Hagith Sivan’s *Palestine in Late Antiquity* arrived in my mailbox as my son, Elisha, was studying for his eleventh-grade final on the Babylonian Talmud tractate Gittin, chapter 1. This chapter deals with the legal boundaries of Eretz Israel and the nature of rabbinic authority within and beyond those boundaries—all of this as context for the composition and issuance of divorce documents, Gittin. On the night the book arrived, we studied a particularly evocative text, Gittin 7b. This document concerns areas of Palestine that were considered to be Jewish, offering a kind of micro-vision of the problems of identity in late Roman Palestine. The text focuses upon the line between two towns on the northern Mediterranean coast, Acre on the northern side of the Bay of Haifa, and a town near the border of Phoenicia, Akhziv. For the Babylonian rabbis (who were not always conversant in Palestinian geography), this is liminal territory—not quite *huts la-arets* “outside the land,” yet not part of the heartland of Jewish Palestine. Rabbinic determination of the status of such territories was based upon the number of Jews living there. Lands inhabited and controlled by Jews, such as the eastern Galilee, were treated as holy land, while those that were mainly non-Jewish, such as the city of Beit Shean (called in Greek Scythopolis and from 409 C.E. capital of Palestina Secunda), for example, were not liable to such laws, and thus from a practical standpoint were not holy land. Gittin 7b makes a claim that, to
the American mind unaccustomed to the micro-division of small territories (nor attuned
to recent attempts to place the top of the Temple Mount/Haram under Islamic
sovereignty and the sides under Israel sovereignty), sounds strange and sophistic.
According to b. Gittin, the small strip between the sea on the west and the coastal road
leading from Acre northward was inhabited by Jews and thus subject to rabbinic
agricultural law; the area east of the road was Gentile territory. While we cannot verify the
former (in any event, this is clearly a Babylonian academic conversation, as the road
hugged the coastline), during late antiquity the western Galilee was, in fact, inhabited
largely by polytheistic Romans and then Christians. The Talmud then suggests that this
situation continues eastward “until you are made aware” that agricultural laws are again
applicable—upon entry into Jewish territory.

At that point, Elisha asked me how far east into “Gentile” territory one would have to go
before reaching majority Jewish territories. Happily, Sivan’s book happened to be on the
table. I opened to map 3 and showed Elisha the line south from the synagogue of Kefar
Baram southward past Gush Halav, Meron/Khirbet Shema, Kefar Hananyah, and Horvat
Ammudim.¹ On this point, the Babylonian Talmud got it right. Palestine during late
antiquity was indeed a pastiche of jurisdictions and jurisdictions superimposed upon
jurisdictions and populations separated by the slimmest of boundaries, most of which were
ideational and sometimes linguistic—and not physical at all.

Enter Sivan’s *Palestine in Late Antiquity*. This delightfully written tour of the
communities that inhabited the Holy Land during late antiquity uses conflict theory as an
organizing principle for a vast quantity of primary and secondary sources that represent
the history of Christian imperial and patristic communities, Samaritan, Jewish, and
remnants of beleaguered polytheistic communities in “late antique” Palestine.

This volume has much to commend it. The task undertaken by Sivan, to digest vast
literary and archaeological resources and their modern interpretations, is formidable. No
one has had the “guts” to take on such an exhaustive project since Michael Avi-Yonah’s
*The Jews under Roman and Byzantine Rule: A Political History of Palestine from the Bar
Kokhba War to the Arab Conquest* (Jerusalem, 1946, 1984).² Even the generally
ecuménical Avi-Yonah did not take the global focus that Sivan does, fore-fronting, at

¹ For more exacting maps of synagogue and church discoveries, see Y. Tsafrir, L. Di Segni, and J. Green,
eds., *Tabula Imperii Romani: Iudaea Palaestina: Eretz Israel in the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine
Periods: Maps and Gazetteer* (Jerusalem, 1994). Churches exist to the west of the Kefar Baram-Horvat
Ammudim line.
² Alternately titled *The Jews of Palestine: A Political History from the Bar Kokhba War to the Arab Conquest
* (New York, 1976), and more interestingly: *Geschichte der Juden im Zeitalter des Talmud in den Tagen von
what was nearing a momentous moment in the history of Palestine, what he calls “Jewish political history.” The deep presence of Samaritans in the mix of late antique peoples that Sivan presents is unique to this genre of land-focused Palestine one-volume histories, this community having received scant attention, for example, in Robert Wilken’s more impressionistic *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (New Haven, 1992), a book that is far more broadly conceived than its title betrays. This development is facilitated by the explosion in Samaritan studies that has quietly occurred in recent years, with discovery and publication of numerous Samaritan sites—village, synagogue, and burial synthetic studies and, most importantly for Sivan, R. Pummer’s *Early Christian Authors on Samaritans and Samaritanism: Texts, Translations and Commentary* (Tübingen, 2002). Similarly with Sivan’s deployment of the Zoar (Zoora) funerary stela from the modern Jordanian town of Ghor el-Safi. Approximately forty Jewish tombstones have been published from Zoar, and these artifacts have been studied mainly from an epigraphic standpoint. Sivan is the first scholar to integrate the newly published corpus of nearly four hundred Christian tombstones from Zoar and to compare these corpora for historical purposes. Naturally, much still needs to be done with this significant body of sources. New discoveries and publications have greatly expanded our knowledge of this period, and Sivan admirably attempts to integrate these materials. None of the artifacts or sites discussed are illustrated—even in black and white, which is a pity. Images would have greatly strengthened and deepened the argument of this visually rich “grand tour” of late antique Palestine.

While most scholars would be satisfied just to swim in one or perhaps two scholarly disciplines, in my case the proverbial “sea of Talmud” and the history of art, Sivan has set her eyes on the linguistically diverse and visually distinctive primary sources for this long period and the almost as distinctive disciplinary models employed by scholars. Sivan’s specialty is patristics, and she writes from the perspective of the “Late Antiquity” (caps intended) discipline/community, the *paterfamilias* of which is the magisterial Peter Brown. This is exemplified in Sivan’s appendix, “A Note on Jewish Sources” (362–64). The purpose of this appendix is to explain the complexities of Samaritan and rabbinic sources for “Late Antiquity” specialists who specialize in ancient Christianity. She does a credible job here, though the historical uses of rabbinic sources are far less gloomy than Sivan describes. One would have expected a parallel description of the complexities of Christian sources, which bear many of the same problems as historical sources as rabbinic works, even as they often feign historicity. This is made evident by works such as David M. Olster’s *Roman Defeat, Christian Response, and the Literary Construction of the Jew*

(1994). Unfortunately, Sivan is often far more positivistic in her acceptance of late antique Christian narrativity than one might expect from so sophisticated a reader. While our author often applies conflict models with great success, her approach reinforces the notion of competing communities of equals—an approach that is rooted in the ecumenical spirit of postwar America and erases the deep power inequalities between Jews, Samaritans, polytheists (who Sivan continues to call, as Christians did, “pagans”), on the one hand, and imperial Christianity—including its most radicalized churchmen—on the other. Application of lessons learned from colonial studies, an approach applied by Andrew S. Jacobs in his *Remains of the Jews: The Holy Land and Christian Empire in Late Antiquity* (2004) and by me in my *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge, 2005) would have strengthened Sivan’s hand. Despite our author’s attempt to stay above the fray of late antique Palestine, her work settles into a position that balances toward the master narrative of the late antique Christian imperial discourse, both in antiquity in its secularized (post)modern academic guise.

Regarding the modern study of Jewish Palestine, of whose culture wars I am hardly a disinterested bystander, Sivan’s study reflects much of the secondary literature on late antique Palestinian Jewry available before her 2003–4 cut-off date. She makes much of theories that have been deeply challenged in the subsequent half decade. For example, Sivan accepts the thesis developed in Seth Schwartz’s *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton, 2001), which identifies Christianity as the factor most important in the development of “rabbinic” Judaism—a counterhistory that has been harshly reviewed by many historians of late antique Judaism, including me. Add to this the related contributions to this narrative developed by culture critic Daniel Boyarin, late antique historian Oded Irshai, and medieval historian Israel J. Yuval, who in differing yet related ways view rabbinic sources through Christianity-colored glasses (rather than, say, Roman-, archaeological-, Zoroastrian-, or Samaritan-colored ones), and the context is set for Sivan’s overemphasis on Christian-Jewish “competition.” No one would argue against Sivan’s point that the advent of the Christian Holy Land deeply affected and transformed Palestinian Jewish culture—this is the fate of colonized minority cultures (ancient and modern). The question is one of balance and nuance.

Sivan is sidetracked by the overwrought “rabbinic authority” debates of the 1990s and the early part of this decade, with their deep focus upon limiting the rabbinic literati to an ideological cage constructed around G. F. Moore’s elitist conception of “normative Judaism.”

This is well expressed, for example, in her claim that lack of “orientation” toward Jerusalem in some ancient synagogues is indicative of a lack of “rabbinic authority” over synagogues (10). As I showed long ago, the history of Jewish law is replete with discussions of synagogues that did not align toward Jerusalem—usually (as in ancient Sepphoris) for very practical reasons of urban geography. These medieval and modern synagogues were both tolerated and in the modern world accepted as “Orthodox.”

Similarly, Sivan’s discussion of Jewish “priests” and their influence in society is related to the question of “rabbinic authority.” At the turn of this century, Oded Irsha and others claimed broad priestly powers for the Aaronite priesthood during late antiquity, the priest having been an alternate power base to the rabbis. This claim was based almost exclusively upon a very small group of patristic sources and has no archaeological support. Sivan is aware that archaeologist Ze’ev Weiss came out forcefully against this paradigm (110 n. 13), though she may have benefited from my response to it in 2001 in the Journal of Jewish Studies and Stuart Miller’s related response. Sivan’s dependence on the “rabbinic class” struggle model is a distraction from her general point. She might have noted that patristic sources—unlike Jewish literary and archaeological sources—mention the activities of powerful Jewish “priests” and then explored the complex possibilities inscribed in this term.

These examples are significant though ultimately secondary points. Sivan’s Palestine in Late Antiquity is an important contribution, and we owe her much for having the guts to write it. In our age of hyper-specialization, and disciplinary cloisters, her breadth of knowledge and innate curiosity are refreshing. Reading through Sivan’s book in preparation for this review, I came upon an extended citation from Palestinian Talmud, tractate Shevi’it 6:1, 36b (249). This text describes the status of biblical agricultural law along the road connecting Acre and Akhziv—a parallel (with different results) to the pericope in b. Gittin 7b that my son and I had studied days before. Sivan beautifully sets this text within the dynamics of identity and boundary formation in late antique

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7. S. Fine, This Holy Place: On the Sanctity of the Synagogue During the Greco-Roman Period (Notre Dame, 1997), 106.
Palestine, paralleling it to archaeological discoveries such as the (unillustrated) Zoar tombstones and a twenty-nine-line mosaic floor inscription applying biblical agricultural law discovered at Rehov in the Beth Shean region, on the one hand, and to Christian conceptions of the “Holy Land” that are expressed in the (also unillustrated) Madaba map, on the other. *Palestine in Late Antiquity* is relevant well beyond the rarified academic discourse on “Late Antiquity.” The identity issues explored in this volume are alive and well in our own world, as Christians (eastern and western, Catholic and Protestant), Jews (eastern and western, Orthodox and liberal), Muslims (Shi’a and Suni, not to mention Druze and Bahai), and even Samaritans (Israeli and Palestinian) inscribe, reinscribe, and inscribe themselves again on the maps of the Levant, Holy Land, Eretz Israel, and Palestine (in no particular order), as an eleventh-grade yeshiva student in New York and his historian father rehearse Gittin 7b, and as yet another American president enters the fray of Israel/Palestine and its maps....