

PREFACE

I completed this work during the study-leave afforded to me by the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation in the calendar year of 1974. Brown University generously supplemented the Guggenheim Fellowship. My most cordial thanks go both to the Foundation and to my University.

Within Brown University decisions are made which, time and again, bespeak a consistent, profound commitment to scholarship. I find here a deep understanding for the disciplines of learning, an appreciation of hard work, criticism, and self-criticism, and a willingness respectfully to entertain any proposition yielded by free and rigorous thought. While the prevalent spirit of serious learning at Brown is the work of many men and women, sustained by them all and enhanced and enriched by the achievements of each, one person in particular has served as the center. His decisions, well-earned influence and capacity for academic leadership, his wisdom, and the consequent respect and esteem accorded to him by the University faculty—these, perhaps more than the contributions of any other, have nurtured scholarship at Brown. To him I dedicate this work. At the same time, I offer it to the honor of those many men and women who have been responsive to his leadership, my colleagues of the faculty. In doing so, I borrow the language used by my late, much-missed friend, Erwin Goodenough, in dedicating to the Yale History Department his *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*. (Volume I, N.Y., 1953). For if Brown's Provost has exemplified the ideals of rigorous and free learning, it is the faculty for which he has stood and whose values he has exemplified.

I am not unaware that the work undertaken here, as that in my earlier publications, is apt not to find an entirely favorable hearing in each and every place in which Jewish learning is undertaken. I realize that in attempting a wholly new approach to legal texts and historical problems studied for nearly two millenia, I am bound to generate a certain amount not merely of legitimate criticism, which is to be encouraged, but also of obscurantist antagonism and ill-will, of various kinds and for various reasons. Ofttimes I have consoled myself that the struggle really is for the mind and understanding of future generations. For that reason the opportunities for teaching both under-

graduates and graduate students afforded by Brown University, and for publishing my work, in exactly the way I wish it to go forth, afforded by E. J. Brill, have been profoundly appreciated. Yet, in the face of opinion, expressed over many years, as to the negligible (or negative) worth of my work, I could still have been overcome by discouragement, were it not for the benign and constructive, objective and detached environment in which I do my work. Elsewhere I have paid my tribute to individual colleagues in the Department of Religious Studies at Brown University who mean so much to me. Here I do the same for the larger world in which we work together.

In some small measure there seem to be harbingers of a more open-minded and less negative reception, even among specialists in the sacred texts and sacred history on which I work in my own secular way. Professor Saul Lieberman's consistent assistance in solving specific exegetical problems and his acceptance of the dedication of *Eliezer ben Hyrcanus* to me have been the most important evidence of that fact. As I was bringing the present volume to its concluding stages, I received the University Medal for Excellence at Columbia University, a profoundly appreciated gesture of recognition, for which I express my thanks.

Yet, whatever the future may reveal, I am always consoled by colleagues who, because they themselves take the risks and the chances of academic and free learning, encourage me to do the same.

J. N.

16 September 1974

29 Elul 5734

†Erev Rosh HaShanah 5735

The first anniversary of the
death of my father-in-law,
Max Richter.