Biblical scholars today almost uniformly recognize that in antiquity there was no single people called “Israel,” that the notion of a single, unitary “Israel” is a later construction. Thus William Dever has written, “If we ask then how the story of the ‘house of Joseph’ became the story of ‘all Israel’, the answer may be deceptively simple. It was they who in the end told the story.” Here Dever is stating and solving a problem at the same time. The so-called Israel of the Hebrew Bible is not one people with one story, but many people whose many stories have been recorded as one. Biblical scholarship has identified the literary process that consolidated diverse peoples into one biblical Israel, so that their problem is no longer how to explain or describe one Israel, but how to define and understand the many antecedent Israels.

An analogous problem faces scholars of ancient Judaism. Simply stated, we possess many documents that we have classified under a single religion, Judaism. Alongside the three main divisions—the books of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Rabbinic literature—are works of individual authors, such as Philo and Josephus, as well as documents such as the Elephantine Papyri. But despite the conventional assumption of the common religious provenance of these texts, two facts make their classification under a single Judaism impossible. First, these documents differ from each other in every way imaginable: they encompass different genres; they were written by different people in different languages at different times and in different places; and they organize their thought according to different categories. The books of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, for example, were written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek between the second century B.C.E. and the second C.E., and range in genre from history (I Maccabees) and biography (Lives of the Prophets) to apocalyptic (I-V Enoch), wisdom writings (Sirach), and poetry (Psalms of Solomon). The Dead Sea Scrolls of the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E. contain copies of biblical and Apocryphal/…

Pseudepigraphic works, as well as books unique to the Qumran community: the Community Rule, the War Scroll, Thanksgiving Hymns, biblical commentaries, and a catalogue of temple treasures (Copper Scroll), for example. The Rabbinic corpus—the Mishnah, Tosefta, Halakhic Midrashim, Talmuds, and the Haggadic Midrashim—date from the late second century C.E. to the early sixth, are composed in various forms of Hebrew and Aramaic, and originate in Palestine and Babylonia. These facts lead to the conclusion, because it is impossible to unite all of these documents under any one historical or literary classification, their consolidation under the single religious classification of “Judaism” is suspect.

Second, these documents do not see themselves as expressions of a single religion. None understands the others to represent different but equally valid articulations of the same religion. The Community Rule of the Qumran community, for example, is clear in its assessment of other Jewish groups: “They shall separate from the congregation of the men of injustice and shall unite, with respect to the Law and possessions, under the authority of the sons of Zadok” (1 Q; The authorship of the Community Rule thus excludes from Israel all Jews who do not submit to the authority of the sons of Righteousness. For its part, the authorship of M. San. 10:1 excludes from Israel Sadducees, Samaritans, philosophers, heretical Jewish sects, and Jewish workers of magic:

10.1A. All Israelites have a share in the world to come:
B. As it is said, Your people also shall be all righteous, they shall inherit the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified (Is. 60:21).
C. And these are the ones who have no portion in the world to come:
D. (1) He who says, the resurrection of the dead is a teaching which does not derive from the Torah, (2) and the Torah does not come from Heaven; and (3) an Epicurean.
E. R. Aqiba says, “Also: he who reads in heretical books,
F. “and he who whispers over a wound and says, I will put none of the diseases upon you which I have put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord who heals you” (Exod. 15:26).

1 The most common response of one Judaism to another, contemporary Judaism is simply to ignore it.