Countless words have been written about Jewish—and particularly rabbinic—responses to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E. and the convincing conquest of Jewish territories by Roman forces.¹ But one key to understanding the variety of Jewish responses, from rabbinic to early Christian, has largely been neglected. I have in mind Daniel Boyarin’s thesis that “rabbinic Judaism…was substantially differentiated in its representations and discourses of the body…from Greek-speaking Jewish formations, including much of Christianity…rabbinic Judaism invested significance in the body which in other formations was invested in the soul.”² The reason Boyarin’s distinction is significant in this connection is that the destruction and defeat constituted, among other things, a crisis of space and place. The Temple was, in the Jewish imagination, God’s terrestrial space, and the Holy Land Israel’s promised place. And body and space are inextricably linked one to the other. As Henri Lefebvre writes, “there is an immediate relationship between the body and space, between the body’s deployment in space and its occupation of space…each living body is space and has its space.…”³ If Boyarin is correct—and I am convinced he is—that the rabbis “invested significance in the body” while early Christians did not, at least not in the same degree, then space and place should similarly be invested with a different significance in each. Simply stated, questions of space and place should figure significantly in expressions of rabbinic Judaism, while in Christian Judaism and other early Christianities they should not. It is our task in the following pages to explore this thesis.

¹ When I say “countless,” I am barely exaggerating. Given the abundance of scholarship on this subject, no purpose would be served by providing even lengthy documentation—by definition still highly selective—here. For the present volume, I will simply draw attention to Professor Neusner’s chapter focusing on this question in Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 25–44.


Before commencing our exploration, it is essential to make two observations. The first relates to the fact that the Land and the sanctuary were both signs of the biblical covenant. Explicitly and repeatedly, biblical books declare that peaceful residence on the Land—a Land at whose center was the sanctuary where the covenant would be maintained—was an expression of the covenantal promise. Conquest of the Land and exile therefrom, by contrast, were signs of Divine displeasure at the failure of Israel properly to uphold its covenantal commitment. Because early Christianity had a different view of covenant than did the rabbis—Christians asserting that the received biblical covenant had been superseded by a new covenant—one could argue that different relationships with these covenantal places are merely a consequence of their different views of the covenant itself. But this would not be an alternative explanation, one that would render the body-place analysis unnecessary. It is actually a different way of expressing the body-space connection, for the new Christian covenant is a covenant of the spirit, by contrast with the traditional Jewish covenant, which is a covenant of the flesh. If the covenant privileges the flesh, finding its symbolic expression in the flesh of the male generative organ, then the Land and space the flesh occupies can be expected to matter. If, on the other hand, the covenant is spiritualized—if there is “no Jew or Greek…no male or female” (Gal. 3:28), then there is no people on its Land and no flesh demanding its space. In this religious configuration, space and place can be expected to matter little.

The second preliminary observation relates to the different modes of expression employed by early rabbinic Jews and the earliest Christians. Simply stated, these two groups left us very different writings. From the early rabbis come the Mishnah, the Tosefta, and the halakhic midrashim. The former are works of law, organized topically, and the latter are records of rabbinic “exegesis” generating law. None was completed before the end of the second century. From the earliest Christians, by contrast, come not legal compendia but narratives of Jesus’ life and its aftermath, a spectacular apocalypse, and epistles. The latter—along with Mark and Acts—comprise the earliest part of this corpus, with the letters of Paul emerging from the 50s of the first century; no part of this canon was written after the first century. This corpus is, therefore, significantly different, in both genre and chronology, from the first rabbinic documents. Even if we extend our attention to Christian writings that are chronologically parallel to the rabbinic writings, we will still see very different sorts of compositions. Few if any may be categorized as legal. Most are theological, many polemical or apologetic, and some resemble the models of the earliest canonical Christian texts. We must be very careful, then, when making comparisons between the two bodies of writings, for differences in genre can