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# The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties (Hellenistic Culture and Society)

*Shaye J. D. Cohen*
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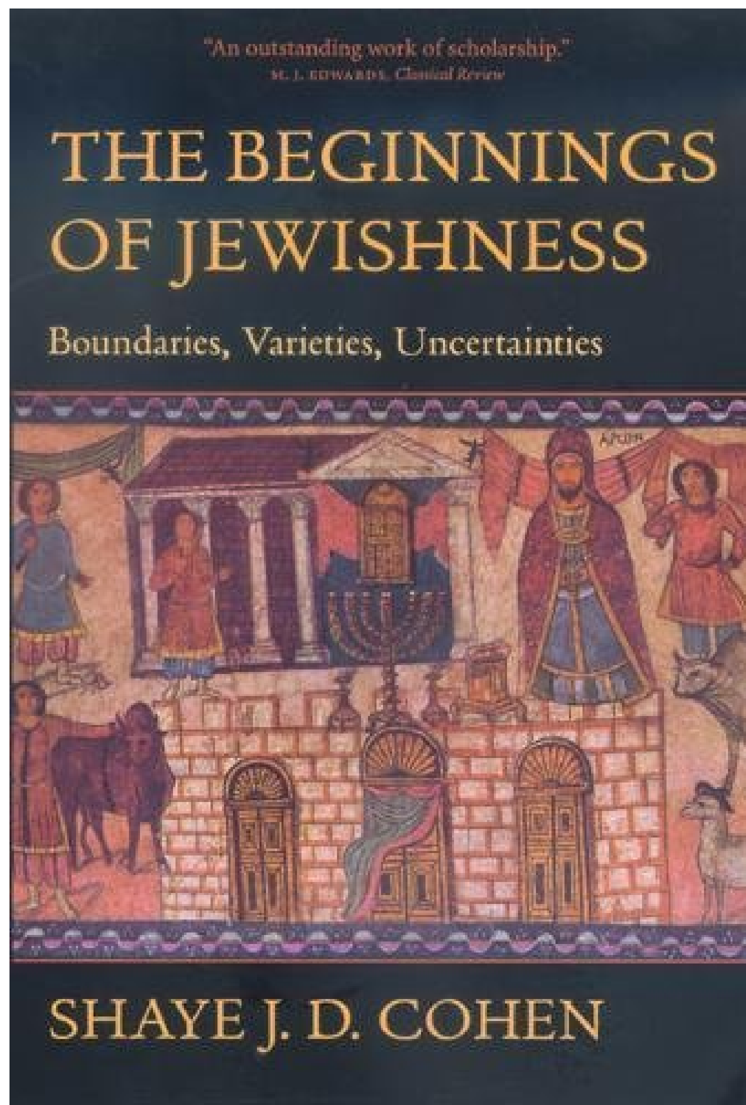

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**Shaye J. D. Cohen : The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties (Hellenistic Culture and Society)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties (Hellenistic Culture and Society):

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Greek/Hasmonean/Roman ...By l. K.The author describes the transformation of the adjective during Greek/Hasmonean/Roman times from tribal, geographical, ethnic, political, to religious meanings. Very interesting and well written.7 of 10 people found the following review helpful. A UNIQUE BOOK ON THE ISSUES OF JUDAISMBy Vladimir TsesisUnfortunately, this book did not achieve attention and respect as it appropriately deserves. The author possesses an incredible knowledge on the issues of Judaism In this modern Guide for Perplexed a curious reader could learn all the lattitude of numerous controversies comprising the core of Jewish thought. This as an extraordinary book. I wish the author would present the discoveries he made in a more passionate manner. He deserves such a stance.4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Important Contribution, but Somewhat TendentiousBy Daniel McClellanShaye J. D. Cohen's 1999 The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties comprises revisions of eight previously published papers and two new papers discussing different aspects of Jewish identity during the Greco-Roman period. The author offers two questions in the prologue which form the foundation of his study (p. 2): "What is it that makes a Jew a Jew and a non-Jew a non-Jew?" and "Can a gentile become a Jew?" Rather than try to provide definitive answers to these questions, Cohen seeks to clarify their meaning and unpack their complexity. Because Jewish identity was a subjective social construct that had no simple definition and few empirical criteria available for evaluation, a multifaceted approach is required. The book is divided into three sections. The first tries to understand the question "What is a Jew?" Of central concern are the correct interpretation of the Greek term Ioudaios, and the maintenance of the boundaries of that interpretation. The second addresses the question of how one becomes a Jew. Is it a question of changing culture, politics, religion, or ethnicity? The third section addresses the effects of intermarriage on boundary maintenance. In an epilogue entitled "Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness: Us and Them" Cohen shares some final remarks concerning Jewishness in the modern Jewish mind.Cohen's first chapter asks the question, "Was Herod Jewish?" The chapter is a case study meant to illustrate the blurriness of the boundaries of Jewishness. Herod was of Idumaean descent, and so represents a third generation convert to Judaism of some kind. How was he classified? Several ancient witnesses are appealed to in an effort to answer this question. The results run the gamut from Ioudaios to Ascalonite, and from gentile slave to the Messiah. This shows the ambiguity of the term and its application in ethnic-geographic, religious, and political contexts. It also shows the complexity of conversion to Judaism, or, as Cohen recasts it in chapter 3 (p. 106), "Judaeanness."Chapter 2, "Those who say they are Jews and are not," addresses the question of self-definition. If someone claimed to be a Jew, what methods of verification were available in antiquity? How was Jewishness expressed? Cohen examines the possibility of distinctiveness in physical appearance, speech, names, occupation, and via circumcision. Ultimately, none of these characteristics provide firm footing, as far as Cohen is concerned, for identifying Jewishness. "How, then, did you know a Jew in antiquity when you saw one? The answer is that you did not" (p. 67).In chapter 3 Cohen examines the Greek term Ioudaios (and the Latin Iudeaus). This chapter is the richest in primary texts and forms the foundation of the rest of his arguments. His thesis is that the term Ioudaios is an ethnic-geographic designation in all its uses prior to the mid-second century BCE, and should be interpreted as "Judaean." After the second century BCE a semantic shift takes place that incorporates a variety of other senses, such as religious, cultural, and political. As he will argue in subsequent chapters, the Hasmonean dynasty and its assimilation of Hellenistic ideologies catalyzes this shift and redefines forever what it means to be Jewish.Chapter 4 begins Cohen's discussion of the crossing of boundaries. He argues that two new definitions of Jewishness emerge from the Hasmonean rebellion: Ioudaios as a political and as a religious designation. Ioudaioi then are those who worship the God worshipped in the Jerusalem temple and/or those who are citizens of the Judaean state. The Idumeans represent the first example of the latter category, while two fictional conversions (Antiochus IV in 2 Maccabees and Achior in Judith) show the earliest intimations of the former. This time period marks a clear redefinition of Jewish identity, which Cohen attributes to increasing concern for boundary maintenance, which necessitated the need for formal processes of conversion, and to the Greek concept of politeia.Cohen examines in chapter 5 the ways which a gentile in the Greco-Roman period "became less a gentile and more a Jew" (p. 140). He discusses gentiles associating with, appreciating, and becoming Ioudaioi, as well as the different stages of assimilation, from God-fearer to convert to Jew. These designations show a conscious desire for, and the development of, formal boundaries.Chapter 6 treats the verb Ioudazein. He points to three general definitions for related -izein verbs: (1) to give political support, (2) to adopt customs and manners, and (3) to speak a language. Contrary to popular opinion, Cohen does not believe that the verb should be understood as "to become a Jew" until it is adopted by Christianity. The Christian use also, "invested the word with new meanings, new overtones, and a new specificity not previously attested" (p. 186).Chapter 7 discusses the rabbinic conversion ceremony, which is attested in two texts: b. Yevamot 47a-b and, with substantial changes, Gerim 1.1. In the former, the ceremony consists of four main parts: (1) presentation and examination, (2) instruction, (3) circumcision, and (4) immersion and further instructions. The latter also has four parts. The first two are the same, but the last two consist of instruction during the immersion and exhortation after the immersion. Gerim contains no instructions regarding circumcision, which was most likely performed in a prior ritual, or was presupposed for the performance of the ritual found in Gerim 1.1. Cohen concludes by pointing out the lack in either text of any mystical or spiritual requirements or exhortations. The ritual seems to be primarily one of initiation.Chapter 8 begins part three of Cohen's book, and it discusses the prohibition of

intermarriage. This prohibition is traced from the earliest biblical attestations through to the Talmud. The chapter is one of the shortest and simply argues that nothing in the Hebrew Bible prohibits the marriage of a Jew to a non-Jew. Exodus and Deuteronomy prohibit marriage to specific Canaanite nations on the grounds that it would lead to idolatry, but there is no universal prohibition. By the time of Ezra and Nehemiah there is a sense of growing disapprobation for intermarriage, but the prohibition is not fully developed until the Hellenistic period, and it is not formally outlined until the Talmud.The title of chapter 9 is "The Matrilineal Principle," and constitutes a lengthy discussion of the origins of the modern concept of the matrilineal inheritance of Jewishness. In the biblical period the ethnicity of a woman was largely regarded as irrelevant. According to Cohen, "the woman was joined to the house of Israel by being joined to her Israelite husband; the act of marriage was functionally equivalent to the later act of `conversion'" (p. 265). While many point to Ezra as the beginning of the matrilineal ideal, Cohen argues briefly that this is not certain. He concludes that it was not present during the Second Temple Period, but is first attested in the Mishnah ("It appears in the Mishnah like a bolt out of the blue" [p. 283]). The "other half" of the matrilineal principle, or the implications of a Jewish mother and a gentile father, are also developed in rabbinic literature, although of a later date.The next chapter is a continuation of the discussion of the matrilineal principle, but it focuses on one text from the Mishnah (M. Bikkurim 1.4-5), which "treats three areas in which converts suffer legal disability because of their non-Jewish lineage" (p. 309): (1) converts may not recite Deut 26:3-11, (2) converts may not say "God of our fathers," and (3) daughters of converts may not be married to priests. Interestingly, one line from the text speaks of a convert whose "mother was of Israel." This convert is not prohibited from reciting Deuteronomy, may say "God of our fathers," and may, if female, marry a priest. The differences between a convert and a born Jew disappear if the convert has a Jewish mother. Cohen seeks to explain why in this chapter.Cohen's volume makes an invaluable contribution to the discussion of Jewish identity. He certainly succeeds in unpacking (and appreciating) the complexity of the questions asked in his prologue. Without providing definitive answers (for the most part), he draws upon vast corpora of primary texts that show the subjective and often conflicting nature of Jewishness. Caution is exercised at almost every turn. Some conclusions are overstated, though. For example, the certainty with which he declares "Judaean" to be the proper understanding of Ioudaios for any usage prior to the mid-second century BCE is excessive. He is inconsistent with that threshold as well, dogmatically translating Josephan (and later) occurrences of Ioudaios as "Judaean" without argument. The story of Dinah is repeatedly referenced in discussions of its Hellenistic era reception, but its significance for a pre-Maccabean ideology of conversion is not engaged. In many contexts equal weight is also given to Jewish and non-Jewish definitions of identity, which downplays the importance of self-identification. Philo's appeal to Aristotelian genetics and his version of the matrilineal principle are also neglected.Despite some oversights, Cohen highlights the most critical questions and his conclusions, right or wrong, have catalyzed, and will continue to catalyze, debate over those questions. For that alone Cohen's book is one of the most important contributions to the debate in recent years.

In modern times, various Jewish groups have argued whether Jewishness is a function of ethnicity, of nationality, of religion, or of all three. These fundamental conceptions were already in place in antiquity. The peculiar combination of ethnicity, nationality, and religion that would characterize Jewishness through the centuries first took shape in the second century B.C.E. This brilliantly argued, accessible book unravels one of the most complex issues of late antiquity by showing how these elements were understood and applied in the construction of Jewish identityby Jews, by gentiles, and by the state.Beginning with the intriguing case of Herod the Great's Jewishness, Cohen moves on to discuss what made or did not make Jewish identity during the period, the question of conversion, the prohibition of intermarriage, matrilineal descent, and the place of the convert in the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. His superb study is unique in that it draws on a wide range of sources: Jewish literature written in Greek, classical sources, and rabbinic texts, both ancient and medieval. It also features a detailed discussion of many of the central rabbinic texts dealing with conversion to Judaism.

"One of the greatest strengths of Cohen's erudite book is that he is willing to acknowledge that many parts of his argument are open to challenge. While some might be overwhelmed by the sheer volume, this reviewer thinks he has done a great service in collecting an immense amount of relevant data, allowing readers to weigh the evidence for themselves and draw their own conclusions. . . . Cohen's book is the most comprehensive study to date on the question of Jewish identity in antiquity."--J. S. Kaminsky, "Choice"About the AuthorShaye J. D. Cohen is Ungerleider Professor of Judaic Studies and Professor of Religious Studies at Brown University. His earlier books include Josephus in Galilee and Rome: His Vita and Development as a Historian (1979) and From the Maccabees to the Mishnah: A Profile of Judaism (1987).