The Jewish Diaspora in the Roman Empire.
Diaspora, Social Agents and Social Networks: Towards the Creation of a New Analytical Toolkit

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Abstract

During the Hellenistic and Roman period, Jewish communities spread over a wide geographical area spanning from Italy to Babylon, and in all the areas under the influence of Rome. Traces of these diasporic communities are so enormous in quantity and varied in quality, and they comprise such a long time-span, that they call for subtle analyses. In the past decade the use of novel perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches has brought the focus on to social agents and the networks they created, far from a traditional narrative which presents socio-cultural choices for diasporic communities as a simplistic dichotomy: resistance to an alien environment or assimilation. Evidence acknowledging the existence of different social agents and socio-cultural ties shows that social networks provided the skeleton on which Jewish culture evolved and spread, as well as the framework in which to form local communities that were not isolated, but shared social and cultural traits with, and had multiple ties to, non-Jewish groups that existed in the same context. This article argues in favour of the need for adequate theoretical tools to analyse such complex phenomena.

Keywords: Diaspora, Network, Agent, Jewish, Theory

Introduction

While the Jewish Diaspora has been the object of scholarly inquiry for centuries, approaches to this subject have begun to change over recent years as the social and political climate in which modern scholars work has changed and many of the assumptions of traditional narratives have begun to be questioned. As a result, debate has appeared over several concepts in its analysis, including in many cases the very concept of 'diaspora' and the acceptable definitions of Jewish identities.

Although the term 'diaspora' was first used to refer to the Jewish communities that had to abandon their lands after the Babylonian invasion, and those who emigrated to Egypt (Purvis 1988), I will use it here to refer to Jewish communities who dwelled in the Greco-Roman areas during what is known traditionally as Second Temple

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Period – from mid-sixth century BCE to 70 CE – and the centuries immediately following. During this period, thousands of Jews chose their residence, and lived for generations, in Hellenistic and Roman communities, mostly in voluntary migrations (for instance, see Goodman 2007).

During the Hellenistic period, Jewish communities could be found in a wide geographical area spanning from Italy to Babylon, and later Jewish communities appeared in the areas under the influence of Rome, and in the city of Rome itself as early as the second century BCE. In spite of great cultural and social differences, Jerusalem and the area of Roman Palestine were – arguably and according to traditional scholars – a 'unifying force' in these diasporic communities (for instance, see Edrei&Mendels 2007).

Already in the first century BCE Rome developed a body of specific laws for Jewish communities that enabled them to practice their cult freely, gave them autonomy in their communal affairs, and allowed them to send money to their temple in Jerusalem through the Temple tax; after the year 70 CE, when the Temple was destroyed, this tax was converted by the Roman administration into the *fiscus Iudaicus* (Rutgers 1994: 57, 72; Goodman 2007: 453). However, by the first century CE many Jews were *cives romani* (Rutgers 1994: 59–60).

The traces that these diasporic communities left behind are so enormous in quantity and varied in quality and nature, and they comprise such a long time-span, that they call for subtle analyses, far from stark dichotomies and binary alternatives –resulting sometimes from the selective preservation of evidence concerning Jews and Judaism in this period by the two religious systems, rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, which has often led to imposing on the evidence assumptions derived from these later traditions. On the other hand, scarce attention has been paid to the way diasporic communities interacted with the world around them, although in the past decade the use of novel perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches has brought the focus on to novel concepts, such as social agents and the networks they created (e.g. Eckhart 2010).

Diaspora as resistance
Traditional narrative reduces socio-cultural choices of Jews living in diasporic communities to a simplistic dichotomy that comprised either resistance to an alien environment or assimilation (Rutgers 1995: 392). For instance, Max Weber argued that the Jews voluntarily chose to segregate and become an urban population in order to maintain their ritualistic norms, impossible to follow in rural areas (Weber 1952: 363–364) – an opinion shared by many scholars to our days. On the other hand, the more recent discourse of 'alterity', which has theorised 'othering' as an instrument of imperialism and oppression, often results in emphasising the fashioning of collective self-definition in antiquity through conflict and disparagement (e.g. Isaac 2004).

Ancient literary sources, especially those profusely produced by Jewish and Christian elites and authorities, are much to be blamed for these assumptions (see, for instance, Edrei & Mendels 2007: 93). They appear to create a picture in which Jews were regularly subjected to unfair or harsh treatment by Greco-Roman society at large, according to which interaction meant exclusively Jewish resistance to non-Jewish culture. Furthermore, they imply only two possible pagan or early Christian reactions to Judaism: either the wish to adhere to it, or the decision to reject it (Rutgers 1995: 392-3). There are several unrealistic assumptions in this traditional view: that Jewish people did not adopt anything from the context in which they lived, so that their identity was never altered; that they manifested themselves mostly through their religion; and that Jews and non-Jews interacted only in religious terms (Rutgers 1995: 394).

However, if we contrast literary sources with others, such as archaeological remains, and epigraphic evidence, we do not get a view of Jewish communities living in isolation and oppression, clinging to a heritage under threat; nor one of communities assimilating to the broader cultural world, ignoring their traditions and past (Gruen 2002: 5). In fact, it could be argued that different kinds of evidence taken together suggest that the Greco-Roman world not only served as a background against which the Jews redefined themselves, but also provided most of the concepts for this redefinition (Cohen 1990: 204).

It is precisely this apparent paradox available in the Greco-Roman world –that provided both a base on which to build and a background against which to contrast the diasporic identities- that concerns this article.

Towards an agency and network oriented study of Diaspora communities
Trying to learn from the processes going on in Diaspora communities implies trying to learn about the world of complex contexts, dependent on local conditions, in which these communities were immersed, which results in a mixed, ambiguous and varied picture very far from simplistic dichotomies (Gruen 2002: 5–6). This essay will discuss the need for methods of looking at the Jewish Diaspora in the Greco-Roman world – which I will refer to as Diaspora from now on – that can be consistent with, and inclusive of, the extremely different kinds of evidence, location and period under consideration. In raising issues that involve a variety of sources, it acknowledges the need to include evidence generated by all kinds of social agents instead of just literature and material culture produced by the elites.

As we study evidence acknowledging the existence of different kinds of social agents and the socio-cultural ties that they created, we need to be sensitive to the social and cultural context. We will also see that social networks provided the skeleton on which Jewish culture evolved and was spread, as well as the framework in which strengthened ties coalesced to form local communities that were not isolated, but

shared social and cultural traits with, and had social ties to, non-Jewish groups that existed in the same context.

Therefore, a theoretical toolkit that integrates elements derived from multidisciplinary frameworks seems more useful than adhering to any one isolated theoretical universe. The Diaspora might thus be studied as a fascinating phenomenon during which the Jewish communities established new ties and reshaped their identities, while the whole Greco-Roman cultural context was evolving.

Material Culture: Archaeology, Epigraphy and Objects

Archaeological and epigraphic evidence points to the existence of Jewish communities in most parts of the Roman Empire, although often this evidence is notoriously difficult to interpret due to the lack of a clear-cut distinctive material culture, which makes archaeological remains from the period prior to (arguably) the third century CE difficult to be recognised as Jewish (Rutgers 1995: 366). Here are some examples that illustrate the difficulty of analysing this kind of evidence within traditional theoretical frameworks.

Religious structures

These are the most important evidence of the presence of religious communities. In this sense, it is to be expected that different religious communities would use distinctively different religious structures, and thus Jews would worship in buildings easily distinguished from churches. However, this is generally not the case.

According to literary and archaeological sources, synagogues began to appear in Palestine during the Second Temple period as a meeting space for the needs of the community; however, religious features were absent (Levine 1996: 431). By the end of this period, synagogues were everywhere in Palestine and the Diaspora, and in villages and cities, but with considerable local variety and often called by different names (Levine 1996: 429).

The synagogues of Roman Palestine provide an excellent case-study, since they have been extensively excavated, in contrast to other areas. Also, by Late Antiquity Palestine contained a mixture of Jewish and Christian communities living in relative harmony (Ribak 2011: 1). The archaeological record shows that these groups were not confined to specific areas or settlements, but coexisted in the same localities, with only a few of these showing a majority of inhabitants from one religion (Ribak 2011: 10).

Considering also that Palestine is reputed to be very important for the diffusion of rabbinic Judaism, centred on synagogues, it is to be expected that churches and synagogues might present distinguishing features that facilitate their identification. And yet, archaeologists find it very difficult to differentiate structures clearly

attributable either to synagogues or churches: both may be halls, basilicas or rooms; both use the same kind of patterns in floor mosaics or decoration; both often lack specific religious symbols such as menorahs or crosses (Ribak 2011: 5–7). This absence of differentiating elements, and the fact that the beginning of the construction of churches during the fourth century – when Christianity was declared legal – did not hinder the construction of synagogues in any way (Ribak 2011: 17), shows that these communities were certainly used to coexistence .

Burials

Graves -their location, inscriptions and material culture found therein- are an obvious place to find clues about the cultural and religious identity of the individuals who made them. However, in the area and periods under consideration in this essay, this is usually not a very easy task. On the one hand, people from different religions seem to have shared the same burial spaces, including catacombs. On the other hand, there are often no religious symbols to be found in burial contexts (Ribak 2011: 12).

However, even when inscriptions and other distinctive features are used, identifying religious allegiance might be difficult. This is the case of some of the tombs found in the necropolis of *Hierapolis*, dated roughly to the period from the second century to the fourth century CE (Harland 2006: 224). The evidence from this town shows that there was a great Jewish community living here, and that they shared burial ground with people of other religious affiliations. Yet, the way they chose to identify themselves in their graves makes it difficult for today's researchers to assign them to one specific group. As an example we have the family tomb of *P. Aelius Glykon* and *Aurelia Amia*, whom many scholars consider Jewish because they left a provision to be remembered on principal Jewish holidays; however, not only do they also ask to be remembered on the New Year pagan feast of Kalends, this tomb includes a provision that the *Hieropolis* guild of dyers should take care of these funerary arrangements (Harland 2006: 230–231). Therefore, considering that the rabbinic literature being composed precisely during that period expressly forbids Jews to take part in non-Jewish festivals – for instance the *Abodah Zarah* tractates (Harland 2006: 232) – , and considering that the people designed to carry out these provisions were a guild consisting mainly of non-Jewish members, what kind of religious affiliation did the people buried here have? How can we know from this evidence if *Glycon* and his family were Jews, pagan sympathisers or judaising Christians who had adopted Jewish practices? And what about the people who would perform the funerary provisions? (Harland 2006: 242)

Epigraphy

While the fluctuations in number of Jewish inscriptions in a given locality has usually been taken as demographic evidence, scholars agree now that this number in fact depends on epigraphic habits, which we do not in fact understand fully (Rutgers

1995: 367). Nevertheless, as we have seen above, it is not easy to identify inscriptions as belonging to a specific group, even when they contain symbols and other markers of identity. The criteria for identifying inscriptions is usually based on often poorly substantiated assumptions about Jews, Christians and pagans, and in too many cases individuals are ascribed to one group even when serious doubts can be raised – as was the case for the burial illustrated above. Two assumptions which are very usual among scholars are that Jews are generally recognisable, and that Jews, Christians and pagans are mutually exclusive categories. Furthermore, the classification of an inscription as Jewish is typically done based on the presence of 'positive' indicators of jewishness – such as the occurrence of *Ioudea/us* or the presence of symbols such as menorahs- and the absence of 'negative' indicators (Kraemer 1991: 142–144). However, quite a number of inscriptions also contain 'positive' markers considered antithetical to Judaism, such as a pagan location, invocation to pagan deities, etc (Kraemer 1991: 144)

To further illustrate how difficult it is to identify the religious affiliation of individuals or groups that made inscriptions, let us consider one particular inscription on the outer north-western corner of the theatre of Miletus (fig..3), which invokes the archangels to protect the city and its inhabitants (Cline 2011). Because of its invocation to archangels the inscription has been generally considered Christian, and dated to the sixth century CE, but its Christian identity has been questioned lately because of its formal similarities with Greek and Jewish magical texts from the third to fifth centuries CE (Cline 2011: 55–56). According to this argument, when it comes to protective magic, Greco-Roman communities valued efficacy more than orthodoxy, so this is a realm in which we often find examples of syncretism (Cline 2011: 68). In fact, this inscription is headed by several magical signs known as *charakteres* (fig.1)of the type usual in late Roman magical *papyri,* and amulets (Cline 2011: 57), and it even resembles personal *phylacteries* from the fourth and fifth centuries (Cline 2011: 78).

Figure 1. The so-called 'archangel inscription' of Miletus (after Cline 2011)

Additionally, the location of this inscription is of great interest. Recent research indicates that the centre of the city, where the theatre is located, was inhabited at least well into the sixth century, and that during this time some buildings were kept and maintained, while new ones were built, including churches (Cline 2011: 76). Therefore not only would this invocation have been displayed in a very public place (fig.2), and in the vicinity of churches, but it lasted for several centuries even after Christianity won hegemony. Unorthodox imagery prominently displayed, as in this case, in public or private buildings indicates that these images transmitted meanings that were important for the people, and which they could not find among motifs in their own specific affiliations (Hezser 2005a: 283). This shows that this inscription enjoyed public acceptance, and that the use of symbols and ritual formulae from different religions for a specific practical purpose was considered normal in this context. On the other hand, while the task of ascribing a religious identity seems impossible, the range of questions to be asked is much bigger than the narrower limit of the religious tag. Public displays of unorthodox imagery such as the 'archangel inscription' can be considered as evidence of coexistence, even acceptance, of different religious concepts and communities.

Figure 2. Location of the inscription in the Theatre structure (after Cline 2011).

Literary Sources: Heresy as Strategy

Due mainly to the triumph of Christianity -with its obvious interest in Jews- and of rabbinic Judaism, there is a considerable amount of written sources that focus on Jewish matters. These sources might create the wrong impression that Jews aroused great interest in the context in which they lived, whereas the references in Greek and Latin to other communities – prominently Egyptians, but also Phoenicians, and

others – far outnumber the references to Jews (Bohak 2000: 7–8). The usual scholarly claims as to the uniqueness of Jews in Greek and Roman eyes disappear when Greco-Roman interest in other peoples is taken into consideration. As mentioned above, considering Jewish sources in isolation –or just non-Jewish sources that mention Jews – distorts the results and creates a picture of 'judeophobia' or 'judeophilia', where there might have been relative indifference (Bohak 2000: 15). It is convenient, therefore, to bear in mind the panorama of a Greco-Roman world where innumerable cultures and religions coexisted in order not to deform the perspective when we focus on any one specific community.
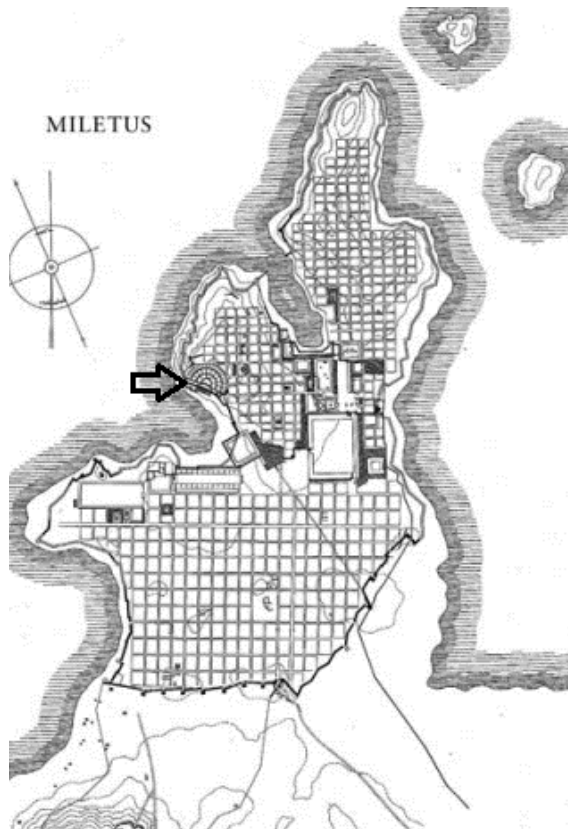
In this context, a major difficulty for some scholars lies in the recognition that in some settings the boundaries between 'Jewish' and 'Christian' were fluid, and that there is abundant evidence that Jews and Christians interacted in many ways into Late Antiquity and beyond (Harlow 2012: 392). The current metaphor of 'parting of the ways' for the separation of these two groups is problematic, since it implies two clearly differentiated religious groups, when in fact the moment and the way this separation took place remain contested (Harlow 2012: 414).

Having said this, one must also be cautious when approaching literary sources created by any community. Authors wrote because they had a message to give, that is, they had

Figure 3. Location of the theatre of Miletus (after Cline 2011)

their own agendas, and the content of their works cannot be taken at face value, but analysed critically. It is also important to be aware of the fact that only a minority of people, usually the elites, had access to written documents; the illiterate majority relied on oral tradition or needed to be read to in order to access information. To illustrate this, let us look at some examples of documents written by or about Jews during the period of the Diaspora.

Jewish Sources

Orthodox or normative Judaism did not really exist until the fourth century CE, when the rabbinic movement had already become the dominant form of Judaism (Harlow 2012: 392). One of the basic texts in rabbinic Judaism is the Mishna, believed to have been written around the second and third centuries CE (Botticini

& Eckstein 2005: 15). In this and other texts, Jewish religious elites created a diasporic discourse concerned with how Jews should preserve their identity and religion in foreign lands. However, even though most Literature of the Second Temple period emphasised norms and commandments directed at setting the boundaries of jewishness, we cannot establish how widespread or effective it was among ordinary people (Bohak 2002: 184).

As was the case with Christians, one of the strategies used for building ethnic and religious boundaries was the concept of 'heresy', a concept that has only recently begun to be acknowledged as a Jewish strategy by scholars of rabbinic Judaism (Iricinschi & Zellentin 2008: 14), and which they had for a long time rejected as 'Christian category' not applicable to the study of Judaism (Iricinschi & Zellentin 2008: 11). However, there are several examples among Second Temple literature – for instance the Yerushalmi Berachot – in which martyrdom is disparaged as useless death, and condemned in terms of 'heresy' (Visotzky 2008: 307-308). This kind of texts is now considered by scholars as part of a broader fourth-fifth century anti-Christian polemic conceived to mark boundaries of acceptable praxis and belief among Jews (Visotzky 2008: 301). Thus, for the rabbis, heretics are 'christianizers', easily recognised for their unseemly penchant for martyrdom (Boyarin & Burrus 2005: 436).

Nowadays many scholars believe that Christianity and Judaism had so many things in common during the first century CE that even Roman rulers did not bother to distinguish between these groups (Botticini & Eckstein 2005: 14). This was a danger for the survival of Jewish communities in two senses: on the one hand, while Christianity was illegal Jews could be taken for Christians; on the other hand, when Christianity became the religion of the emperor Jews could feel that converting to Christianity was not such a big change.

Hence, not only the polemic against Christianity, but also the creation of new rules, after the destruction of the Second Temple and the emergence of new religious leadership, that required male Jews to teach their sons to read the Torah (Botticini & Eckstein 2005: 14). Soon, these rules, leaders, and anti-Christian texts would spread across the Diaspora with the help of the networks created by rabbinic scholars, and the synagogues at the centre of Jewish communities.

Christian Sources

During Late Antiquity, Christianity shifted to a position of cultural hegemony in the Greco-Roman world. The discourse centred around 'heresy' which had been created by early Christians as a self-defining strategy –thus not only explaining who they were but who they were not (Rutgers 1995: 385)- was taken by bishops and leaders to set the limits of orthodoxy (Boyarin & Burrus 2005: 433). In this context, the verb 'judaise' and all its derivatives were applied to those who deviated from the norms Christian leaders were trying to establish; the meaning did not necessarily imply

contact with or influence from Jews (Harlow 2012: 415), but it was almost a synonym of 'heresy' or deviation from the norm.

Thus, examples like John Chrysostom's eight homilies on the Jews, with their aggressive anti-Jewish attacks, have been interpreted by traditional scholarship as 'anti-Semitism'. However, in view of the archaeological, epigraphic, and other documentary evidence, one wonders the extent to which these elitist polemics really had any impact on ordinary people (Ribak 2011: 2) or it was just intellectuals and leaders who considered such 'judaising' behaviour as dangerous (Rutgers 1995: 382).

As for the Christian law codes and Church cannons established during Late Antiquity, in spite of having the explicit goal of keeping Jewish and Christian communities apart, they reveal a surprising degree of interaction, and the existence of mixed communities far to the north and west of the Mediterranean – where Jews engaged in all sorts of activities, from trade to agriculture, as illustrated in a famous decree of the fourth-century Council of Elvira (Sterk 2012: 30).

Documentary sources indicate an implementation of a religious reform within Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, which shifted the power from the priests in the Temple to the rabbinic scholars that promoted public reading of scripture in the synagogues. Likewise, Christianity entered a period of laws and canon creation after being made legal by the emperor. In both cases, the religious and social elites adopted strategies that aimed at setting limits to their communities through the conception of orthodoxy and heresy, concepts that traditional scholarship used to study as 'real' behaviours. Evidence suggests, though, that they were actually intellectual constructs, and therefore 'heresy' is now a contested term, and so should 'orthodoxy' be (Cameron 2008: 114).

In negotiating the collective identity, therefore, a common strategy constructed the 'other' as the distorted caricature called 'heretic' in order to craft more cohesive 'orthodox' identities (Iricinschi & Zellentin 2008: 14). Scholars should approach this issue with precaution, and rather than take literary sources at face value, use their potential for questioning their relationship to agency and identity.

Theoretical Framework

Among recent approaches to cultural change, migration and mobility, probably the most influential have been modernization and dependence theories, and transnationalism. Modernization theory, widely used before the seventies, assumed that movement to the city meant progress, and was centred on several dichotomies such as traditional/modern, city/country, immigrant/citizen and push/pull factors (Kearney 1986: 333). Dependency theory is focused at the macro level, and looks at both historical and structural causes of migration, such as local and international capitalist systems. Neither of these two theories is really concerned with individual

agents' motivations , since they hardly allow for local-level, let alone individual-level, research questions (Kearney 1986: 340).

In trying to move away from unidirectional assumptions such as diffusionism and acculturation, transnationalism emerged in the nineties as an explanatory model following the discussion on post modernity and post colonialism. It focuses less on the big picture and more on the individual and the structure (Brettell 2008: 114, 121), and conceives 'diaspora' as a useful concept that allows to study and theorize transnational communities, emphasising connections with the land of origin and heterogeneous communities at the land of destination. Recently, classical archaeologists have begun to study diasporas and diasporic events, as well as other mobility phenomena in the classical world.

On diasporas, exiles, migrations and slavery

It is generally assumed that a diaspora can be distinguished based on a series of very specific traits: forced dispersal from a homeland into at least two foreign regions; collective spiritual connection to the homeland, often of myth-like properties; a strong ethnic consciousness; difficulty of assimilation into the receiving culture; strong empathy and solidarity between the members of diasporic settlements; a desire to return to the homeland (Holobinko 2012: 47–48). But there are several problematic assumptions implied in this definition of diaspora: it implies a resistance/assimilation dichotomy; it assumes that there is a primary identity -and no other possibilities whatsoever except for the lack of it; it centres communities around a continuous and unbroken connection with the ancestral homeland, even when people have lived most of their lives -or have been born- elsewhere (Eriksen 1994: 186). Also, since it views diasporic migration as the result of involuntary dispersal resulting from persecution, slavery or political pressure, it adopts an exclusively 'push factors' model of migration as an overall causal model (Lee 1966; Holobinko 2012: 44). Moreover, it implies a diasporic identity with an emphasis on conservation and re-creation of the ancestral culture (Eriksen 1994: 187).

All these assumptions, unchallenged, limit enormously the range of cultural, social and religious activities and processes seen as available to social agents. Used consciously or unconsciously, this kind of assumptions feed and support specific points of view, which are later turned into theoretical models and frameworks that might condition the result of research. Thus, many research projects of Jewish Diaspora groups have focused primarily on the retention and transmission of cultural traits within migrant communities (Holobinko 2012: 48), assuming a dangerous proximity to diffusionism by explaining most distinctive cultural traits in the Diaspora as originating from the homeland in an unilateral way.

Often, this results in confusing and incongruent explanations that, since they do not even acknowledge the existence of different social agents among diasporic migrants, can never accommodate conceptions of permeable social boundaries between them (Noy 2000: 4), often necessary to understand diasporic cultural processes. For

instance, the social categories of migrants in the Greco-Roman world – let us say, slaves, soldiers, and civilians – were in practice just the end point of a social continuum that allowed several combinations. The events of thousands of slaves being sent to Roman markets from newly-conquered lands or from wars (Scheidel 1997) loom large in scholarly works about the Jewish Diaspora. Josephus and other literary sources describe how thousands of Jewish captives were taken as slaves after the conquest of Judaea or the first and second revolts against Rome (Hezler 2005b: 18). Many scholars count these slaves as part of the Diaspora (e.g. Cohen 1990; Edrei 1992; Holobinko 2012: 47), assuming they preserved their Jewish identity. And yet they seem to overlook the fact that enslavement constituted a total uprooting from one's family, religion and origins, and that slaves had to assume the identity of their masters (Hezser 2005b: 21–22, 26). Slaves would not have been allowed to keep their religious and dietary laws, and they would have been given a new name, consequently becoming undistinguishable from other slaves in inscriptions or burials (Hezser 2005b: 19).

The problem of unrealistic assumptions exists in the other direction too: it is generally assumed not only that slavery played a minor role amongst ancient Jews, but also that Jews treated their slaves in a more humane way than other people (Hezser 2005b: 3). On the one hand, there seems to be a strong aversion to envision Jews owning other Jews, even though this possibility was contemplated in the Mishnah and other religious literature (Hezser 2005b: 33); on the other hand, the age-old Jewish custom of converting non-Jewish slaves to Judaism (Rutgers 1995: 377) is often overlooked. Yet, there is no doubt that slavery existed as an institutionalized system in the Greco-Roman world, including Roman Palestine (Hezser 2005b: 9), that Jews bought slaves, and that many non-Jewish slaves and their descendants were probably converted to Judaism this way -the practice of converting non-Jewish slaves was prohibited in the third, fourth and fifth centuries CE, which suggests that Jews had continuously owned and converted slaves during this time (Hezser 2005b: 41–42).

Thus, both literary and epigraphic evidence show that distinction between Jews and non-Jews could not be maintained where slaves were concerned: observant Jews would have required their slaves to follow a Jewish lifestyle; similarly, non-Jewish masters would have forced their slaves to follow pagan or Christian ways (Hezler 2005b: 53). This example shows how monolithic, binary views that do not recognise difference and degrees in agency do not really fit the cultural contexts or actual evidence for Diaspora social processes, quite the opposite, they perpetuate incongruence and misconceptions.

Ethnicity, Mobility and Cultural Distinctiveness

When Roman scholars discuss migration and mobility in the Empire, the geographical spaces they allude to are often presented in implicit structuralist terms or contrasting dichotomies, such as provinces/Italy and towns/countryside, etc. In asking questions about Diaspora, its different locations and its social agents, recent

perspectives in cultural anthropology that conceive of human movement in the Roman world as a "spectrum" of migration and mobility (Erdkamp 2008: 420–421) might be useful. At one end, *migration* involves permanent relocation, which can result in, for example, changes in subsistence strategy, the creation of an ethnic enclave at the destination, or voluntary acculturation. *Physical mobility* is less permanent than migration, involving seasonal or temporary relocation. Finally, *travel* does not result in any significant change in a person's self-definition. Overlap can occur and individuals can engage in one or more of these movement patterns during the course of their lives.

However, our main sources of information –for the time period and area under discussion here - about physical mobility and travel among Jews are rabbinic documents.One might question to what extent these sources reflect the travel habits among broader segments of the population (Hezser 2010: 216–217). Pilgrimage to Jerusalem seems to have been quite uncommon for ordinary people, and it certainly came to an end with the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE (Hezser 2010: 220–221).

Moreover, concerning concepts related to mobility and settlement, it is useful to bear in mind that very likely both ethnic enclaves and integration of people from a variety of backgrounds in specific sites existed (Noy 2000). In the Greco-Roman world, and as a result of Rome's expansionist policies, different peoples came into contact with one another constantly, and where physical boundaries of ethnic groups actually existed, they were in most cases permeable (Witcher 2005). The network of Roman roads that crossed Italy and ran through the Empire, together with improved seafaring techniques, made transportation of goods, movement of people, and exchange of ideas between Rome and its area of influence relatively easy (Laurence 1999).

Even though the Latin term most similar to our concept of foreigner or migrant, *peregrinus,* probably conveyed the lack of citizenship (Noy 2000: xi), following the edict of Caracalla in 212 CE that granted citizenship to all members of the Empire, *peregrinus* just came to mean anyone whose birth place was not Rome. It seems probable that, by the end of the third century CE, the extension of Roman citizenship to every person in the Empire became the primary way by which people organized and conceived of themselves as Roman (Laurence & Berry 1998). Nevertheless, many scholars insist on a separate treatment of Jewish people, as if they had nothing in common with other people among whom they lived, including members of other diasporic communities such as Phoenician or Egyptians (Bohak 2003/4: 200-202).

This denotes a narrow perspective, as well as a dangerous disregard of the context in which diasporic communities were immersed. If Greco-Roman Jews are studied exclusively by themselves, based exclusively on Jewish evidence, it is impossible to learn how they related to other communities (Bohak 2003/4: 200). Moreover, this approach is based on the assumption that Jewish people used uniquely Jewish

cultural norms, and left material traces of identity that were clearly distinctive and different from those generated by other communities (Holobinko 2012: 49).

Social Agents, Social Networks and Transmission of Information

Thanks to literary sources, we know much more about the networks created by Jewish religious elites than we do about the rest of people that constituted the vast majority of the Diaspora. Thus we know that, as was usual among Greco-Roman philosophical students, rabbinic students left their homes to study with different masters. This way a decentralized rabbinic network was created, based on personal relationships between scholars that contacted through visits and written messages sent through acquaintances (Hezser 2010: 217–218). The exchange of knowledge and information was constant, and not limited to religious matters. This network, originally limited to Palestine, was the base on which a decentralized religious leadership was created after 70 CE, when the traditional leadership disappeared, and it facilitated all kinds of economic, social, intellectual and cultural connections among diasporic communities (Hezser 2010: 210). However, elites were a minority in the Diaspora, and their values and practices should not be considered as representative, although their point of view is dominant in literary sources.

In the Greco-Roman world, many different networks existed through which knowledge and information were exchanged and, in contrast to the rabbinic network, they were not exclusive to Jews. However, because they were objected to by rabbis, these other networks have been typically overlooked by scholars as means of communication in the Diaspora. Among these there are forms of oral literature, such as folk tales, songs, fables, proverbs (Hezser 2005a: 268). Considering most ordinary Jews must have been illiterate at least at the beginning of the Greco-Roman period (Harris 1989: 11–12), oral and visual media were probably popular means for the acquisition of knowledge and cultural immersion. For instance theatres were places in which Jews, Christians and pagans of all social classes shared important elements of their common culture (Hezser 2005a: 267), while mime performances and pantomimes seem to have abounded in the streets of towns and villages (Hezser 2005a: 281). The systematic criticism of these forms of entertainment by philosophers, Christian priests and rabbis alike (Hezser 2005a: 274) should make scholars take this issue seriously as evidence of networks through which knowledge was spread among ordinary people.

The transnational concept of diaspora, useful when considering both mobility and ethnic communities resulting from migration, not only allows for questions related to individual and collective agency, but also for spatial and temporal discontinuity in data – a usual problem in phenomena that encompass such vast geographical areas and long time-spans as the Jewish Diaspora. Transnationalism focus on migration implies an articulation between homeland and abroad, and conceives of immigrants as human links between populations and geographies. Therefore, it is a convenient concept for framing questions about social agents and social networks that concern both the individual and the structure.

The Greco-Roman world was an area that typically generated transnational spaces, where transmigrants could construct multiple or situational identities. Taken together, transnational, social agency and social networks concepts can frame future research questions in terms of identity, ethnicity, and agency, but also to show how ethnic communities operated within a larger socio-political structure.

Discussion and Conclusion

The assumption that the Jewish communities of the Diaspora formed an alien element, although based on studies of literary and epigraphic remains, echoes conclusions reached in the historiography of Judaism in the late 19th and early 20th century. It stresses the otherness and isolation of Jews in an environment insensitive and often openly hostile to their concerns. Corroboration for this is often inferred from references in the literature of the later Roman Empire. However, it would be incorrect to claim that in the later Roman Empire Jews, Christians and pagans related to each other exclusively in terms of conflict, as there is considerable evidence that for most of the time a more or less peaceful coexistence was the rule rather than the exception.

In diasporic communities, non-Jewish elements taken from the Greco-Roman context are clearly present. Rather than reject such evidence as 'exceptions', scholars should consider the context in which it appears in order to determine its importance. By doing so, we might then be able to address the criteria by which different social agents chose some elements and not others from around them, the purposes they had, and who these agents were. The narrow traditional dichotomy of resistance/assimilation tends to present these non-Jewish elements as evidence of acculturation, but from a more flexible and transnational point of view, diasporic communities were also transmitting elements from their culture, and creating a bridge between (at least) two worlds. In this sense, the focus should shift from how Diaspora Jews resisted assimilation to how they integrated elements from the context in order to articulate their own identities (Rutgers 1995: 388).

On the other hand, these processes of cultural and social interaction constitute a great opportunity to address questions about the Greco-Roman context in which they took place. Greco-Roman art, myth, symbols and designs were considered sufficiently inclusive and universal to be adapted in various contexts, constituting and empire-wide language of signification. This would also be a basis for questioning strict distinctions between Jews, Christians and pagans (Hezser 2005a: 290)

Likewise, a generalised over-emphasis on forced dispersal in Diaspora research results in viewing communities as masses with no power of agency, oppressed by the powerful and manipulated by their elites, committed to an ancestral heritage that ensured their isolation to secure the ethnic continuity of Jewish existence even outside the homeland (Bohak 2002: 175). Evidence suggests that many Jewish settlements constituted thriving, rather than merely surviving, communities (Rutgers

1995: 389). Also, as collective and individual agents, diasporic communities seem to have had more options than the ones reflected in the literary sources written by elites, while boundaries between communities were not so clearly drawn as these same sources clearly intended. However, while the strategies for drawing boundaries employed by authorities and elites can be elucidated from the documents they produced –for instance construction of the 'other' through the concept of heresy- the formation, negotiation, and articulation of collective identity among ordinary people has been poorly explored. In this sense, any theoretical toolkit should analyse these as strategies involving individuals who were – following Foucault's notion – neither a radically free or self-originating agent nor the passive recipient of some overdetermining structure, but an active participant in the interplay of power relations which produced them as a subject. Consequently, resistance was always possible, but resistances never originate from a position of exteriority to power, rather a plurality of points or strategies of resistance exist within the web formed by power relations (Foucault 1998: 95–96).

Therefore, any analysis of Diaspora should address questions seeking to understand the power relations formed by different kinds of agents, and the strategies by which they might have tried to transform the power relations to which they were subject. That is, the kind of power of agency exerted by different individuals/communities should be acknowledged and examined – for instance, while Jews did not have access to the uppermost sphere of imperial power, some of them could devise and try to implement strategies to enforce different degrees of cohesiveness in their own group, while others must have decided to follow/disregard these. Foucault's argument that power implies a relational agency means that it comes from multiple sources – as many as different agents in the network –, which creates multiple sources of possible resistance. This perspective defuses the dichotomies used to define diasporic communities, and can be applied to gain a more subtle insight into this and other transnational phenomena.

Transnationalism, with its post-colonial conceptions of hybridity and difference, provides an adequate framework to ask questions about diasporic transformations without recurring to assimilation, and about identity and self-definition without the need to mention religious leaders. In this sense, scholarship has often – consciously or unconsciously – emphasised the so-called 'weak-ties' or long distance links (Collar 2013: 224) that characterized the connections among Jewish literate elites through written information. The documents they generated suggest the use of these networks to build a leadership that gradually took control of synagogues after 70 CE. However, 'strong ties' that connected people to their families, neighbours and friends, have been barely studied, if at all. I propose that any perfunctory look at this kind of network would show that many of these ties linked people from different religions through intermarriage, apprenticeship, friendship, and many other possibilities that 'orthodox' leadership was trying to curb. Through the study of overlapping strong-tie networks (Collar 2013: 226), we might ask questions about how ordinary people shared and spread information about the world around them,

which provided them with choices to articulate identities, allegiance and powers of agency that scholars should finally acknowledge.

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