

THE SOCIAL STATUS OF DIASPORA SYNAGOGUES IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN PERIOD

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RESUMO

O povo judeu passou por altos e baixos ao longo de sua história no mundo antigo. A tentativa de salvaguardar sua identidade, cultura e leis nem sempre foi uma tarefa fácil. Esta pesquisa pretende analisar a vida social dos “judeanos” da Diáspora e como eles reagiram ao mundo gentio ao seu redor. Quais são os paralelos entre as sinagogas da diáspora e os “grupos de Cristo” do cristianismo primitivo? A estrutura social deles compartilha da mesma natureza? Que impressões os gentios tiveram sobre as etnias judaicas? Essas são algumas das questões que este trabalho pretende investigar.

Palavras-chave: período greco-romano; associações; grupos de Cristo; diáspora; judaísmo do Segundo Templo.

ABSTRACT

The Jewish people went through ups and downs all over its history in the ancient world. The attempt to safeguard their identity, culture, and laws has not always been an easy task. This research intends to analyze the social life of the Diaspora Judaeans and how they reacted to the Gentile world around them. What are the parallels between Diaspora Synagogues and Christ groups during the Early Christianity? Does their social structure share the same nature? What impressions did the outsiders have about the Jewish *ethnos*? These are some of the questions that this work intends to investigate.

Key-words: Graeco-Roman period; associations; Christ groups; Diaspora; Second Temple Judaism.

Historical Overview

The Roman Empire signified an important factor in the formation of the Jewish history, both in Judaea and the Diaspora. Their way of living was admired by the surrounding pagan cultures, but it was also the cause of conflict and the origin of antisemitism. To adapt their lives among the Gentiles, Judaeans had to compromise their own lifestyle while keeping the most of their values and culture as they could.

In *The Jews under Roman Rule*, E. Mary Smallwood affirms that Jews were present in Asia Minor since the third century BCE (SMALLWOOD, 1976, p. 121-123). The Jewish community of Ephesus was initiated around 210/205 BCE. In the mid of the second century, substantial communities were appearing in Crete, Cyprus, Rhodes, etc. Over a relatively short time, Rome became one of the largest Jewish communities of the Empire and, later on, most of the big cities of the Mediterranean Basin would eventually have the presence of the Jews.¹ Because of Hellenism, Greek became the first language of the Diaspora. Consequently, the Scripture was translated into Greek language and the Septuagint became the main version read by the Alexandrian community.

By means of political agreement, Jews managed to create a diplomatic relationship with the Roman power, especially during the period of Julius Caesar. Their religious customs were tolerated and they received exemption from some specific Roman requirements, such as the obligation of the imperial cult, required from all other ethnic groups under the Roman rule (SMALLWOOD, 1976, p. 137). In 88 BCE, they were also allowed to send the temple tax, a financial aid to the services of the Temple in Jerusalem (SMALLWOOD, 1976, p. 125).

Generally speaking, at that time Diaspora Jews kept their religious customs comprehensively. They observed the Sabbath, circumcision, the study of the Torah, feasts, and ritual washing. Diaspora Synagogues were classified as *collegia*, but they did not only hold meetings for their members. They administered all aspects of the community life. They had the right to assembly for the Sabbath, provide educational

¹ A later evidence of the widespread Jewish population in the Diaspora can be found in the New Testament: "Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem. [...] We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene, as well as travelers from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs, yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God" (Acts 2,5.9-11, NABRE).

formation, have a common fund of maintenance, and collect the temple tax (SMALLWOOD, 1976, p. 133).²

During the time of Julius Caesar's control, the Diaspora Jews had their civil and religious rights protected. The theft of the temple tax or the Torah rolls was punished and counted as sacrilege (SMALLWOOD, 1976, p. 135). Indeed, Philo of Alexandria gives some evidence of the Jewish privilege dispensed by the Roman authority. He mentions the consideration towards the Jews to have the Roman monthly distribution of food and money postponed because of the Sabbath:

Yet more, in the monthly doles in his own city when all the people each in turn receive money or corn, he never put the Jews at a disadvantage in sharing the bounty, but even if the distributions happened to come during the sabbath when no one is permitted to receive or give anything or to transact any part of the business of ordinary life, particularly of a lucrative kind, he ordered the dispensers to reserve for the Jews till the morrow the charity which fell to all. (PHILO, 1962, p. 158)

According to Smallwood, the harmonious relationship between Jews and the Roman power remained unchanged until 66 CE. The Jerusalem uprising that culminated in the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 CE was strongly punished by the Roman Empire. The Romans, however, distinguished the Jewish insubordinate nationalists of Judaea from the Diaspora Judaeans, who refused to participate in the conflict, and they did not impose any restrictions on the latter during the war (SMALLWOOD, 1976, p. 357).

In the Diaspora, the Jews could also establish their own separate and autonomous political body, the so-called *politeuma*.³ This concept suggests that the Jews had a self-contained and constitutionally-defined unit that granted them an independent sphere within the cities. Josephus affirms that some Jews could eventually have double-citizenship: Greek and Jew, because of the jurisdictional status of the *politeuma* (SMALLWOOD, 1976, p. 359).⁴

² About the Diaspora Synagogue's activities, confer too (RAJAK, 1985, p. 254).

³ "As well as meaning 'government' and 'form or constitution of a state', politeuma denoted, particularly in the Seleucid kingdom and Ptolemaic Egypt, affiliations among compatriots, e.g. the minority populations of Macedonians, Greeks, Persians and Jews, who had some degree of self-government and independent jurisdiction. After the disappearance of the ethnic components, politeuma still denoted an elite of the privileged classes" (THÜR, 2006, p. 580)

⁴ More about the Jewish *politeuma* (RAJAK, 1985, p. 248).

While the *politeuma* functioned as a substitute *polis* for the Jews who wanted to keep their own customs and laws, it is also true that they kept continuous contact with the Gentile world for economic, social, and political affairs. Although they did not participate in pagan sacrifices or sacrificial meals, they were very much involved in public events, dignitary ceremonies, and contests. Epigraphic evidence from Miletus shows the following inscription on the seat of a theatre: “place of the Jews and of the God-fearers” (RAJAK, 1985, p. 252-258).

After the revolt of Bar Kochba (135 CE), Jewish nationalism considerably lost its force. The Jewish representatives turned their attention away from local affairs to wider horizons. The Jewish sages engaged in rabbinical interpretation of the *Halakha*, and, in Rome, they even established a rabbinic academy. Indeed, vast literary evidence has shown that the Roman Jewish community was rich and influential (SMALLWOOD, 1976, p. 512).

In the second and third centuries, the Jews were still very much attractive not only to pagans, but to Christians too. Evidence shows that until the 4th century, Christians were strongly attracted to Judaism in Asia Minor. In some communities, Easter was celebrated on the day of Passover, Jewish feasts were observed, and Maccabean martyrs were included in the calendar among Christian saints. John Chrysostomos even felt the need to issue a sermon “Against the Jews” (CHRYSTOSTOM, 1979).

Jewish influence on the spread of Christianity

In his article *Christianizing the Urban Empire*, Rodney Stark suggests that the Jewish Diaspora influenced the rise of Early Christianity. His method consisted in collecting sources such as atlases that indicate information about ancient cities, their population, geographical settings, and cultural profile. Following the Wayne Meeks’ proposition that says that Christianity was originally a primarily urban movement, Stark’s survey focused on the 22 largest Graeco-Roman cities and their social situation during the first three centuries CE. He separated these cities in three levels: those that

had a first church 1) until 100 CE, 2) until 200 CE, and 3) until 300 CE (STARK; RABINOWITZ, 1991, p. 78).⁵

Stark concluded that the more urban the place, more the level of unconventionality, namely, the chance to develop a deviant subculture, which indicates an appropriate field for the emergence of Christians. Having in mind that Christianity was born in Judaea, Starks also measured the distance of those cities from Jerusalem. He assumed that the closer they were to Jerusalem, the more presence of Jews and less Romans. Consequently, the Christian mission was expected to be more successful in these areas. Judaeans of different cities kept continuous communication and relationship networks (kinship, commerce, friendship). They would naturally be more willing to join a new “religion” to the extent that it retains a continuity with their previous cultural and religious background, which in this case was Judaism. Besides, Christian missionaries were supposed to have previous contact to access these areas, which suggests that most of these cities had Jewish presence. Therefore, Stark assumed without hesitation that there is a meaningful correlation between Diaspora Synagogues and the process of Christianization outside Judaea (STARK; RABINOWITZ, 1991, p. 80-83).

Responding to Stark’s theory, Jack T. Sanders does not see any reason to believe that the presence of Judaism was relevant for the spread of Christianity. He affirms that Stark’s research raises an interesting topic, but it must be corrected for some specific reasons. According to him, Stark makes use of doubtful statistics that do not give accurate evidence of such an audacious research. It is very difficult to rely upon old atlases that claim to have detailed information about cities’ population of the first centuries of common era. These atlases are mainly based on information found in the Acts of Apostles, which is not a reliable source of historical evidence (SANDERS, 1992, p. 434-435).

Besides the deficient statistics, Sanders affirms that Christianity spread to towns and cities of all sizes, not only to big cities, as Stark suggests. Writings from Josephus and Philo of Alexandria suggest that also Jews were everywhere. Their presence seems, therefore, irrelevant for the spread of Christian missions. Moreover, just because a

⁵ For the reference of Meeks’s work (MEEKS, 1983).

specific city was closer to Jerusalem (and farther from Rome) does not mean that they were more connected to Judaism and less affected by the Roman Empire. Sanders reminds that both Jerusalem and Rome, as much as any other polis of the empire, were equally subordinated to Roman rule. Only this could explain the destruction of the Jewish capital in 70 CE and its renaming as Aelia Capitolina, becoming a Roman city (SANDERS, 1992, p. 436-439).⁶

Sanders affirms that Christian missionaries went where there were people, regardless if they were Jews or Gentiles. Indeed, literature of that time has several indications suggesting that Christ groups were very often located in societies with the strong presence of Gentiles. Many of Paul's letters indicate that the congregation was mainly Gentile-based.⁷ Additionally, Ignatius opposes Judaizing in the community of Antioch. Being bishop of this city in 110 CE, Ignatius presumably was himself a Gentile, which suggests that the majority of the city was Gentile as well (IGNATIUS, 2003).

Another good example of a chiefly Gentile community is found in the letter of Pliny the Younger to Trajan. The governor sent a letter to the emperor Trajan giving details about the converts who left a Christ group to continue their old customs:

It is certainly quite clear that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found. Hence it is easy to imagine what a multitude of people can be reformed if an opportunity for repentance is afforded. (THE YOUNGER, 1969, nº 10: 96)

The growth of Christianity had greatly reduced the frequency to the temple and the performance of pagan sacrifices. The content of the Pliny's letter suggests that these people were Gentiles. A Jew would not get involved in pagan sacrifices after leaving Christ groups.

⁶ Indeed, John Kloppenborg warns about the scholarly tendency to "protect" Early Christianity from the "contamination" of the pagan world. Some tend to see Christ groups as incomparable societies that were only influenced by Judaism and had no similarities to social structures of other associations of the Graeco-Roman world (KLOPPENBORG, 2017, p. 27).

⁷ With the exception, maybe, of the Letter to the Romans, that might have been addressed to a primarily Judean-Christian community.

Jewish Ethnicity

Many scholars have compared the social character of Christ groups and Synagogues. Some have eventually suggested categories that do not always reflect historical accuracy. Most of the time, they are charged with ideological prejudice or reductionism. In his article *Judaeans and Christ-Follower Identities: Grounds for a Distinction*, Steve Mason argues against the idea that Christ groups were as much *ethnos* as the Judaeans were. For him, it is quite evident that the Judaeans were an ethnic association. He affirms that *ethnos* language was everywhere applied to the Judaeans, while Early Christianity had no such status. This does not mean, however, that Christ groups were necessarily more spiritualized or universalized as some supersessionist approaches have claimed (MASON; ESLER, 2017, p. 493-495).⁸

In fact, in the Graeco-Roman world, a variety of associations assumed different social aspects and were formed to give voice and identity for specific social strata. Some of them had voluntary character, and others were recognized by their ethnic nature, such as the synagogues. The *ethnos* were associated with a homeland, and Judaeans were known for being closely connected to their mother-*polis* Jerusalem. Indeed, Mason investigated what makes a group an *ethnos*. Ethnic groups shared some similarities. The members are identified by their origin and background. They usually have 1) a common proper name for the group, 2) a myth of common ancestry, 3) shared history and memories, 4) a common culture, 5) a link with a homeland, and 6) they involve in communal solidarity among their members (MASON; ESLER, 2017, p. 496).

There is vast literary evidence that indicates the recognition of the ethnic character of Diaspora synagogues. Mason affirms that the word *ioudaioi* is associated with *ethnos* at least 1091 times in the Jewish and Christian literature during the Roman Empire period. Only in Eusebius' works there are 623 occurrences, and in Origen, 164. The same phenomenon is found in writings of Philo and Josephus (MASON; ESLER, 2017, p. 500).

As said before, recognizing that Judaeans were an *ethnos* group and not a voluntary association does not diminish their social impact and influence. Mason warns

⁸ Mason's article is a response to D. G. Horrell, who suggests that the letters of Paul and the First Letter of Peter indicate the presence of a process of ethnicization of Christ groups, what makes them similar to the Judaeans (HORRELL, 2016, p. 439-460).

against the dualistic and anachronic approach that tends to see synagogues and Christ groups as two religions: a mother and a daughter, a legal and an illegal, a legalist and a spiritual. The difference of their nature does not necessarily suggest that one was more exclusivist and the other one more interactive in social terms. The Judaeans had a particular status, but they were not particularists. They were very often recognized by outsiders for their distinctive laws, for being open to the world, and for their elites being usually versed in the common language (Greek).

In the Letter of Aristeas, the record of an attempt to free Judaeans slaves shows that their laws were highly appreciated by outsiders and considered to be of great philosophical value (THACKERAY, 1904, p. 28). Besides, the request to translate the Bible into Greek language is also an expression of the pagan interest for Judaeans legislation. Indeed, both Philo and Josephus interpret the Mosaic laws as a paradigm for the laws of nature, showing an attempt to give a universal value to the Torah's principles. The ethnic nature of the Judaeans does not prevent them from welcoming foreigners interested in adopting their way of life (MASON; ESLER, 2017, p. 498-502).

While Mason insists that Christ groups were not *ethnic associations*, he also affirms that they were not totally universal or inclusive either. Some of Paul's letters suggest that despite being ridiculed by their own folks, Christ followers were supposed to persevere in trust, be sexually pure, and bear witness of a blameless life (cf. 1 Thess 1,4-10). A sense of distrust of the outside world led them to strongly oppose ethnos-polis life. Christian missionaries had eschatological expectations. They announced the "new creation in Christ", where ethnic distinctions had no importance (MASON; ESLER, 2017, p. 504-505).

The Pliny's Letter to Trajan mentioned above also gives hints to the non-ethnic character of Christ groups. The text suggests that they had no ethnic distinction. Many of them were voluntary members and local citizens. If they abandoned the group and went back to their customs, they could not be identified as having an ethnic profile, where people do not simply come and go (MASON; ESLER, 2017, p. 507-508).

Later evidence of the ethnic nature of the Diaspora synagogues is found in the end of the second century CE, in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Minucius Felix. Clement mocked the Judaeans for their ethnic character. He found their claim for orthodoxy based on ethnicity ridicule (MASON; ESLER, 2017, p. 508). Tertullian

gives a clear demonstration of his preference for the Christian profile, especially for not being an *ethnos* as the Judaeans were:

How badly they [Judaeans] failed [...] their final state nowadays would prove [...] Scattered, wanderers, exiles from their own sun and sky, they roam the earth without a king either human or divine. They are not permitted to greet their ancestral homeland even by a provision for visitors – not a single footprint [...] God would choose for himself much more faithful worshippers, from every gens, people, and place, to whom he would transfer his favor. (TERTULLIAN, 1931, nº 21:4-6)

In other passages, Tertullian also denounces the institutions of the *polis* (TERTULLIAN, 1931, 1:28), showing his contempt for the civic sphere, in which the Judaeans seemed to be much more involved. Mason suggests that, in this period, Christians would naturally demonstrate their refusal for political institutions and regarded themselves as unattached from social reality. “They gathered to worship an executed criminal who was supposed to deliver their group alone from the *cosmos*. For this absurd belief they were willing to abandon their proper obligations to ancestral and *polis* customs” (MASON; ESLER, 2017, p. 511).

The term “Jew”

Many scholars have investigated whether it is appropriate or not to call “Jews” those synagogue members of the Diaspora during the period of Early Christianity. The fear is related to a possible anachronism regarding the religious weight that the modern concept involves.

Wayne Meeks made a detailed research on the usage of the Greek word *ioudaioi* in the New Testament texts. He realized that in the Gospel of John, it is quite intriguing the way the author applies the term. He seems to use it arbitrarily either to refer to the Jews, as opposed to the Gentiles, or to refer to Jewish authorities that opposed the Christ groups. Meeks suggests that, in most of the cases, the evangelist is referring to the Judaeans, that is, those residents of Judaea. However, the term may also indicate a territorial religious group, as much as the Galileans or the Samaritans. The Judaeans could represent the group that had the most critical view regarding John’s community.

Indeed, the world of John's Gospel is a place where groups identified as Judaeans, Samaritans, or Galileans interact and compete with each other (MEEKS, 1985, p. 95-99).

While for John "Israel" has the positive meaning of all the people of God together, including the Gentiles and without the ethnic barrier of the Judaeans, the *ioudaioi* has always a negative connotation in this Gospel. Regardless of who were the John's *ioudaioi*, it is a fact that they exercised relevant power in the local society, to the point to expel people from the synagogues (cf. Jo 16,2).

According to Meeks, the famous Jewish blessing against the heretics (*Birkat HaMinim*) might be connected to the expulsion of Christ followers from the synagogues as mentioned in the John's Gospel. The Johannine Christians formed their lives in a society dominated by Jews. The heterodox doctrine they were teaching was received as a threat to the Jewish local community, and the hostility they suffered would naturally lead to the harsh and divisive language found in the gospel (1985, p. 102).

In the case of Paul's letter, the approach to the Jews follows a totally different dynamic. Paul almost never mentions the relations between Jews and Christians. The Acts of the Apostles suggests that the Paul's mission begins in the synagogue (cf. Acts 17,1-2), but Paul himself confesses that he is an apostle to the Gentiles (cf. Gal 1,16). He does not reveal much interest in the direct debate against the Judaeans, since his focus is related to the proclamation of a "novelty". In fact, the only conflicts he points out are those found within the Christ groups. Indeed, for Paul, the only Jewish influence over Christians is the theological one. In terms of politics and society, he does not present any interdependence.

Like the fourth evangelist, Paul wants to claim the name and hopes of Israel for the followers of Messiah Jesus. Theologically it is correct to say that the scriptures and traditions of Judaism are a central and ineffable part of the Pauline Christians' identity. Socially, however, the Pauline groups were never a sect of Judaism. They organized their lives independently from the Jewish associations of the cities where they were founded, and apparently, so far as the evidence reveals, they had little or no interaction with the Jews. (MEEKS, 1985, p. 106)

Meeks adds that, beyond the evidence of John's community, until the fifth century CE., there are very few occasions of physical interactions between Jews and Christians. The massive confrontation between the two groups never really happened.

Most of the controversies involving both sides happened in the sphere of literary apologetical works (MEEKS, 1985, p. 114).

The debate regarding the religious conflicts between ancient Jewish sects leads to a reflection that goes beyond the subject already analyzed here. At this point, we may ask if “religion” would be an appropriate term to describe what Judaeans had in common at that early period.

In his article *Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History*, Steve Mason investigates the Greek term *Iudaismos* and the possible meanings this word assumes in different contexts and periods. To begin with, he suggests that the word “religion” represents a contextualized worldview that, in modern days, might signify something very different from its ancient correlate.⁹ He says that *Iudaismos* was used four times until 160 BCE and more other times some years later in 2 Maccabees. The term never appeared in Philo or Josephus, and generally speaking, Greek and Latin authors regularly use the word *ioudaioi*, but almost never *Iudaismos* (MASON, 2007, p. 459-461).

Modern understanding of the suffix *-ism* in English words can express different things. It can refer to 1) an action or its result (plagiarism, exorcism), 2) a system or ideology (Anglicanism, communism), 3) a peculiar idiom (Americanism, Latinism), 4) a disease or disorder (rheumatism, autism), or 5) prejudicial discrimination (racism, sexism). In ancient Greek, this suffix is only applied to the cases number 1 and 3. In the context of the book of 2 Maccabees, for instance, the word *Iudaismos* could only correspond to an action, an attitude, rather than a system of beliefs, such as the modern understanding of the word “Judaism” presupposes. A closer and contextualized investigation of the reading might help us to identify the meaning that the word intends to convey (MASON, 2007, p. 461).

In 2 Maccabees, *Iudaismos* seems to be a response to the threat of the Hellenistic influence over the Jewish people. In this case, *Iudaismos* would function as an antidote to Hellenism. The same way that Hellenism does not refer to a religion, but

⁹ Jonathan Klawans, however, affirms that anachronism in the usage of the word “religion” is insurmountable. Besides, he understands that the critical view of this concept has its origin in the Protestant spiritual approach to religion, dissociated from other spheres of life. But, actually, this category is hardly found in history. “That kind of religion – an idealized Protestantism, largely faith-based and easily dissociated from webs of political power and other social constructs like ethnicity and race – exists almost nowhere, and whether Judaism (ancient or medieval) ever fit fully into such a pattern is certainly an open question” (KLAWANS, 2018, p. 2).

a phenomenon associated with postures, actions, and adoption of Greek customs and culture, *Iudaismos* would likewise work as a countermeasure that involves the action of assuming Jewish culture, laws, and customs. For this reason, Mason preferred translating *Ioudaismos* as "Judaizing" as much as Hellenism conveyed the idea of *Hellenizing*.

Following the same reasoning, Paul warns about the risk of Judaizing, that is, assuming the customs and legislations of the Jews (Gal 2,14). Likewise, Ignatius of Antioch considers "bizarre" those Christians who talk about Jesus Christ, but Judaize, through circumcision, for instance (IGNATIUS, 2003, p. 10). Thus, while 2 Maccabees suggests Judaizing as a measure against Hellenizing, Christian writers such as Paul and Ignatius believed that Christianizing would be the right response for the risk of Judaizing.

Mason affirms that the first two centuries of the common era did not see Judaism as a systematic way of life. The New Testament, Justin, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and many other authors did not have the same understanding of Judaism as we modern readers have. Things changed only in the third century, with Tertullian's interpretation of Marcion. For Tertullian, John the Baptist marked the end of *Ioudaismos* and the beginning of *Christianismos*. *Iudaismos* assumes the form of a belief system that opposes the new and better faith called *Christianismos* (MASON, 2007, p. 471-472).

If *Ioudaismos* in the first centuries did not mean the modern concept of a religion, how can we identify ancient religions? J. Z. Smith suggests that the term "religion" before 1500 CE was irrelevant for contemporary usage (1998, p. 269). As for Judaism, the reference to a religion is even more debatable, because of the very constitution of Jewish identity. Josephus does not mention the concept of *Ioudaismos*, but he talks about laws and customs of this ethnic group (MASON, 2007, p. 480). In fact, both insiders and outsiders refer to *Ioudaioi* as an *ethno* group, that had a social expression as much as the Egyptians, Syrians, Romans, etc: "Each *ethnos* had its distinctive nature or character, expressed in unique ancestral traditions, which typically reflected a shared (if fictive) ancestry; each had its charter stories, customs, norms, conventions, mores, laws, and political arrangements or constitution" (MASON, 2007, p. 484).

An *ethnos*, however, cannot be considered a religion. Some of the *Ioudaioi* had no visible cultic expression, but were mentioned by Philo and Josephus because of their

relationship with Jerusalem, their ancestral land. For Mason, this is another evidence that proves the inappropriateness of using the modern term “Jew” for both modern Jews and ancient Judaeans, because today’s Jewish people are not linked, or at least are not necessarily identifiable as such by a connection with that land (MASON, 2007, p. 486-489).

In the Graeco-Roman world, it was Philosophy that had the role to discuss the nature of the divine and human responsibility and ethics. The philosophical discussion encouraged people to ponder life’s meaning. This is why Philo, Josephus, and other contemporaneous writers refer to Essenes, Therapeutae, Pharisees, Sadducees as “philosophers” (MASON, 2007, p. 486).

Therefore, the ancient usage of the word *Iudaismos* was not necessarily referring to a religious category. The rare occasions that the term was used, it always referred to the Jewish life in a broader sense, sometimes in contrast to other cultural movements. As a belief system or an abstract concept dissociated from Judaea, Jerusalem, the Temple, etc., it appears only with the construction of *Christianismos* from the third to fifth century. “*Christianismos* was itself a new and hybrid kind of group, which drew elements from *ethne*, cults, philosophies, *collegia*, and magical systems: it was also based initially in households” (MASON, 2007, p. 512).

Social Relationship Between Jews and Gentiles

Since its beginning, early Christianity was a movement that ideally claimed a dissociation from earthly concerns and sought for a spiritual and detached life. On the other hand, Judaeans did not hide their interest in political and social affairs with the Gentile world. Egyptian ancient literature gives evidence of how Judaeans were praised by Gentiles for their laws and ethics. They were well-regarded for rejecting astrology, superstition, for practicing social justice, for avoiding idolatry, and condemning homosexuality (COLLINS, 1985, p. 165).

In the article *Respect for Judaism by Gentiles According to Josephus*, Shaye J. Cohen investigates the writings of Josephus regarding the disposition of Gentiles towards the Judaeans. Cohen affirms that there were two main ways that well-disposed Gentiles used to participate in the Jewish life. There was conversion, when the proselyte replaced his or her old culture and gods to the new Jewish faith. There were also the

adherents. These are people who did not leave their old life, but added the Jewish God as their own God as well. Cohen affirms that this adherence does not necessarily presuppose a religious experience, a rejection of pagan gods, or an exclusive dedication to the Jewish God (1987, p. 411).

Josephus mentions cases of Gentile kings who used to honor the temple in Jerusalem. He affirms that Titus had even greater regard for Jerusalem than the Jewish revolutionaries. Most of these Gentile monarchs had a good impression of the Jewish concept of the unity of God. They did not compromise their pagan customs, but worshiped the God of Israel as another manifestation of the supreme deity. It is also possible that the Jewish God was seen as part of their pantheon, as Greek mythology did not claim exclusivist piety (COHEN, 1987, p. 412-414). Gentile monarchs would worship the Jewish God not only for simple personal piety. They wanted to show they were good governors who seek to rule justly and impartially. They were not necessarily “Judaized” or circumcised.

Thus, among Gentile sympathizers, there were 1) those who were Judaized through a process of conversion, that is, a significant change in their lives, 2) those monarchs that showed a sort of religious piety towards the temple, more out of respect or honor than devotion, 3) and the adherents, that showed great consideration for the Jewish faith and culture but did not leave their previous life, for various reasons. There are cases, for instance, of Gentile married women who participated in Jewish gatherings and cultic services, but did not leave their previous life since they were married with pagan husbands. In this case, they would naturally be separated from the Jewish community, keeping only a sense of common belief and honor (COHEN, 1987, p. 415-417).

Although Judaeans had no apparent distinction, they were known for the practice of circumcision, that was perceived as a symbol of otherness in the first century CE. In fact, the insistence of the Apostle Paul not to circumcise the Gentiles was widely considered as the breaking away of Jews and Christians, since the circumcision was the sign that accompanied not only the ethnic Jews, but also the proselytes that joined their group.¹⁰

¹⁰ For the proselytes, circumcision may not be an entry requirement, but an obligation consequent of admission (COLLINS, 1985, p. 177).

John Collins investigated some ancient writings both from the Ptolemaic and Roman periods to see the Jewish expectations regarding outsiders, either a proselyte or a simple sympathizer. In the Sibylline oracles, there is a tendency to make things easier for those who want to join the Jewish *ethnos*. Surprisingly, they do not need to be circumcised. The only request is to worship God in Jerusalem. The Letter of Aristeas makes no appeal to conversion. The Jewish writer is interested in winning sympathy rather than making converts. Besides, the author presents the Jewish culture and laws as a non-violent philosophy that could be understood and assimilated by outsiders. In this literature, Judaeans only asked Gentiles to worship the one and true God, with no reference to proselytism (COLLINS, 1985, p. 164-169).

The Talmud, however, prescribes three steps that proselytes have to observe: 1) circumcision, 2) baptism, and 3) a sacrifice.¹¹ The literal observance of circumcision is important also for Philo. He even persuades his readers about the hygienic reasons of being circumcised. Philo also defends the proselytes because of their social status. He believes they deserve an especial treatment among the group fellows because they have left their country, friends, kinfolk, and, sometimes citizenship (COLLINS, 1985, p. 175).

There were also some unknown figures that might be associated with Gentiles sympathizers of Judaism. The *God-fearers* used to go to service in the synagogue, were considered monotheist, responded for the ceremonial requirements of the Law, but did not circumcise. They were called *sebomenoi* or *pheboumenoi*. According to Collins, together with the *theosebeis*, they were Gentiles generally associated with Judaism, but it is difficult to put them in a specific category of a Gentile religious group, because each passage that mentions them has its own context and, therefore, they can be interpreted differently in each of these cases (COLLINS, 1985, p. 179-183).

As seen above, literary evidence from Egypt and elsewhere shows that full incorporation into the Jewish people was not generally considered essential for Gentiles who wanted to worship the Jewish God. Moreover, proselytism was not much common among them. However, no Hellenistic Jew would discourage circumcision for those who demonstrated interest. In this sense, Paul represented an exception among those Judaeans entrusted to present Israel's expectations towards the Gentiles. He did not

¹¹ The request for baptism only appears in the end of the first century (COLLINS, 1985, p. 171).

only avoid to preach circumcision for Gentiles. He also demonstrates disappointment for those Christ followers that pursuit circumcision: "For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery. It is I, Paul, who am telling you that if you have yourselves circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. [...] For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love." (Gal 5,1-2.6) In fact, Paul was concerned with the otherness of the new creation in Christ, and this is why circumcision for him had no relevance (COLLINS, 1985, p. 186).

Jewish self-affirmation

Another possible way to analyze the relationship between Jews and Gentiles is by investigating the rabbinic sources. In the article *Self-Isolation or Self-Affirmation in Judaism in the First Three Centuries: Theory and Practice*, Ephraim E. Urbach argues that the historical Jewish attempt to keep their identity has often been misunderstood as a self-isolation. He affirms that the idea of self-affirmation is a desire to give expression to one's tradition and faith. Ethnic or religious groups can eventually self-isolate, but this is not the necessary outcome from the attempt of self-affirmation (URBACH, 1981, p. 272).

Israel has a theological reason to foment its self-affirmation. They believe to be the addresses of a divine call to be a chosen people and to proclaim God's sovereignty to all nations. This proclamation is primarily executed through their witnessing, by having a particular behavior, by obeying the commandments of the Torah, and by separating themselves from the pagan customs. This does not necessarily mean, however, that they are supposed to be socially inaccessible to the outside world.

The Talmud is known for presenting different and, sometimes, opposite opinions of rabbis regarding various spheres of common life and the correct way to behave in different circumstances, what it is called *Halakha*. Urbach affirms that one Talmudic opinion about circumcision suggests that, in the case of no availability of a Jew to perform the ritual, it is better a Gentile than a Samaritan does it. The argument explains that, instead of worshipping God in Jerusalem, the Samaritans go to Mount Gerizim. Another rabbinic tradition demonstrates the Jewish ethics regarding the Gentile. Some

rabbis teach that stealing from Gentiles is more serious than from a Jew (URBACH, 1981, p. 281-283).

Urbach also mentions the openness of Diaspora Judaeans regarding the teaching of Greek language. While there is a ban against it in the Talmud, it was never actually applied. The House of R. Gamaliel had their children taught Greek, since they were quite connected with the government authorities. In a different case, however, R. Joshua does not forbid, but advises that it is better to engage in the study of the Torah than to study the Greek language. When asked about if its permissible or not for a father to teach his son the pagan language, R. Joshua says: "Let him teach him Greek at a time when it is neither day or night, for it is written 'Thou shalt meditate therein day and night'" (URBACH, 1981, p. 286). In fact, R. Joshua's advice does not represent a ban on the teaching of Greek, but it warns about the difficulty to both learn Greek and keep the commandment of studying the Torah "day and night."

A positive attitude towards teaching and learning the Greek language is more frequently found in the second century CE. Urbach affirms that with the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, unifying bonds such as the Temple, the Sanhedrin, and the festival pilgrimages to Jerusalem were lost. Consequently, the demand for allegiance to a single normative set of doctrine became rare, which ensured more freedom of different halakhic opinions and broader access to the Gentile world (URBACH, 1981, p. 287-289).

This openness, however, did not always mean a harmonious relationship with the outsiders. Social conflict between Jews and Greeks, for instance, is abundantly found in Alexandria during the Seleucid Period. According to Christopher Stanley, evidence of such ancient conflicts might indicate that Jews and Greeks shared a history of ethnic conflicts. In the article *Neither Jew nor Greek: Ethnic Conflict in Graeco-Roman Society*, Stanley argues that there is a social and rhetorical significance in the reference of "Jews and Greek" in the letters of Paul (cf. Gal 3,28), among other Christian writers. There is no reason to believe that the "Greeks" that Paul mentioned were simply a generalized term for non-Jews. He suggests that Paul referred rather to the actual ethnic group of the Greeks.¹²

¹² The Seleucids founded numerous Greek colonies, in a largely barbarian world. Jews also lived in these places (STANLEY, 1996, p. 101-124). See also (SMALLWOOD, 1976, p. 517).

To begin with, Stanley argues that the Gentile world is commonly misunderstood as a unified corpus of thought and cultural trend. Actually, the term “Gentile” represents a social construction developed by a particular people (the Jews) in a concrete historical situation. Those called Gentiles would rather define themselves as Greeks, Romans, Galatians, etc. “To speak of Jewish-Gentile conflicts in antiquity is to confuse social analysis with ideology” (STANLEY, 1997, p. 106).

Stanley’s research is mainly based on Josephus’ account about the conflicts that took place in the first century BCE. Although Josephus had apologetic interests in showing the good relationship between Jews and Greeks, he could not help mentioning conflicting situations involving Greeks in the book 16 of the *Jewish Antiquities*. That is, he would not label the Jews’ opponent as “Greeks” unless the facts supported it. Stanley affirms that no educated person would confuse Greek as referring to the general non-Jewish population (STANLEY, 1997, p. 107-109).¹³

The tensions between Jews and Greek in the first century BCE might have been occasioned because of ethnic factors. There are some boundary markers that distinguish ethnic insiders from outsiders: 1) a belief in a shared history, 2) a common culture, and 3) some form of physical difference (STANLEY, 1997, p. 111). Stanley affirms that there is ample evidence that Jews and Greeks regarded themselves as distinctive ethnic groups within a broader Graeco-Roman world. On the one hand, Jews many times used the word “Gentile” as a negative term. On the other hand, most of the people identified as “Greeks” in the cities of the East could still trace their family-trees back to Greece in this period. Jews would not compromise their right of Jewish practice (Sabbath, dietary laws, etc.), and Greeks would not admit “barbarian” influence (Jews included) on their prestigious culture (STANLEY, 1997, p. 113-116).

A sociological approach indicates that ethnic conflict happens when groups that exercise similar socio-economic activities compete for economic or territorial resources. Discrepancies in political power also leads to conflict. It is known that in 60 BCE there was a shortage of local currency. Cities in Asia Minor were forced to contribute with massive resources to solve the crisis. Conflicts would arise over the Judaeans because of their practice of sending funds to Judaea. Exporting money only increased the economic

¹³ For Josephus’ work (JOSEPHUS, 1965).

hardship of the local population. Moreover, the Roman intervention in the affairs of the polis was deeply resented by the majority of the Greek citizens. Private clubs and associations became the forum of anti-Roman sentiment (STANLEY, 1997, p. 119-120).¹⁴

The Romans had developed a policy of protecting the religious rights of Jews in the cities of western Asia Minor as part of their strategy to limit the expansion of Seleucid power. The popular impression must have been that the Jews (under Roman protection) had been granted a favored status within the cities, superior even to the citizens. To the average 'Greek', this was a blatant violation of all that the city stood for, and a constant reminder of his city's subjection to Rome. (STANLEY, 1997, p. 121)

That being said, Paul's reference to "Jews and Greeks" can naturally be understood as an attempt to loosen the historical tension between two ethnic groups. Paul, being a Jew raised in a prominent Greek city of Asia Minor was aware of the anti-Jewish sentiments of many Greeks. He knew the struggle he had to face in the effort to unite Jews and Greeks into a new social institution, the Christ group (STANLEY, 1997, p. 123).

Conclusion

This research aimed at investigating the social aspects of the Diaspora Judaeans of the Graeco-Roman world, especially during the first two centuries of the common era. The parallel between Diaspora Synagogues and Christ groups was also investigated, as much as the possible influence that the two groups exercised over each other.

In fact, one of the first topics of this paper was related to Rodney Stark's theory regarding Jewish influence in the rise of early Christianity. By analyzing old atlases and statistics from ancient writings, he tried to prove that Diaspora Synagogues contributed to the spread of the first Christian missions. The Christian novelty would more likely be accepted in places where their ancestral correlate was already present. His arguments were confronted with Jack Sanders' response, who demonstrated that Stark's arguments did not give clear evidence of his claim. The presence of Judeans in the big

¹⁴ Smallwood also comments on the conflicts with Greeks. After Agrippa's death, Jewish delegations went to Augustus to complain about Greek attacks on their civic rights. Communities from Sardis and Ephesus sent letters regarding the issue involving the temple tax (1976, p. 142).

cities of the Roman Empire apparently remains irrelevant for the success of Christ groups.

Besides, Judaeans associations did not have the same character as the one of Christ groups. The Diaspora Synagogue was an *ethnos*. Their sense of belonging to the group was associated with a myth of common ancestry, a link with a homeland, and a shared history and culture. A vast literature shows evidence of Judaeans being widely recognized as an ethnic group, both by insiders and outsiders, while Christ groups did not have such a feature.

The difference between them does not mean, however, that Christ groups developed a more sophisticated and universal spirituality. A supersessionist approach must be avoided because it lacks social and historical accuracy. Judaeans and Christ-followers had several similarities regarding their social formation and political structure. Both were influenced by external factors and present many parallels with other contemporary associations.

The ethnic nature of Diaspora Judaeans requires a critical approach on the usage of terms such as “Jew” or “Judaism.” The modern meaning of these words does not necessarily correspond to ancient concepts that they are traditionally associated with. Judaism as a religion is rather a modern concept that is not identifiable in the ancient world. Judaeans were recognized not by an organized belief system, but by their belonging to an ethnic group. Literature of that period usually used the word *ioudaioi* to refer to those somehow ethnically related to the land of Judaea. For this reason, the term “Judaeans” seems to be more appropriate in this context.

ioudaismos was almost never used before the second century CE. In some cases, like the 2 Maccabees, for instance, the word suggests a countermeasure for the risk of cultural influence of Hellenism over the Jewish people. Therefore, instead of translating this word as “Judaism”, some authors suggest “Judaizing,” as a positive attempt to promote Jewish customs, culture and legislation. This suggestion seems to fit the occurrences both in 2 Maccabees and the early Christian literature.

Another relevant topic analyzed in this work was the impression that Judaeans and Gentiles had about each other. Ancient epigraphic evidence from Egypt shows that local Gentiles admired Jewish culture because of the sophistication of their laws, their sense of social justice and morality. Some outsiders would eventually become proselytes

and join the Judaeans through circumcision. Others would partially adhere to the group by worshipping the Jewish God in the Temple. Some monarchs also manifested respect and honor for the temple of Jerusalem.

Finally, it is quite intriguing all the struggle the Jewish people had to face to safeguard their identity and values. Urbach affirms that the Jewish self-affirmation is, first of all, an attempt to persevere in the theological conviction that they were a people chosen by God. This conviction, however, should not be understood as a self-isolation, although in some occasions this idea is reinforced. In fact, most of the time, the Judaeans were open and very influential in the social life of the polis. They were often involved in the political and cultural sphere, and did not hesitate to participate in honorary ceremonies, to attend theaters, or to teach their children the Greek language.

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