* is used for the "scrupulousness" of ascetic life. See Lampe, *Patristic Greek Lexicon*, p. 64. It would seem that the name *perushim* was originally a positive term, used to describe the Pharisees, whether by themselves or by others, as being exacting and hence somewhat separatist in their study and observance of the Torah.

64. For two opposing views, see Jacob Neusner, *From Politics to Piety*, 2nd ed. (New York: Ktav, 1979); and Ellis Rivkin, *A Hidden Revolution: The Pharisees' Search for the Kingdom Within* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978).

65. Jacob Neusner stresses the Pharisaic emphasis on purity. However, whether the Pharisees were defined by their preoccupation with purity or whether this was only one concern of theirs, part of a broader ethos, is difficult to know, given the paucity of unbiased witnesses. Purity was clearly a central element in the Essene ascetic discipline, as it was for Pythagorean asceticism.

66. Similarly, *Sifra Shemini* 12.4; *Sifra Qedoshim* 11.21; and *Lev. Rab.* 24.4: "Just as I [God] am Holy so too you be Holy. Just as I am *parush*, so too you be *perushim*." The same sense can be found in *Sifra Qedoshim* 9.2, where the emphasis is on separation from the idolatrous nations and their ways. Similarly, *Sifre Deut.* 104; *y. Yebam.* 2.4 (3d); Rashi ad Lev 19:1. On sanctifying oneself by refraining from what is biblically permitted, usually taken to refer to sexual relations, see *b. Yebam.* 20a.

67. On Israel's having once been fit to eat holy things, see *Mek. Pisha* 1.

68. According to the Munich manuscript. The same tradition is found in *m. Sota* 9:15, with *perishut* in the printed editions but not in the chief manuscripts. Earlier in the

same mishnah we find: "When Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died, the honor of the Torah ceased, and purity and abstinence (*perishut*) died."

69. *y. Ber.* 9.7 (14b); *y. Sota* 5.7 (20c); *b. Sota* 22b. In *m. Sota* 3:4 *perishut* is positively referred to in the sense of sexual restraint, and then the "afflictions of the *perushim*" are mentioned negatively. The commentators take *perushim* here to refer to those people who adopt ascetic ways for this-worldly benefits. See Maimonides and the Meiri ad loc.

70. We saw much the same tension in Philo and noted a Stoic parallel (above, n. 50). The critique of excessive asceticism for one's own honor is a frequent theme of early Christian literature, in both the New Testament (sometimes directed against the Pharisees) and the writings of the church fathers (see Col 2:16-23; Matt 6; Luke 18:12; Origen, *Against Celsus* 5.49).

71. *T. Sota* 15.10-12; *b. Baba Batra* 60b.

72. E. Urbach argues that such abstinence was motivated by a desire to find alternatives to the Temple cult (see above, n. 25). The examples of the following note, and the text itself, suggest self-denial primarily as an expression of mourning or loss.

73. For instance, *t. Ta'anit* 3.11 forbids wine or meat during the meal preceding the fast day of the Ninth of Av (mourning the destruction of the Temple). Similarly, *b. Mo'ed Qat.* 23b stipulates abstention from meat and wine between death and burial. In *aggadah*, note *Mekilta of R. Simeon bar Yohai* ad Exod 18:27, in which the Rechabites are said to have been commanded to live abstinent lives in anticipation of the destruction of the Temple. *Gen. Rab.* 31.12 (and parallels) states that Noah and his family (and the animals) were forbidden sexual intercourse while in the ark and concludes in the name of R. Abin: "If you see poverty and famine come to the world, regard your wife as menstruous" (that is, abstain from sex). As *Tanhuma Noah* 17 (ed. Buber) has God say: "Can it be that while I angrily destroy the world you build?" The same text shows how Joseph abstained from procreation during the famine. Note, however, that according to one tradition, Noah continued his sexual abstinence after leaving the ark, which one rabbi views positively as a sign of holiness, and another views negatively.

74. The tension between an originally separatist, individualistic, and elitist *askēsis* and the desire of its adherents to exert influence and wield authority within a broader religious and social circle is well exemplified in the evolution of early Christian monastic asceticism. See especially Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian*.

75. Note Maimonides's wavering position: *Moreh* 3.33, 48, 49; *Hilk. Talm. Tor.* 3.12; *Hilk. De'ot* 1.5; 3.1, 2; 6.1; *Mish. Tor. Ned.* 13.23-25; *Shemon. Peraq.* 4; *Mishnah Commentary*, *Avot* intro. 4; *Avot* 5:6; *Sanh.* 4:7. Similarly Judah Halevi, *Kuzari* 2.50; 3.1-7. Contrast Bahya Ibn Paquda, *Hovot ha-Levavot* 9. On Bahya's asceticism, see Allan Lazaroff, "Bahya's Asceticism," 11-38. On the penitential asceticism of the German pietists (*Hasidey Ashkenaz*), and its tensions, see Ivan G. Marcus, *Piety and Society: The Jewish Pietists of Medieval Germany*.

76. See also *Sifre Num.* 22; and later parallels, some of which are cited in the following notes.

77. See 1 Macc 3:47-51; Josephus *Antiquities* 19.6.1 § 294; *War* 2.15.1 §313; Acts 18:18; 21:23-24; *m. Nazir* 3:6; *y. Ber.* 7.2 (11b). A burial inscription that refers to members of a family as Nazirites has been uncovered; see N. Avigad, "The Burial-Vault of a Nazirite Family on Mount Scopus," *Israel Exploration Journal* 21 (1971) 185-200.

78. According to Josephus (*Antiquities* 4.4.4 §12), the Nazirite, at the completion of the vow, offers his or her dedicated hair in sacrifice, giving the shorn locks to the priest. On the priestly aspects of the Nazirite, see Jacob Milgrom, "Nazirite," *Encyclopaedia*

*Judaica*, 12:909-910. For the sanctity of the Nazirite compared to that of the high priest, see *m. Nazir* 7:1.

79. For negative views see *m. Ned.* 1:1; *t. Ned.* 1.1; *m. Nazir* 1:7; 2:3 (cf. *m. Ned.* 2:3); and sources cited in the following notes. For a positive view of the Nazirite, see *Sifre Zuta* 9.6: "Because he acts in an abstinent (*perishut*) and pure way he is called 'holy.' And furthermore, Scripture considers him equal to a prophet. . . ." For the connecting of the verb *nzr* ("dedicate") with *prsh* ("separate"), see *Sifra Zavim* 9:6; *Sifra Emor* 4.1; *Targum Onqelos* Lev 15:31.

80. *y. Ned.* 1.1 (36d). However, vows are also viewed positively: "Vows are a fence around abstinence (*perishut*)" (*m. Abot* 3:13). In other words, the successful fulfillment of vows strengthens one's ability to abstain (Maimonides). Both the Pharisees and the Essenes are said to have taken oaths quite seriously. See Josephus *Antiquities* 17.2.4 §42; *War* 2.8.6 §135; *Matt* 23:16-22.

81. Hence, the argument *a fortiori*. Similarly, in *b. Ta'anit* 11a Samuel extends the argument to *anyone* who undertakes a fast (*ta'anit*). In *b. B. Qam.* 91b our tradition is cited against one who rends his garments too much in mourning.

82. On this debate, whether all Nazirites are sinners or only impure ones (having rashly undertaken vows they could not keep), see *b. Ned.* 10a, *tosafot*, s.v. *kullan*.

83. On overcoming or converting one's impulse to do evil, see *Sifre Deut.* 33; *y. Sota* 5.7; *y. Sanh.* 2.3; *b. Qid.* 81b; *b. Yoma* 69b. Such examples notwithstanding, it may be said that the ascetic control of one's impulses does not occupy nearly as central a place in rabbinic asceticism as it does in Philo and Cynic and Stoic writers (or Maimonides). Penitential asceticism, however, is much more evident. See Moses Beer, "On Penances and Penitents in the Literature of *HaZal*." (*Hebrew*), *Zion* 46 (1980-81) 159-81.

84. See also *t. Yebam.* 8.7; *Gen. Rab.* 34.14. On Moses' continence at Sinai (and before), see my discussion of Philo above, and *Sifre Num.* 99; *b. Yoma* 4b; *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* 2, 9; *Gen. Rab.* 48.14; *Exod. Rab.* 19.3; 46.3; *b. Shab.* 87a; *Midr. Ps.* 146.4; *Zohar* 3.148a.

85. See *m. Ketub.* 5:6. The ideal of sexual continence is more often expressed in *aggadah*, whereas ordered sexuality is prescribed in the *halakhab*. Like the Essenes, who, according to Josephus, had celibate and marrying orders, the rabbis found a way to incorporate both types of sexual self-discipline. Yet the two remain in tension. Note *Midr. Ps.* 146.4, where the expression "he sets free the bound" (*Ps* 146:7) is interpreted in various ways to refer to the expectation of release from rules of abstinence in the world to come. According to one view God will then permit intercourse with a menstruant wife since the discipline of ordered sexuality will no longer be necessary, whereas according to another view intercourse will be altogether forbidden since the *shekhinah* (divine presence) will constantly dwell among humanity.

86. See *b. Yebam.* 20a: "Sanctify yourself in what is permitted to you." See *b. Shevu.* 18b; *b. Shab.* 53b.

87. Note Zipporah's bitterness at Moses' continence in *Sifre Num.* 99 and parallels. For abstinence and hardship in combination with Torah study, see *b. 'Eruv.* 54a; *b. Sota* 21b; *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* 11; *m. Abot* 6:4, 5; *Sifre Deut.* 306. Cf. Eusebius's description of Origen's ascetic concentration on study in *Church History* 6.3.9-13.

88. On rabbinic fasting see S. Lowy, "The Motivation of Fasting in Talmudic Literature," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 9 (1958) 19-38. On the practice of regular fasting every Monday and Thursday see G. Alon in *Tarbiz* 4 (1932-33) 285-91.

89. A distinct tension can be discerned regarding the practice of fasting on the Sabbath. See Yitzhak D. Gilat, "On Fasting on the Sabbath" (*Hebrew*), *Tarbiz* 52 (1982) 1-16.

90. See above, n. 75.

91. For the important role of human will in the mishnaic law, see Jacob Neusner, *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 270-281. Human volition is especially central to Cynic and Stoic views of asceticism.

## Bibliography

For general surveys of asceticism in various religious traditions the best place to begin is still the series of entries under "Asceticism" in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Scribner, 1910) 2:63-111, even though the treatment of Jewish asceticism by A. E. Suffrin (pp. 97-99) is not satisfactory, since it, like most earlier treatments, tends to minimize (whether due to a positive or negative bias) the ascetic side of Judaism (see above, n. 5). For a survey whose presuppositions about asceticism (including its place in Judaism) are closer to my own, see M. Olphe-Galliard. For a more succinct survey, see Vööbus, "Asceticism," and for a still useful early attempt to develop a typology of asceticism, see Hardman.

Earlier efforts to rectify the prevailing view that asceticism is absent from or only aberrant within Judaism can be found in Montgomery; Bonsirven; Lazaroff; and Baer. For a more reserved approach to asceticism in ancient Judaism, see Urbach, "Ascesis." For ascetic aspects of Philo's philosophy and ethics, see Winston. On the asceticism of the Essenes and Dead Sea sectarians, see Black. Regarding the ascetic aspects of early rabbinic Judaism, no comprehensive treatment has yet been attempted. In addition to the differing perspectives of Baer and Urbach, further reading may include more detailed studies of specific areas in which ascetic tensions within Judaism are manifested, such as fasting: Lowy; Gilat. On ascetic tensions within medieval German Jewish pietism, see Marcus, and for asceticism in Bahya ibn Paquda, against the background of rabbinic Judaism and Islam, see Lazaroff.

Although a vast literature treats Western Christian asceticism, especially the phenomena of the Desert Fathers and subsequent monastic movements (a good place to start is Chitty), the social and phenomenological underpinnings of those phenomena and the comparative light they might shed on the ascetic aspects of ancient Judaism remain uncertain. See for now Rousseau; and Kretschmar. Recent study of Syrian Christian asceticism has pointed to even more suggestive analogues for the investigation of asceticism in ancient Judaism: see Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*, and Guillaumont. For the Greco-Roman background of ancient Jewish asceticism, an area in need of further investigation, a good place to begin would be Moore.

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## The Religious Experience of the *Merkavah*

JOSEPH DAN

### Jewish Mystical Schools in Late Antiquity

THE APPEARANCE of Jewish mystical schools in late antiquity gave a new dimension to Jewish spirituality as expressed in the classical rabbinic works of the Talmud and Midrash. The mystical teachings of these schools are preserved in the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature, the accepted appellation of the earliest Jewish mystical writings, produced from the tannaitic (second century C.E.) to the late geonic period (tenth century). These works, written in Erez Israel and in Babylonia, in Hebrew and Aramaic, describe in about twenty-five treatises the first mystical world view produced by Jewish culture.

When the main centers of Jewish culture moved to Europe in the tenth and eleventh centuries, there were Jewish scholars, poets, and philosophers who continued to describe the divine worlds in terms and symbols used by these ancient mystics, until, late in the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth, the symbolism of the Hekhalot mystics was incorporated into the new systems of the emerging European schools of Jewish mysticism—the Kabbalah in southern France and northern Spain, and Ashkenazi Hasidism, the Jewish pietism of medieval Germany, especially in the Rhineland. Thus, for nearly a thousand years, Hekhalot and Merkavah mysticism was the dominant element in Jewish nonrationalistic spirituality. It flourished side by side with the great legal systems of Judaism, the Mishnah and the Talmuds of Erez Israel and Babylonia, with the great schools of the Geonim, the heads of the legal academies in Babylonia, and the early Jewish philosophers and lawyers who shaped Jewish culture in medieval Europe.

In order to achieve such long-lasting impact on Jewish mystical thought, Hekhalot mysticism surely must have reflected deep-seated religious and