Introduction

This volume collects papers presented on two different occasions. The first was a debate entitled "Scepticism in Qohelet," which took place in the framework of one of the numerous activities held at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies (MCAS), a DFG-Kolleg-Forschungsgruppe at the University of Hamburg directed by Prof. Dr. Giuseppe Veltri. This event was a "dialectical evening" held on 16 February 2016 and the presenters were Reuven Kiperwasser and Carsten Wilke, both affiliated with the centre at the time.

The second occasion was a workshop entitled "The Expressions of Sceptical Topoi in (Late) Ancient Judaism," which was also held at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies on 18 and 19 June 2016 and convened by Reuven Kiperwasser. The first two papers are based on the presentations at the dialectical evening, while the other five resulted from the workshop.

Both the "dialectical evening" and the workshop were directly inspired by Kiperwasser's research in Hamburg, about which a few words of description are in order. The project consisted of two structural units: "Sceptical Meditations within the Book of Ecclesiastes in Rabbinic Midrash" and "The Embodiment of Scepticism in Rabbinic Narratives."

In the rabbinic tradition, Ecclesiastes is regarded as a prophetic book composed by King Solomon. It contains verses expressing doubt about divine justice or even about God's involvement in earthly events. It also articulates a pessimistic point of view concerning the nature of mankind as a whole. The earliest midrash had already sought to reconcile such tendencies with more familiar Jewish theological beliefs by ascribing to many of them a prophetic hidden meaning. The rabbis reinterpreted problematic verses, often apologetically. Does this mean that they sought to distance themselves from the doubts of Ecclesiastes, or that they perhaps found it inappropriate for the wise king to be a proto-sceptical thinker? Another question relates to the characteristics of rabbinic culture that are implied by such activity. What kind of sceptical reasoning was appropriate for the rabbis, and what needs of rabbinic culture did it serve? Exegetical phenomena are undoubtedly placed at the centre of rabbinic intellectual life, but it is important to bear in mind that behind the ongoing process of proposing different readings of the sacred texts is the constantly changing theological thought. Reading Ecclesiastes through a seemingly non-sceptical exegetical lens, rabbis express their own doubts, which, as will be argued within this volume, are sometimes quite similar to the inquiries of a sceptical theist.

The reader of rabbinic literature, therefore, should not only address rabbinic scepticism in a narrow sense, looking for direct expressions of ideas similar to those found in the works of Greek authors. Rather, as was argued within the framework of this project, one should approach the cultural expressions of scepticism manifest

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in rabbinic *exegetical narratives based on verses from Ecclesiastes* and other such ostensibly problematic verses from the biblical wisdom literature.

This project was, to the best of our knowledge, the first systematic attempt to address sceptical modes of thought in rabbinic culture, as well as the first to explore their role in rabbinic thought in general. The second part of the project, the embodiment of scepticism in rabbinic narratives, was the inspiration and background of the lion's share of this volume. As part of an attempt to locate sceptical thought in rabbinic culture, Kiperwasser determined to analyse the representation of sceptical thinking in the ancient Jewish texts as a whole.

The term *scepticism* has its origins, as is well known, in the Greco-Roman realm. Philosophical scepticism questions the possibility of certainty in knowledge. Sceptical philosophers adopted different doctrines, but their ideology can be generalised as either the denial of the possibility of all knowledge or the suspension of judgement due to the inadequacy of the evidence. Sceptical ideas were shaped in the works of ancient Greek and Roman thinkers, leaving us numerous literary monuments, and scepticism was both a driving force in the development of past cultures and also the impetus for far-reaching scientific achievements and philosophical investigation. The first wave of sceptical thought was Pyrrhonism, founded by Pyrrho of Elis (ca. 360–270 BCE), and the second was the so-called Academic scepticism; namely, the sceptical period of ancient Platonism dating from around 266 BC. The interest of this approach seems to have dissipated in the course of the late Roman empire. An impressive revival of scepticism took place much later during the Renaissance and the Reformation, after the complete works of Sextus Empiricus were translated into Latin leading to far-reaching philosophical developments.

As is well known, early Jewish culture, in contrast to its Greco-Roman peer, avoided creating consistent representations of its philosophical doctrines. Jews of the first centuries of the common era, however, were engaged in persistent intellectual activity devoted to the laws, norms, regulations, exegesis, and other traditional areas of Jewish religious knowledge. An effort to detect sceptical ideas in ancient Judaism requires, therefore, a closer analysis of this literary heritage and its cultural context. In accordance with this, the aim of the workshop was to explore elements of sceptical thought in ancient and late antique Judaism through a new analysis of pertinent texts. The participants discussed a wide spectrum of texts: Jewish writings from the Second Temple period, rabbinic literature, magical texts, and the reflections of Jewish thought in early Christian and patristic writings. These textual corpora show little direct influence from Greek philosophical thought more generally and from sceptical thought in particular. Therefore, with the understanding that when reading Jewish texts in search of scepticism, we are to some extent looking for the equivalent of a concept taken from another culture, we nevertheless found it of heuristic value to embrace the term and concept as a hermeneutical lens through which to view classical Jewish culture.

It could be argued that the application of the philosophy of scepticism to the study of early Jewish thought is problematic, being, as it were, an eclectic and for-

eign cultural approach for the investigation of distant cultural phenomena. However, this argument does not present a challenge in our situation, since within the framework of this volume, our purpose is not to analyse the sceptical approach as a system of knowledge, but rather to employ certain basic components of sceptical thought in order to see whether there are analogies with chosen Jewish textual traditions. From a variety of the formal aspects of sceptical methodology, we concentrate mostly on presupposing a limited epistemology, reflections of doubt, a questioning spirit, and a rejection of dogma. These are the sceptical topoi disseminated among the texts produced by different communities of faith, which have often barely been recognised by readers.

We have deliberately chosen to use the term "topoi" (plural of topos) in the title of this volume, assuming that it is more suitable for expressing the rudimentary state of sceptical ideas in classical Jewish texts. The term "topos" is itself borrowed from ancient rhetoric. Its meaning was expanded by Ernst Robert Curtius in his ground-breaking *Europaïsche Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948), and it has become a term for "commonplaces." These commonplace features are the product of reworkings of traditional material, particularly the descriptions of standardised settings, but can be extended to almost any literary pattern. Early medieval Latin literature, for instance, inherited traces of motifs and fragments of plots from classical Greco-Roman literature and used them without being aware of their source. In this way, individual texts may include elements that were not invented by the author, but which rather belong to his or her culture. We aimed to find these modest manifestations of sceptical thought within the fields of classical Jewish culture and to shed light on them, employing modern methods of critical textual analysis. The collective efforts of the authors in this volume reflect this quest for expressions of these topoi in the various literary corpora.

Of the many historical intersections between philosophical scepticism and the Jewish tradition, the earliest possible and only canonical one is the Book of Qohelet (Ecclesiastes), which is traditionally attributed to King Solomon, but can be dated to the Hellenistic period on linguistic grounds. Under the aphorism *ha-kol hevel*, "all is vanity" (KJV), the author insists on the futility of any quest for knowledge, labour, virtue, or happiness and dismisses the belief in both divine providence and human agency. The book's competing maxims of enjoying a meaningless life and fearing an incomprehensible God have intrigued Jewish and Christian exegesis since antiquity. Contemporary scholarly research is divided between a philosophical reading affirming that the author shared his sources and critical stance with the Greek sceptical tradition and a religious reading that places the book within Levantine and biblical reflections on theodicy and divine transcendence. Based on a new look at the reception, structure, and context of the book, Carsten Wilke, in the first paper, "Doubting Divine Justice and Human Knowledge: Qohelet's Cultural Dialectics," seeks to show that Qohelet's inner contradictions should be read dialectically as a way of coping with a historical moment of economic expansion and cultural

transformation. Dating the book to the peak of Hellenisation in Jerusalem during the years 175 to 172 BCE, he argues that it took advantage of sceptical inquiry in order to encompass the claims of both biblical theism and Greek science.

The second paper in this volume, "'Matters That Tend towards Heresy': Rabbinic Ways of Reading Ecclesiastes," deals with how the main message of Ecclesiastes—its scepticism—is perceived by the modern reader. Earlier scholarship assumed that references to efforts to proscribe the Book of Ecclesiastes in rabbinic literature stemmed from the rabbis' inability to cope with its sceptical tendencies and attest to a struggle over its acceptance within the canon. Kiperwasser claims that the rabbis accepted the closed canon, with all its twenty-four books, and did not question the inclusion of any of the books therein. They were in fact unaware of how the process of canonisation had been conducted and the reasons for the acceptance of certain exceptional books, such as Ecclesiastes. And yet, as sensitive readers and experienced exegetes, they felt that the book was different. For this reason, it received plenty of attention from the rabbis and featured extensively in their exegetical art form. The stories of the difficulties in accepting of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs essentially come as a defence of their enormous appeal and broad exegetical use as valuable resources for interpretation. The rabbis were fully cognisant of Ecclesiastes's unconventionality and aspired to produce etiological explanations in order to account for its oddity.

The third paper, "Wisdom Scepticism and Apocalyptic Certitude; Philosophical Certitude and Apocalyptic Scepticism," which analyses the attitude towards scepticism in Jewish literature of the Second Temple period, is by Cana Werman. The paper begins by discussing writings from the beginning of the Hellenistic era which express sceptical notions based on the recognition that man cannot comprehend God's role in the world. These include Ecclesiastes, where God is pictured as being detached from the world, the Book of the Watchers of 1Enoch, and the biblical Book of Daniel, where evil heavenly forces rebel against God. The paper further points to two kinds of works that grappled with similar challenges but made an effort to avoid scepticism. The first group is semi-apocalyptic compositions such as the *Aramaic Levi Document* and the *Apocryphon of Jeremiah*, where calamity and disaster are considered not as the consequences of a God who is removed from humanity, but rather as the result of human deeds and misbehaviour. The second collection is formed of works that adopted philosophical ideas claiming that God's sovereignty over the world can be perceived by the mind's eye.

The fourth paper, "Reasonable Doubts of the 'Other': Jewish Scepticism in Early Christian Sources" by Serge Ruzer, is devoted to reading early Christian sources which describe polemical encounters with "unbelieving Jews." Such encounters, whether real or imagined, attribute to the Jews a rejection of Christian beliefs. This paper posits the question of whether such descriptions faithfully represent a real external rival, or, alternatively, whether they are tailored to overcome an internal problem of the Christian outlook, conveniently disguised as a struggle with the eter-

nal Jewish Other. Discussing a few representative examples, this study highlights a meaningful dynamic in the focus of the supposed Jewish scepticism. Thus, it takes us from Jesus's resurrection through claims about his messianic mission and stories of his miraculous birth to insistence—in spite of the obvious delay in the Parousia—on his future triumph and all the way up to theological concepts. While various combinations of the internal and external directions of the polemic are definitely possible, the paper takes a particular interest in the cases where the disbelief is perceived not as resulting from Jewish spiritual corruption, but rather as a reasonable, "sceptical" reaction, for example, in light of the absence of sufficiently convincing external signs of salvation. It is argued that especially in such cases, behind the scepticism of the "Other" might be looming the Christians' own internal doubts.

Geoffrey Herman, in his paper "Idolatry, God(s), and Demons among the Jews of Sasanian Babylonia," argues against the opinion of many earlier scholars that for the Jews in the Second Temple period and afterwards, an interest in gods and the issue of idolatry was not a major factor in their beliefs. This paper considers the situation with respect to the Jews in Sasanian Babylonia in light of the polytheistic religious scene. Non-Jewish evidence points to a pervasive polytheistic religious culture that embraced numerous deities, some of which were demonised. The Jewish magical material from Babylonia indicates an awareness of and an engagement with these deities and demons among some of the Jews. The Babylonian Talmud also speaks of idolatry as a contemporary issue for Babylonian Jews, or interprets biblical sources, which suggest its continued relevance for them. In view of all this evidence, the paper argues that polemical and other reflections on idolatry in the Babylonian Talmud would appear to be more significant than previously assumed. The rabbis, it would seem, being a part of this religious world, accepted many of the assumptions of their non-Jewish contemporaries regarding the reality of demons perceived by others as gods and were grappling with a tangible religious reality that was impinging upon their world.

The sixth paper, "Facing Omnipotence and Shaping the Sceptical Topos" by Reuven Kiperwasser, is a narratological inquiry into late antique rabbinic stories told from the point of view of sceptical theists. Sceptical theists accept that we can know general truths about God but deny that we can know the reason for God's decision to act in a particular way in any given case. A sceptical theist will maintain his belief in God but will deny his involvement in the politics of evil. However, the rabbinic narrator's approach is different. God is involved in the world and is aware of the existence of evil; however, despite being omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent, God has decided not to change anything in the world. These theological ideas are embodied in narratives in rabbinic literature. This paper aims to show how behind the narrative fabric, serious doubts about how God controls the world are revealed, yet notwithstanding the intensity of such doubts, no expressions of disrespect for accepted religious values appear.

The final paper in this volume, "If a Man Would Tell You," is by Tali Artman-Partock. It examines the groups of texts in rabbinic literature which start with varia-

tions of the phrase that appears in the title, arguing that it functions as a discursive marker that signals doubt in a rabbinic teaching which paradoxically serves to eradicate doubt about rabbinic authority. The texts often serve to reinforce the sense of belonging and the favoured status of the members of the rabbinic group as interpreters of the Bible, so much so that they might accept as true arguments that would normally be conceived as challenges to accepted rabbinic theology and epistemology.

The product of our joint efforts is offered to the reader in the hope of both expanding and intensifying a scholarly discussion on expressions of doubt and religious enquiry in Jewish sources in particular and in antiquity more generally. We would like to express our immense appreciation to the Maimonides Centre, and especially to Prof. Dr. Giuseppe Veltri, both for supporting the conference and for supporting us in this publication of the proceedings. This is also a suitable opportunity to thank the staff of the centre in Hamburg—Karolin Berends, junior professor Dr. Racheli Haliva, Dr. Patrick Koch, Dr. Anna Lissa, Yonatan Meroz MA, Dr. des. Felix Papenhagen, Dr. Bill Rebiger, Silke Schaeper M.L.S., Prof. Dr. Stephan Schmid, Dr. Michela Torbidoni, and Maria Wazinski MA—and the fellows of the centre in Hamburg in 2016, namely Prof. Marietta Horster, Prof. Dr. Almut Renger, and Dr. Libera Pisano, and others who attended and participated in the workshop.