A ninth-century Byzantine miniature portraying the assembly of the Second Ecumenical Council that took place in Constantinople in 381 offers a good introduction to this article’s main thesis. The scene is centered on the hetoimasia, the prepared throne of the Apocalypse, bearing an open Gospel and surrounded by an assembly of church and lay leaders, including the emperor. The hetoimasia, a widespread pictorial motif in late antique and Byzantine art, appears in a variety of contexts where it acquires new significance. It is a sign largely empty of innate meaning and fully legible only in relation to other signs within the semiotic system in which it appears. Moreover, the individual elements in this ninth-century depiction of the hetoimasia could just as easily be understood to carry a meaning in Jewish as in Christian contexts. An open book and a jeweled throne bearing that book do not have any inherently Jewish or Christian connotations. They are part of a semiotic repertoire that served to establish an epistemic horizon, a range of possibilities, within which certain types of meaningful literary and artistic forms could develop. If not for additional identifiers within the picture, not least among them a Greek inscription above the throne, we would have to deal with what is quite literally a semiotically empty seat awaiting to be filled with meaning.

Jewish culture in late antiquity, the period between the fourth and the seventh centuries CE, can be viewed as another configuration of semiotic forms otherwise ubiquitous within the language of contemporaneous Mediterranean cultures. Such forms could be deployed in countless new combinations to communicate a variety of narratives by different religious, social, ethnic, and linguistic groups. In his work on violence and belief in late antiquity, Thomas Sizgorich has described late antique culture as “a lexicon of signs, symbols, narratives and associations that might be described as essen-
tially late antique in that it was this semiotic brew that united a constellation of communities otherwise separated by language, culture, and dogma across a geographical expanse stretching from Ireland to Yemen” (Sizgorich, Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity, 275). To be able to read and comprehend late antique Jewish cultures, one has to comprehend this broader cultural lexicon, which, like words in a language, could accrue different meanings in different contexts.

Central to the study of this lexicon is a methodological question: to what extent do Judaism and Christianity function as useful hermeneutical tools in our attempts to understand the language of late antique and early Byzantine culture? This question, to be sure, is not new. In the past decade or so, several works by scholars Daniel Boyarin and Peter Schäfer have articulated important methodological concerns about the projection of such “common sense” categories as Judaism and Christianity into academic research. As Schäfer puts it in one of the most succinct and to the point formulations of an alternative approach, the two religions should be studied “as two poles of one spectrum or as two components of one religious discourse constantly engaged in active relationship. This relationship produces various configurations—positive and negative, friendly and hostile, attracting and rejecting—but it is always a relationship, which (consciously or unconsciously) never obliterates their common origin” (Schäfer, Mirror of His Beauty, 232–33).

I am afraid this quote suggests a much greater degree of continuity between Judaism’s and Christianity’s origins and the subsequent modulations of both traditions at various stages of their histories than I am willing to accept. Rather than talking about Judaism and Christianity as timeless existential absolutes, I suggest that we address them in the context
of specific cultural settings, in which they happen to take place at any given moment. As we deal with the specific cultural setting, we have to evaluate the usability of our two categories of “Judaism” and “Christianity” within that setting’s epistemic framework. Therefore, since I deal with the period of late antiquity, the common origin of Judaism and Christianity is only of modest interest to me. What really matters is whether these categories provide useful heuristic tools to help understand the language of late antique culture and help us situate ourselves within that culture’s epistemic horizon.

In my opinion, one has to read the culture of late antiquity, including its Jewish component, by using multiple complementary levels of description. As a result of such complementarity, irreducible to a single set of epistemic standards, the categories useful on one level of description may be useless or misleading on another. The categories of Judaism and Christianity are certainly useful for understanding such forms of late antique discourse as Christian Contra Iudaeos dialogues, sermons of John Chrysostom, or occasional Jewish references to Christians as “those who preach the existence of two powers in heaven,” “those who argue that God has the son or a brother,” and the “splitters” of God. In these and other cases, “Judaism” and “Christianity” can be identified as intentionally marked categories, used by culture to describe itself and organize its knowledge.

In other cases and on different levels of description, however, these categories become not only useless but outright misleading. Most cultural codes, shared by Jews and Christians in late antiquity, lacked specific markings as “Jewish” or “Christian.” Within the language of late antique Jewish culture, for instance, Jacob’s face engraved on the Throne of Glory was never identified with Christianity, even though, as argued in recent studies by Rachel Neis and Ra’anan Boustan, the many meanings of Jacob’s image could only be comprehensible within the broader semiotic milieu of the increasingly Christianized late Roman culture. This milieu included, among other things, the depictions of the hetoimasia, mentioned in the beginning of this article. The Throne of Glory, with Jacob’s image engraved on it, and the prepared throne of the Apocalypse offered two different readings of the same sign. As we study Jewish texts produced in late antiquity, we learn how to read a common sign system, shared by Jews and Christians alike. We also learn how to appreciate new meanings that emerge every time the same sign appears in a different context.