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Self-Control in a World Controlled By Others: Palestinian Rabbinic 'Asceticism' in Late Antiquity

Abstract

The article suggests that asceticism can best be understood as a religious form of self-control, of using one's mind to control one's body. The control of the senses can serve as a category that allows us to compare rabbinic 'ascetic' behaviours with those associated with ancient Christianity. *Askesis* and self-control were already present in Hellenistic culture on which both rabbinic Judaism and ancient Christianity are based. Self-control for the purpose of living in accordance with what one perceived to be God's will and for the avoidance of what was seen as transgression was a dominant feature of rabbinic Judaism. In Palestinian rabbinic texts it is mentioned in connection with the senses of hearing, seeing, touching, and tasting. In contrast to the radical self-control of the desert fathers, rabbis propagated a lifestyle of self-awareness and discretion, in which every detail of ordinary life and behaviour had to be closely examined and adjusted to one's Torah-based beliefs. Rather than constructing ideals, rabbis faced reality and adjusted to it pragmatically. Although rabbis may have hoped that many other Jews would follow their rulings, in reality, this is most likely for their disciples and sympathisers. Therefore rabbinic self-control should also be seen as a marker of a specifically rabbinic identity and as a response to Romanisation.

Keywords: *Apophthegmata Patrum*, askesis, body, curse, desert fathers, diet, enkrateia, ethics, identity, (im)purity, late antiquity, rabbis, Torah (observance), self-control

Whether and to what extent one can identify asceticism in Palestinian rabbinic Judaism depends on one's definition of the term.¹ Many different definitions have been offered in the past, ranging from narrow definitions that fit only particular forms of ancient Christianity to broader ones that try to discover asceticism in almost any religious and philosophical tradition and, indeed, in any culture.² Max Weber's association of asceticism with the Prot-

1 See already Fraade 1987, 253.

2 For discussions of the term, especially in connection with ancient Christianity, see especially Wimbush and Valantasis (eds.) 1995; Vaage and Wimbush (eds.) 1999.

estant work ethic at the basis of Western capitalism is well known.³ Probably less known is Harpham's view of the 'ascetic imperative' as 'sub-ideological, common to all culture': 'Where there is culture, there is asceticism: cultures structure asceticism, each in its own way ...'.⁴

How can one avoid a too narrow definition while, at the same time, preserving a distinctive meaning suited to the discussion of religions in antiquity? Our suggestion here is to work inductively, starting with the rabbinic textual evidence and formulating hypotheses based on the textual findings. It is important to always take the respective historical, political, social, and cultural contexts in which the texts were formulated into account.⁵ As a preliminary working definition we understand asceticism as a religiously motivated form of self-control.⁶

Eliezer Diamond has already argued against a categorical distinction between ascetic Christianity and a non- or anti-ascetic Judaism.⁷ He has suggested to view asceticism as a 'dynamic' and 'attitude' rather than a narrowly defined set of behaviours.⁸ He goes on, however, to provide a very broad and a very narrow definition of asceticism in rabbinic Judaism. According to the broad definition, all kinds of 'self-restriction' suggested by rabbis are to be considered ascetic, including Torah study: 'Judaism teaches again and again that the path to spiritual excellence goes through self-denial'.⁹ This definition is similar to Harpham's view mentioned above, which sees ascetic elements in all cultures. If all cultures, including all aspects of rabbinic Judaism, are ascetic, then why study asceticism as a specific phenomenon or category? A too broad definition turns 'asceticism' into a residual category that is largely useless for inter-cultural comparison. Diamond's narrow definition, which is used in the second half of the book, focuses on 'the asceticism of fasting', a practice that is associated with individual rabbis and 'holy men' only (except for fasting rules for all Jews on specific occasions, such as mourning for the loss of the Temple). He admits that 'fasting is not discussed as a spiritual dis-

3 See Weber 2003 (repr. 1958), ch. 5, 155–184.

4 Harpham 1987, xi.

5 Freiberger 2006, 4: 'While using the term in a wide sense on a theoretical level, we must be able to distinguish, in the respective historical contexts, ascetic from nonascetic practices and beliefs.'

6 Freiberger 2006, 4–5: '... recalling the original meaning of the Greek *askēsis*, we may view asceticism as a certain "exercise", that is, as a rather strenuous way of religious practice. The term 'exercise' is reminiscent of monastic practices.'

7 Diamond 2004, 7.

8 Diamond 2004, 11.

9 Diamond 2004, 11.

cipline at any length in rabbinic sources.¹⁰ Why focus on it then? Probably because fasting was part of Christian monastic culture, although Christian analogies are not discussed in his study.¹¹

Rather than viewing all aspects of rabbinic culture as ascetic (if rabbinic Torah study is seen as an ascetic practice, then all modern academic research would surely fall into this category!) or fasting only, I suggest that the focus should be on the control of the senses as a comparative category that is already present in Hellenistic culture on which both rabbinic Judaism and ancient Christianity are based. The Greek understanding of *askēsis* means ‘practice’ or ‘exercise’ and had both theoretical and practical repercussions.¹² Ishay Rosen-Zvi has already shown that the rabbinic understanding of the *yetzer hara*, or evil inclination, is associated with ‘bodily appetites’ that ‘can be tamed and even enlisted, by way of *askesis* and self-control.’¹³ The focus on the control of the senses therefore seems to be a useful, if not exclusive, way to examine ‘ascetic’ attitudes and practices in a comparative manner, taking Hellenistic, rabbinic, and Christian monastic expressions into account.

1 Self-control in Palestinian rabbinic Judaism

A tradition in the late antique rabbinic Midrash Genesis Rabbah presents an interesting distinction between the senses of sight, hearing, and smell, on the one hand, and the bodily organs of the mouth, hand, and foot, on the other, in terms of inadvertent sensations versus control over one’s actions:

‘R. Levi said: Six things [i. e., body parts] serve a human being, three are under his control and three are not under his control. The eye and the ear and the nose are not under his control: he sees what he does not want [to see], he hears and smells what he does not want [to hear and smell]. The mouth and the hand and the foot are under his control: if he wants, he studies Torah; if he wants, he says something wicked; if he wants, he blasphemes and reviles. The hand, if he wants, he distributes charity; if he wants, he steals and kills. The foot, if he wants, he goes to synagogues and study houses; if not, he goes to theatres and circuses ...’ (Genesis Rabbah 67:3).

Both the senses and bodily organs are presented as ‘tools’ here, an understanding that matches the use of the Greek term *organon*, ‘tool’, for the

¹⁰ Diamond 2004, 117.

¹¹ For my review of Eliezer Diamond’s book see Hezser 2006.

¹² Hollywood 2004, 60.

¹³ Rosen-Zvi 2011, 6.

senses from Plato onwards.¹⁴ The sensory organs of the eyes, ears, and nose are deemed to be beyond human control, whereas the body parts carrying out actions, namely, the mouth, hands, and feet, can and should be controlled by the mind. Whereas Democritus (fifth-fourth century BCE) considered the senses ‘obscure’ forms of perception (cf. Democritus, frg. 11), rabbis were mainly interested in the ability of these faculties to commit sins (in)advertently.¹⁵ While the eyes, ears, and nose are thought to be passively exposed to whatever sensations the environment offers, a person can use his/her mouth, hands and feet to do either good or bad, to actively engage with the surrounding world. One may assume that the rabbis who formulated and transmitted this tradition deemed the active organs more important than the passive ones because they allow a person to obey God’s will and fulfil his commandments. The hands, feet, and mouth, controlled by the mind, are therefore crucial for rabbinic ethical thinking and the notion of divine punishment.

A mistrust of the senses and a higher valuation of reason can also be found in Greek and Hellenistic philosophy. From Democritus to Galen the senses were considered to be prone to err and able to delude the mind.¹⁶ According to Seneca, the senses ‘are not proper judges of what is good, and it is a mistake to rely upon them’ (*Epistulae Morales* 124.3). Like rabbis, Stoics emphasised the necessity of self-control (*sōphrosynē*).¹⁷ As Bowman has pointed out, the Stoics ‘believed humans are knowingly and willingly capable of committing evil acts.’¹⁸ Whereas Stoic argumentation focuses on the control of pleasures and emotions, the rabbinic tradents, by contrast, were interested in Torah observance and the moral behaviour resulting from it. The above quoted midrash reckons with the ability of humans to make rational choices between actions that rabbis sanction and others which they disavow. Body organs serve to carry out the sanctioned actions and must be guarded against transgressions by the discerning mind.

If asceticism is understood as a religious form of self-control, of using one’s mind to control one’s body, rabbinic Judaism is worthy of being inves-

14 See Jütte 2005, 34: ‘... Plato (427–347 BC) explicitly describes the senses as organs of the soul in the *Theaetetus* and, in so doing, establishes the concept permanently in the vocabulary of Western sensory physiology.’

15 According to Democritus, frg. 11 Diels, vol. 2, 140, sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch are forms of knowledge. Whereas the mind has ‘genuine’ knowledge, the knowledge obtained through the senses is considered ‘obscure’. See Seidel 2000, 47.

16 See Jütte 2005, 33–34.

17 On this virtue, which already appears in classical Greek philosophy, see especially Rademaker 2005.

18 Bowman 2011, 13.

tigated in this context.¹⁹ Self-control for the purpose of living in accordance with what one perceived to be God's will and for the avoidance of what was seen as a transgression was a dominant aspect of rabbinic Judaism.²⁰ Such control could be advocated and practiced without denying the world or worldly practices and pleasures altogether. The goal was to use the body as an instrument of the mind; not to kill passion but to turn it toward Torah study and a harmonious and fruitful family life. In contrast to the Egyptian desert fathers, commemorated in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*,²¹ rabbis did not detach themselves spatially from the world and its temptations. Rather, they lived within the world and tried to control their interactions with their environment. This control served a higher good, just as the desert fathers' asceticism was based on their theology and the Stoic virtue of *sophrosyne* was part of the Stoics' philosophical outlook that propagated moderation in all things. Asceticism and self-control must, then, always be examined in the broader context of the respective religious and philosophical traditions within which they are situated.

2 Control of the senses

In contrast to the statement attributed to R. Levi in Genesis Rabbah (above), other rabbinic texts do suggest that certain sensory impressions can and should be controlled. For example, y. A. Z. 3:11, 43b transmits a series of narratives which suggest a way of avoiding the impact of pagan images found in one's surroundings:

‘[A] Gamliel Zuga was leaning on R. Shimon b. Laqish. They came upon an image. He said to him: What is the law with regard to passing before it? He said to him: Pass before it and close [or: blind; tie] your eye.

[B] R. Yitzhaq b. Matenah was leaning on R. Yohanan. They came across an image [at the building] of the *boule*. He said to him: What is the law with regard to passing before it? He said to him: Pass before it and close your eye.

[C] R. Yaaqov b. Idi was leaning on R. Yehoshua b. Levi. They came across a procession of an idol. He said to him: Nahum, the most holy man passed by and you, will you not pass by? Pass before it and close your eye.²²

19 For a discussion about whether and to what extent self-control characterised Christian asceticism, see Wilson 2015, 67–75. She identifies both similarities and differences between Jewish and Christian expressions of self-control.

20 See also Fraade 1987, 257, who speaks of ‘self-discipline’ and ‘the exercise of disciplined effort toward the goal of spiritual perfection’, which he identifies in Philo’s writings already.

21 For a comparison of stories about rabbis and desert fathers, see Siegal 2013.

22 The story has a parallel in y. Ber. 2:1. 4b.

The verb *סמי* means ‘to tie up, close, to make blind.’²³ Jastrow translates the phrase *עבור קומי וסמי עינייה* with ‘pass it [the idol] and blind thy eye [ignore it]’, viewing the third person ending of *ענייה* as a euphemism for *עיניך*.²⁴ Steven Fine translates with ‘put its eyes out’ but acknowledges that it is unclear what this might mean.²⁵ Rabbis are unlikely to have suggested the physical destruction of the idol’s eyes. Noa Yuval-Hacham provides yet another option: ‘pass before it and blind its eyes’, rejecting a literal understanding and suggesting ‘a visceral or psychological response to idolatry.’²⁶ He also refers to other scholars who consider a ‘bold’ rabbinic attitude or even direct gaze into the idol’s eye as an expression of contempt.²⁷ Rather than interpreting the text as a mandate for actual or imaginary iconoclasm, Jastrow’s suggestion that the third person suffix be viewed as a stand-in for a second person possessive pronoun makes more sense here.²⁸ The use of the third person in direct addresses is quite common in rabbinic texts.²⁹ The direct gaze at idols was not seen as an expression of disrespect, as suggested by Neis, but as a way of worshipping them.³⁰ As Hannah Hashkes has pointed out in connection with Byzantine Christian icon worship, ‘An *idol* is an object of our gaze; our attention focuses upon it. It is made *idol* because “the gaze has decided to fall on it”’.³¹ Only by closing or covering their eyes could rabbis avoid acknowledgment, and implicit worship, of an idolatrous image.

The stories suggest that a pious person should close or cover his eyes in front of idolatry, so that the idol could not affect his inner being.³² A rabbinic scholar can live in a world full of statues and images of pagan religiosity only if he guards himself by shutting off the visual impression these images make on him. The stories reveal an important aspect of Palestinian rabbinic culture that contrasts with the extreme asceticism of the desert monks: the pragmatic approach of accommodation with a world one cannot change. Rather than leaving the challenging cultural environment altogether and

23 Jastrow 1985, 999.

24 Jastrow 1985, 999. See also Schäfer 2002, 348; Horowitz 1975, 47 (y. Ber. 2:1, 4b): ‘Gehe an dem (Götzenbild) vorbei, aber mit geschlossenen Augen.’

25 Fine 2005, 113–114.

26 Yuval-Hacham 2014, 35 n. 15.

27 See, for example, Neis 2012, 553–554; Neis 2013, 186.

28 It also makes more sense for the translation of the formula in b. Avodah Zarah 43b, where Samuel advises Rav Yehudah on the use of a signet ring with a figural image on it.

29 It appears in the curse formula, ‘May that man’s breath expire’, for example, where the addressee is threatened with death by God’s action.

30 Neis 2013, 187–188.

31 Hashkes 2015, 73.

32 On the perceived effects of vision in antiquity see Neis 2013, 180: ‘Viewers of idols become idols; hence the refusal to look.’

escaping to the uninhabited and pure surroundings of the desert, rabbis stayed within Roman-Byzantine society and faced its temptations. Realising that they could not control their environment, they decided to control its impact on their own minds and bodies. Self-control provided a means of living a life guided by rules that were different from those imposed by the Romans.³³ It enabled the maintenance of a rabbinically defined Jewish identity in an environment that had become controlled by others. Rabbinic insistence on self-control must therefore be seen at the intersection between religious obedience and Roman imperialism.

Self-control could also be defined positively, not as averting one's eyes from something that was considered negative but as an intentional and focused adoption of something positive. At the very end of *y. Qidd. 4:12, 66d* a strange statement appears that, if viewed within its literary context, suggests that one should eat more vegetables, probably because they are seen as a species that God created. According to a statement attributed to R. Yose b.R. Bun, 'it is forbidden to live in a town that does not have a vegetable garden.' This general principle is followed by a warning, attributed to R. Hezeqiah, R. Cohen in the name of Rav: 'In the future a person will have to render an account [דין והשבון] for everything that his eye saw and he did not eat'. The formula *דין והשבון* clearly refers to a person's accountability before God, based on his deeds during his lifetime, which can lead to punishment. In connection with the preceding statement, the warning seems to be directed at a person who refuses to eat (certain) vegetables. God will eventually punish him for rejecting such good foodstuffs, not (only) because they are healthy (from a modern point of view) but because they are God's creation and meant for human consumption. Especially in an environment in which food was scarce, the rejection of specific types of food could be seen as a grave offense. According to the following narrative, 'R. Eleazar was affected by this teaching and set aside money and ate from each species every year' (*ibid.*), which is to say that he made sure that his diet included all kinds of vegetables that were available on the market. The text is not meant to encourage people to become gluttons but to make conscious choices as far as their eating habits were concerned.

In addition to the dangers that may arise from looking at pagan images, statues and idolatrous processions, rabbis also warn their male fellow-Jews against looking too closely at women, women's hair, nakedness, and even

³³ Balberg 2014, 165, argues that the rabbinic interest in ritual purity should be seen as an expression of self-control, which rabbis considered Jews capable of in contrast to non-Jews: 'The ability to control oneself, mentally and physically, is the main trait that distinguishes the idealized mishnaic subject from his oppositional counterparts', the gentiles.

men's own genitalia. Rachel Neis has already discussed both Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic texts, which address these issues, and compared them with patristic warnings against looking at anything that could arouse one's sexual desire. She has argued that 'the Yerushalmi sexualizes the gaze itself in genital terms',³⁴ as is evident from a text in y. Hallah 2:1, 58c: 'He who gazes at a woman's heel [or: posterior]³⁵ is as if he gazed at her vagina. He who gazes at her vagina is as if he had sexual relations with her'. The male gaze at a woman's body part is seen as transgressive here. The boundaries that preserve male Jewish sexual morality are drawn very tightly. Neis points to the similarity between this text and Matthew 5:28 ('But I tell you that everyone who gazes at a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart') and suggests that the Yerushalmi version 'crystalizes earlier Jewish traditions ... which emphasize the sinfulness of the illicit sexual gaze'.³⁶ The Yerushalmi text implies that women, just as non-Jews, were seen as potentially dangerous, as well as enticing. Others who could lead the observant rabbinic Jew astray.³⁷ Therefore measures had to be taken to guard oneself against them.

The required self-discipline could also involve other senses. The Yerushalmi statement quoted above is followed by another one attributed to Shmuel: 'Shmuel said: [Hearing] the voice of a woman [is forbidden] on the grounds of indecency [קול באשה ערוה] (y. Hall. 2:1, 58c). The anonymous Talmud subsequently quotes a biblical proof-text for this rabbinic ruling: 'What is the reason? "And through the voice [or: sound] of her harlotry [מקול זנותה] the land was polluted, [and she committed adultery with stone and tree]" [Jer. 3:9]' (ibid.). Whereas the meaning of the term קל is 'lightness' in the prophetic text, the talmudic editors who used this text as proof for the alleged dangerousness of female voices saw a keyword connection and reinterpreted it to mean 'voice' or 'sound' (קול). Through the combination of Shmuel's statement with Jer. 3:9, all women are associated with harlots who may lure men to sin through the very use of their voice. This ruling seems to be even more strict than the one about the male gaze, since a woman need not even be visible to threaten male decency. No solution to avoid listening to female voices is suggested here. Since female voices would

34 Neis 2013, 120.

35 The Hebrew term is עקיבא, from the root עקב, which means 'to be curved'. Neis 2013, 120, translates the word with 'heel', while Neusner 1991, 67, translates 'buttocks'.

36 Neis 2013, 120. She also points to Lev. R. 23:12, where a statement, attributed to Resh Laqish, appears: '[even] one who commits adultery with his eyes is called an adulterer'.

37 This danger is also thematised in connection with beautiful gentile women, see Ulmer 1994, 21–23, where she discusses mostly Babylonian Talmudic texts.

have been heard almost everywhere in daily life, except, perhaps, the study house (where, on occasion, women were allowed to come and 'listen'),³⁸ the statement may be meant to encourage a more general avoidance of contact with women. Taken together, the warnings against looking at women and listening to them could have been used to restrict contacts between rabbinic scholars and women, to create a fence around male sexual morality.

Especially interesting is the case of unintentionally overhearing blasphemy and the curse of the name of God, addressed in *y. Makkot* 7:8, 25a–b. The questions discussed are (a) whether or not the special ritual of tearing one's clothes is necessary upon hearing such a grave denunciation and negation of one's beliefs and (b) whether such a ritual applies to blasphemies expressed by non-Jews only. According to a statement attributed to R. Hoshaiiah, no difference should be made between overhearing Jewish and non-Jewish defamations of God: in both cases the tearing of one's garments is necessary. In the following discussion, this ritual is said to be unsuitable for amoraic rabbis' own times, however: 'Once blasphemers became many, they have ceased from tearing their garments upon hearing blasphemy' (*ibid.* 25b). In late antiquity, when Greco-Roman pagans and Christians were encountered daily in certain areas of the Land of Israel, rabbis would have been without proper clothes if they had followed the strict ruling. That damaging one's clothes was an issue also becomes clear from the following story, according to which R. Shimon b. Laqish tore his clothes upon hearing a Samaritan repeatedly utter a curse. He is said to have dismounted his ass and punched the blasphemer, saying: 'Son of Samaria, does your mother have enough new clothes to give me?' (*ibid.*). The ruling not to tear one's clothes in an environment in which blasphemers are all pervasive indicates that late antique rabbis were quite pragmatic and ready to accommodate themselves to the world in which they lived.

One might ask why the unintentional overhearing of a curse requires a ritual response at all. The ritual of tearing one's garments is usually associated with the death of a close relative or rabbinic master or the 'hearing of bad news' in the *Yerushalmi* (see the discussion in *y. B. M.* 2:11, 8d).³⁹ According to *y. M. Q.* 3:7, 83b, the expression 'bad news' refers to any occasion on which Jews were killed. The curse of the Jewish God, whether by Jews or non-Jews, was obviously considered an equally serious calamity by rabbis. Interestingly, the gospel of Mark relates that the high priest tore his gar-

³⁸ See *Tos. Sotah* 7:9: 'The men came to study and the women came to listen ...'. Daniel Boyarin has compared the male enclave of the study house to the male 'locker room', see Boyarin 1997, 155.

³⁹ For a more detailed discussion of this passage, see Hezser 1993, 83–97.

ments upon hearing Jesus identify himself as Christ and son of God (Mark 14:63).⁴⁰ This statement is explicitly called a ‘blasphemy’ in the following verse (14:64). In the book of Acts, when Stephanus states that he sees the ‘heavens open and the son of man standing at God’s right hand side’ (Acts 7:56), the assembled Jews are said to have ‘cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and rushed at him with one accord’ (7:57). Obviously, trying to close one’s ears with one’s hands was another way of reacting to talk considered blasphemous.

One is reminded here of R. Levi’s statement in Genesis Rabbah that the ears are not under a person’s control: ‘he hears ... what he does not want to hear ...’ (Gen. R. 67:3, quoted above). At the same time, what one listened to, willingly or unwillingly, could have an impact on one’s mind. In a vibrant oral environment in which pagan temple cults, Dionysiac processions, Christian street preachers, and mythological theatre performances competed with rabbinic teachings,⁴¹ all that rabbis could do was to warn against overhearing blasphemies and to suggest measures to guard oneself against them, whether tearing one’s garment, closing one’s ears, attacking the blasphemer to make him shut up, or simply closing one’s mind and disregarding the offensiveness of one’s environment. We may assume that the latter pragmatic option was the most common solution adopted by rabbis in late antiquity.

In his book, *Elements of Ethics*, the Stoic Hierocles (second century CE) stresses the self-perception of an individual in relation to others as the basis of all ethical thinking: ‘We ourselves are aware of our eyes and ears and other parts. Thus, when we wish to see something, we direct our eyes toward the visible object ... and when we want to hear, we extend our ears ...’ (1.55).⁴² It is human reason that guides perception, not the sensory organs in and of themselves. A person can use his sensory organs in accordance with his own moral convictions. As Persius (first century CE) states in his fifth Satire, the ‘purified ears’ of the disciples listen to the wisdom of the Stoic philosopher Cleanthes (‘for you, as an educator of youth, plant in their purified ears the harvest of Cleanthes’ (Persius, *Satires* 5.14, lines 63–64). The notion that an

⁴⁰ For a rabbinic analogy, see the story about Honi the Circle Drawer who petitioned God like a son would his father, whereupon Shimon b. Shetach tells him: ‘If you were not Honi, I would decree a ban against you’ (M. Taan. 3:8).

⁴¹ On theatre performances, see Weiss 2014, 117–169; on Dionysiac processions represented on mosaic floors, see Weiss 2014, 122. On Jewish encounters with the Dionysus cult, see also Friesen 2015, 18–19.

⁴² Quoted from Ramelli 2005, 5.

individual can decide whether he wants to study wisdom or give in to his desires provides the foundation for Stoic moral philosophy.

Rabbis would probably not disagree with this view, for rabbinic study, that is listening to rabbinic masters rather than to various types of street preachers, also required a conscious decision. Focusing one's mind on Torah study and keeping away distractions caused by sensory experiences was a rabbinic imperative. The difference between the Stoic and the rabbinic forms of self-discipline was the higher religious value which rabbis attributed to it. For rabbis, shutting out potentially dangerous sensory impressions and concentrating on the words of one's master instead was an essential part of religious practice expected by God.

Whereas rabbis aimed to practice this sensory asceticism in the overstimulating context of late antique daily life, with its erotic wall paintings, brothels, nakedness in bathhouses, and constant noise in the *insula* buildings, streets, and marketplaces, the desert fathers left this environment altogether to avoid its impact on their minds. In the *Apophthegmata Patrum* we find similar advice to shun and protect oneself against one's sinful environment:

'So this is the monk's life: not to walk in agreement with an unjust man, nor to look with his eyes upon evil, not to go about being curious, and neither to examine nor to listen to the business of others. Not to take anything with his hands, but rather to give to others. Not to be proud in his heart, nor to malign others in his thoughts. Not to fill his stomach, but in all things to behave with discretion. Behold, in all this you have the monk.'⁴³

The saying touches upon some of the same aspects of a religious life that were also thematised by rabbis in the texts discussed above: 'not to walk in agreement with an unjust man' (or to go to synagogues and study houses rather than to theatres and circuses, according to rabbis); to avoid the impact of 'evil' sights (in the case of rabbis: idolatry and sources of erotic stimulation); to close one's ears to 'the business of others' (especially talk that stands in disagreement with one's own beliefs); to use one's hand for charitable donations rather than to steal or kill); not 'to malign others' in his thoughts (or to use one's mouth to say something wicked or blasphemous, according to rabbis); not to eat abundant food (or to avoid non-kosher food, according to rabbis).

For both the rabbis and the desert fathers, the leading of a religious life was a practical matter that involved the control of one's eyes, ears, hands, feet, and mouth in everyday life. This controlled behaviour was the visible expression of one's beliefs and convictions. It required a reassessment of,

43 This anonymous saying is quoted from Merton 1960, 28.

and reorientation towards, things and behaviours which ‘ordinary’ people took for granted and did not care about. The literary transmission of these behavioural rules served as guidelines for later generations of rabbinic scholars and monks to emulate.

When comparing the monastic and rabbinic instructions in more detail, the greater radicalism of the desert fathers in some of these areas becomes obvious: the quoted statement even forbids ‘being curious’ about anything outside of one’s own religious world; not to listen to any ‘business of others’; not to take ‘anything with his hands’. Such a radical rejection of normal life was possible – even if only ideally – by keeping a spatial distance from the ordinary world.⁴⁴ Rabbis, on the other hand, lived in the midst of their fellow-Jews and non-Jews and continued to have social and business relationships with them.⁴⁵ They therefore invented a lifestyle of self-awareness and discretion in which every detail of ordinary life and behaviour had to be examined and adjusted to one’s Torah-based beliefs and religious principles. Rather than constructing ideals, they faced reality and adjusted to it pragmatically.

The final form of sensory self-control that needs to be mentioned in this context is touch. This is a very complicated issue because it is associated with notions of (im)purity that enhance its religious and social significance in rabbinic culture. To get in touch with another human being, animal, or object through direct bodily contact is seen as potentially contagious and polluting in a number of cultures, as Mary Douglas has pointed out.⁴⁶ In connection with rabbinic purity rules, Mira Balberg has recently argued that the rabbis of the Mishnah greatly expanded biblical purity rules to add the so-called impurity ‘by tent’ (meaning any shared covering) to impurity conferred through direct touch.⁴⁷ Not only ‘direct body-to-body touch or the touch of bodily emanations and effluvia, can cause two people to share a condition’ but also ‘indirect forms of touch, such as carriage and shift’.⁴⁸ She suggests that rabbinic regulations served to distinguish rabbis from various types of Others and that they show similarities to *askesis* in Greco-Roman society. Only rabbis and their close followers would have been able to understand and practice the complex purity rules in daily life. Accordingly, these rules served as a demarcation between male rabbinic Jews on the one hand

44 Stewart 1990 sees a connection between this extreme lifestyle ideal and the barrenness and ‘purity’ of the desert landscape.

45 On relations between rabbis and other Jews, see Hezser 1997, 353–404; Miller 2006, 446–466.

46 See Douglas 2003, 35.

47 Balberg 2014, 100.

48 Balberg 2014, 56.

and other male Jews (the so-called *am-haaretz*), women, and non-Jews on the other: non-observant male Jews' inability and unwillingness to comply with rabbinic rules made them dangerous and their practices contagious; women, according to ancient stereotypes, were considered unable to maintain self-control; as non-persons in the eyes of rabbis, non-Jews stood outside the rabbinic purity system.⁴⁹

Prohibitions against 'touching' persons and objects who could constitute a threat to one's religious convictions are also found in ancient Christianity. In 1 Corinthians 7:1 Paul tells the community that 'it is good for a man not to touch a woman'. As a compromise, he permits sexual relations between husbands and wives: 'because of sexual immoralities, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband' (ibid. 7:2). In her discussion of the text, Gasparro assumes that 'the recommendation "not to touch a woman" appeared to have expressed the opinion of at least some of the faithful of Corinth, and the apostle states his substantial agreement with this assumption ...' and with *enkrateia* as a distinguishing aspect of the Christian religion.⁵⁰ At the same time, Paul was 'flexible' toward the realities of married life. Rabbinic prohibitions against touching wives during times of menstruation may not be as radical as the Corinthian view but they share the notion that contact with women is potentially dangerous and that precautions are necessary to protect men.⁵¹ Like Paul, rabbis would argue that 'a man may not touch any woman other than his wife ... because of rabbinic concepts of touch and the loss of male sexual self-control'.⁵² The more radical view that relations with women should be abandoned altogether was practiced by monks in late antiquity. The *Apophthegmata Patrum* contain a discussion between an elder and Abba Abraham, who challenged his chastity by asking him to imagine that a woman is lying on a mat in his cell, whereupon the elder is said to have answered: 'I fight my thoughts so that I don't touch that woman'.⁵³ Not touching women other than one's wife and relatives, not touching one's wife during menstruation, and not touching women altogether are all behaviours that run against men's natural sexual desire and require various degrees of self-control. The rabbinic and Christian regulations can all be understood as expressions of *enkrateia* imposed by males on themselves and members of their in-group as markers of particular forms of religiosity.

⁴⁹ See Hezser 2015.

⁵⁰ Sfameni Gasparro 1995, 132.

⁵¹ On rabbinic discussions of menstruation and sexual purity, see especially Fonrobert 2000.

⁵² Fonrobert 2000, 21.

⁵³ Quoted from Merton 1960, 69.

3 Self-control and religious identity

Rabbis who advocated self-control as a means to distinguish rabbinic Jews from others stood in a long tradition within Judaism. The Letter of Aristeas already states:

‘In his wisdom, the legislator [i. e. Moses] ... surrounded us with unbroken palisades and iron walls to prevent our mixing with any of the other peoples in any matter, being thus kept pure in body and soul, preserved from false beliefs, and worshipping the only God omnipotent over all creation ... so to prevent our being perverted by contact with others or by mixing with bad influences he hedged us in on all sides with strict observances connected with meat and drink and touch and hearing and sight, after the manner of the Law’ (Aristeas 139–142).⁵⁴

Aspects of eating, touch, hearing, and sight, which we also encountered in rabbinic discussions, are specified here as well. The Hellenistic Jewish writer of the text claims that biblical law was already meant to keep Jewish monotheists ‘pure’ by preventing too close association with other peoples. According to Aristeas, the laws serve as ‘iron walls’ to protect Jews from intermingling with practitioners of idolatry. What is important to take into consideration is that the text was written in a context that was heavily influenced by Hellenism in general and Hellenistic philosophy in particular. The affirmation of a group identity through distinctive forms of behaviour and self-discipline was also common among Hellenistic philosophical schools.

Classicists have pointed out that ‘the term *enkrateia* appears for the first time in the works of Plato and Xenophon’ in the sense of ‘the mastery one exercises over oneself’.⁵⁵ What is especially significant, as Dorion points out in connection with Plato, is that ‘*enkrateia* is the foundation of virtue in the sense that it is the condition for the acquisition of virtue’.⁵⁶ Only someone who is able to maintain self-discipline is able to resist ‘evil’ temptations and practice what is considered good. How good and evil are defined, that is, the particulars of moral knowledge, varies from one philosophical school and religious conviction to the next. As its basis, however, ‘*enkrateia* is indispensable for the acquisition of the knowledge underlying the virtues’.⁵⁷

In Hellenistic and Roman times *enkrateia* and *sophrosyne* were especially emphasised by the Stoics. Plutarch and Epictetus both advocated self-control and moderation in all things.⁵⁸ For Plutarch *enkrateia* ‘was one of the four

⁵⁴ The translation of the Letter of Aristeas follows Shutt 1985, 7–34.

⁵⁵ Dorion 2007, 119.

⁵⁶ Dorion 2007, 121.

⁵⁷ Dorion 2007, 121.

⁵⁸ On Plutarch, see Gourinat 2007, 215–248. On Epictetus, see Lawrence 2014, 127–142.

cardinal virtues', a view which he attributes to Cleanthes, Zeno's successor as head of the Stoic school at Athens (fourth century BCE).⁵⁹ Cleanthes allegedly considered self-control a 'strength and power' to withstand temptations, to make rational choices, and to avoid anything that could hamper one's philosophical state of mind.⁶⁰ Diodorus Siculus presents the Pythagoreans as an example of training in self-control: they had the most delicious food prepared for them and they 'would gaze upon it for a considerable time; then, after through mere gazing they had aroused their natural desires with a view to their gratification, they would command the slaves to clear away the tables and would at once depart without having tasted of what had been served' (Const. Exc. 2 (1)).⁶¹ This practice is very reminiscent of some late antique Christian ascetics such as Evagrius (fourth century CE), whose saying Palladius recorded: 'I did not touch lettuce or any vegetable greens, or fruit, or grapes ... since the time I have come to the desert.'⁶² While such rigour was associated with exceptional individuals only, Roman orators associated more general forms of *enkrateia* and *sophrosyne* with virtuous upper-class Roman men.⁶³

We may assume that Jewish and Christian religious leaders of Roman-Byzantine times were very familiar with the value Greco-Roman intellectuals placed on self-control. Based on their own religious traditions, they presented alternative versions that expressed their own value systems. Roetzel points out that 'by Paul's time the Greek and Hellenistic worlds had already emphasized the control of sensual passions for centuries ... In the Hellenistic era *enkrateia* ... which had once been a prerequisite for philosophical wisdom ..., became a struggle of reason to exert its supremacy over passions and desires.'⁶⁴ Also, as we have already noted, '*Enkrateia* (...) became the trademark of the élite',⁶⁵ an ideal which the middle strata of society would have tried to imitate. Just as Stoic philosophers and rhetoricians stressed that certain 'normal' human desires and aspects of daily life could distract from a proper philosophical life, rabbis declared Torah study and observance supreme and outlawed anything that could conflict with it, drawing a 'fence' around the Torah to protect themselves against their ordinary surroundings.

⁵⁹ Gourinat 2007, 232.

⁶⁰ Gourinat 2007, 232. Gourinat quotes from *De Stoicorum Repugnantiis* 7, 1034 D-E.

⁶¹ Translation by Oldfather 1989, 220–223.

⁶² Palladius, *The Lausiatic History* 38.12.

⁶³ See, for example, Tacitus, *A Dialogue On Oratory* 41.

⁶⁴ Roetzel 1999, 138.

⁶⁵ Roetzel 1999, 138.

What Stoic philosophers, rabbis, and Christian ascetics shared was their adherence to a form of self-control that differed from that of ordinary people and from other religious and philosophical groups. The adherence to, and observance of, this particular form of self-control determined the very identity of their respective group. While all of them were more or less concerned with the control of the sensory impressions of vision and sight, hearing, touch, and taste – impressions which linked them to the environment they lived in and to other people outside their own group – they differed from each other with regard to what aspects they emphasised, how they formulated particular rules, and how strict they were with regard to their self-distinction. Therefore, Stoic, rabbinic, and anchorite views on food, women, and the dangers of paganism seem like variant forms of self-control for the purpose of self-distinction and group identity. Obviously, from the perspective of the respective practitioners themselves, these regulations were an expression of their philosophical and religious beliefs. Beliefs and practices belonged together, with practices constituting the visible expression of one's convictions. In late antiquity, when the public visibility of one's disposition was so significant,⁶⁶ the very nuances of abstention – from non-kosher and/or luxurious food, from touching (non-kin) women, from looking at statues and processions of idols – would have been noticed and labelled by one's contemporaries.

Although rabbis may have hoped that many of their contemporaries would follow their rulings, in reality the complexity and stringency of rabbinic self-discipline is likely to have been practiced by rabbis themselves and their relatively narrow circles of relatives, disciples, and sympathisers only, to varying degrees. Miller's study has 'confirmed the impression of many scholars that the interests of the rabbis ... were insular'.⁶⁷ Rabbinic literature was not composed for the masses but for future generations of rabbinic scholars.⁶⁸ Similarly, the ideal of self-control propagated by the *Apophthegmata Patrum* served as a model for future monks. At the same time, the reception history of these works has shown that they were also valued by ordinary people for whom they served as ideals and guidelines. Perhaps the model of concentric circles is helpful here: the stringent rulings held up by 'holy men' in the inner circles may eventually reach lay people, but they become increasingly watered down and reinterpreted in this process.

According to Peter Brown, 'the very existence of the monks spoke to the village about itself and its values, just as, most poignantly, the village still spoke to

⁶⁶ Newbold 1986, 224–225.

⁶⁷ Miller 2006, 464.

⁶⁸ Kraemer 1993, 125–140.

them.⁶⁹ Although the monks practiced an ethics of withdrawal from ordinary life, the separation from the village would not be complete: villagers came to visit the monks in their settlements and the monks would have continued certain old habits. The monks' spatial and spiritual disengagement may have been perceived as a visual marker of broader social developments. Brown has suggested that 'the ascetic was seen as acting out a dramatic and readily intelligible ritual of social disengagement' in a world in which farmers practiced *anachoresis*.⁷⁰ Although the withdrawal of rabbis from ordinary life was less radical, their devotion to Torah study and observance may have been seen as a sign of indigenous rebellion against the Roman-Byzantine cultural context in which Palestinian Jews lived. Rabbinic dedication to the Torah and their all-encompassing practice in daily life would have contrasted with the Roman transformation of provincial life and provided an alternative to Romanisation.

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⁶⁹ Brown 1978, 83.

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Religion in the Roman Empire

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Religion in the Roman Empire (RRE) is bold in the sense that it intends to further and document new and integrative perspectives on religion in the Ancient World combining multidisciplinary methodologies. Starting from the notion of 'lived religion' it will offer a space to take up recent, but still incipient research to modify and cross the disciplinary boundaries of 'History of Religion', 'Anthropology', 'Classics', 'Ancient History', 'Ancient Judaism', 'Early Christianity', 'New Testament', 'Patristic Studies', 'Coptic Studies', 'Gnostic and Manichaean Studies', 'Archaeology' and 'Oriental Languages'. It is the purpose of the journal to stimulate the development of an approach which can comprise the local and global trajectories of the multi-dimensional pluralistic religions of antiquity.

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