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# Contents

Roberto Alciati, Luca Arcari, Cristiana Facchini, Emiliano R. Urciuoli, <i>Editoriale</i> .....	7
--	---

## Network Science in Biblical Studies

István Czachesz, <i>Network Science in Biblical Studies: Introduction</i> .....	9
---	---

*Abstract:* This article introduces the special issue of ASE on network science and biblical studies. After a short presentation of network science and the concept of networks, the article discusses the application of network science in three domains: the natural and built environment of ancient Judaism and Christianity, the social networks of Jewish and Christian actors, and the analysis of textual corpora. In the next part, some technical terms of network science are clarified. The introductory article concludes with the presentation of the contributions to the special issue.

*Keywords:* Network Science, Social Network Analysis, Network Analysis of Texts, Historical Network Analysis, Vector Semantics

Catherine Hezser, <i>Between Scholasticism and Populism: Rabbinic and Christian Networks in the Roman Empire</i> .....	27
--	----

*Abstract:* Between the first and fourth centuries C.E. networks of like-minded individuals who shared certain religious beliefs and practices developed in both Jewish and Christian society. These networks emerged in the context of Roman imperialism which connected, integrated, and to some extent homogenized the various sectors of the population through road connections, infrastructure, and Romanization. Both rabbis and Christian leaders tried to distinguish themselves from certain aspects of their Graeco-Roman cultural environment by, at the same time, functioning within it and adopting some of its features. This study compares rabbinic and Christian leaders' networking activities within the shared Roman imperial context of the first centuries C.E.

*Keywords:* Rabbis, Bishops, Imperialism, Romanization, Communication, Travel

Rikard Roitto, <i>The Johannine Information War: A Social Network Analysis of the Information Flow Between Johannine Assemblies as Witnessed by 1-3 John</i> ....	47
---	----

*Abstract:* Social network analysis is applied heuristically to understand how the Epistles of John attempt not only to promote their vision of the community's identity and theology, but

also to strengthen their own position in the Johannine social network and weaken the position of its competitors. Insistence on social distance from competing teachings is central to 1 and 2 John, while 3 John is occasioned by the Johannine School being marginalized by an assembly. The errands of these letters can be described in terms of network analysis as attempts to weaken certain social ties and strengthen others to allow the Johannine School more uncontested dispersion of information in the assemblies of the network.

*Keywords:* Epistles of John, Social Network, Johannine Community, Network Theory, Information Flow, Conflict

Sean F. Everton, Rob Schroeder, *The Church Among Jews and Gentiles: A Network Simulation of the Christian Mission to the Jews* .....

63

*Abstract:* How successful was the Christian Church’s mission to the Jews? The answer to this is a function of numerous factors, such as underlying demographics, fertility rates, competition, and (most importantly) when Christians and Jews severed their ties with one another. Some believe the split as early as 70 CE, but others present evidence that Jews and Christians regularly interacted until the 4th and possibly 5th centuries. In this paper, using computer network simulations that capture various factors, we run a series of models that estimate the proportion of Jewish converts to Christianity from approximately 40 to 600 CE. Our models suggest that whether one considers the Church’s mission to the Jews a success largely depends on what one considers a “success.” If one measures it solely in terms of raw numbers, then probably not. However, if one considers that the potential pool of Jewish converts was relatively small compared to Gentiles, it was perhaps more successful than many early Church scholars believe.

*Keywords:* Social Networks, Network Simulations, Early Church, Mission to the Jews, Jewish Converts

Vojtěch Kaše, Nina Nikki, Tomáš Glomb, *Righteousness in Early Christian Literature: Distant Reading and Textual Networks* .....

87

*Abstract:* The article joins the scholarly discussion about the meaning of righteousness language in biblical literature with consideration of changes in the concept from archaic Greek literature to fourth century Christian texts. The article seeks to showcase and evaluate how methods from the area of computational linguistics and distributional semantics can contribute to the discussion. The article suggests that, together with formal network models, namely word co-occurrence networks and similarity networks, the methods reveal changes in large corpora of textual data which are too subtle to be detected by close reading. On the other hand, some questions require or benefit greatly from combining distant and close reading methods.

*Keywords:* Righteousness, Paul of Tarsus, Quantitative Textual Analysis, Computational Linguistics, Distributional Semantics, Word Co-Occurrence Networks

Tamás Biró, *Who Circumcised Abraham? A Cognitive Network Model for the Interpretations of Gen 17*

121

*Abstract:* The verb “to circumcise” in Gen 17:24, and elsewhere in that chapter, appears in the niphil form, entailing a passive meaning, and the agent of the action remaining unknown. At the same time, Abraham’s circumcision plays a central role in Judaism. It is not simply the prototype of all subsequent instances of a ritual that is central to Jewish identity; but it is also the starting point of a recursive chain of ceremonies by which any later circumcision acquires its religious significance. Hence, the importance of the agent of the first circumcision. First, I describe how this ritual is embedded in the network of concepts, entities, narratives,

precepts and further mental representations in Judaism. Subsequently, I shall present a selection of answers from various traditions to the question posed in the title. Then, I introduce a network of meanings, which shall serve as a linguistic model interpreting the agent-less niphil forms of the verb ‘to circumcise’ in Gen 17. This model yields different interpretations under various conditions, corresponding to various traditions. Consequently, it is argued to describe the computation taking place in the human mind, which is able to produce alternative interpretive traditions.

*Keywords:* Circumcision, Judaism, Midrashim, Biblical Exegesis, Anaphora Resolution, Simulated Annealing

István Czachesz, *The Bible as a Network of Memes: Analyzing a Database of Cross-References* ..... 145

*Abstract:* This article puts forward the theory that the Bible is a network of cultural items (memes) that developed through an evolutionary process and has been transmitted for many centuries in a relatively stable form. Biblical cross-references reveal how the verses and passages of the Bible are connected into a network that is analogous to genetic networks in biology. The article presents a network model of cross-references, based on the *Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*. The article discusses the history of the database and the origin of the references; network statistics that yield insights into the history of the cross-references; node centrality statistics and the popularity of the respective verses in the history of Western biblical interpretation; and the modular structure of the network. The results are interpreted as tentative evidence for the collective behavior of populations in Western history being co-determined by a network of biblical memes.

*Keywords:* Cultural Evolution, Cross-References, Treasure of Scripture Knowledge, History of Interpretation, Node Centrality, Community Detection

**Articles**

Giorgio Jossa, *I “voi” di Gesù. Una spia per identificare i destinatari delle sue parole* ..... 181

*Abstract:* For the gospel passages too, as for any other historical document, it is impossible to interpret their meaning correctly without knowing their context, without therefore assigning them a precise place and time. The scholar of Christian origins is well aware that for the gospels the operation is considered to be mostly impossible, but he cannot resign himself to saying that the original context is irretrievably lost. There are, in fact, a few ways of attempting to recover it. One of these is to try to identify who the recipients of Jesus’ words really were; to try in particular to understand to whom Jesus was addressing himself when he said “you”. Some gospel pericopes allow this operation.

*Keywords:* Historical Jesus, Synoptic Gospels, Exegesis

Brandon E. Bruning, Jessica Ann Hughes, *Sham Synagogues and Fake Jews: Advancing the Thesis of Pauline Pagans at Smyrna and Philadelphia (Rev 2:9, 3:9)* ..... 197

*Abstract:* New Testament scholars continue to identify the opponents of John of Patmos and his addressees at Smyrna and Philadelphia—despite John’s testimony that “they say they are Judeans and are not, but are lying”—as a Jewish “Synagogue of Satan” (2:9, 3:9), not gentile imposters. Since 2001, David Frankfurter has identified the Smyrnan and Philadelphian opponents as “Pauline or neo-Pauline” gentiles who threatened the Jewish identity of John’s con-

gregations. This proposal anticipated recent Pauline scholarship wary of Christian theological anachronisms, but the resulting “Paul within Judaism” shares more with Frankfurter’s “John within Judaism” than with his “Pauline” foil. Refining Frankfurter’s hypothesis to distinguish “neo-Pauline” inheritors from Paul promises a clearer view of John, his disciples, and his adversaries in relation to the contested reception of Paul’s instructions for his gentile disciples.

*Keywords:* Synagogue of Satan, Revelation, Paul, Ephesians, Anti-Semitism

Marius A. van Willigen, <i>Philo’s and Ambrose’s Explanation of the Dreams in Gen 37-47</i> .....	221
---	-----

*Abstract:* The dreams of the patriarch Joseph (Gen 37), the dreams of the butler and the baker (Gen 40) and the dreams of Pharaoh (Gen 41) are significant dream examples in the Joseph-narrative. The Jewish exegesis of these dreams by Philo of Alexandria and the Early Christian exegesis of these dreams by Ambrose of Milan (337-397) will be discussed here. Next, we want to investigate whether Philo’s exegesis of the dreams influenced Ambrose’s exegesis or whether this is unlikely. Although we know that Philo influenced Ambrose far and wide, his influence on the interpretation of the dreams in the Joseph story seems to have been slight. Further investigation reveals that Ambrose relied on Origen for his exegesis of these dreams. As for the scholarly investigation of the latter, a complicating factor is that Origen’s exegesis of Genesis is only partially left.

*Keywords:* Jewish and Christian Exegesis, Joseph’s Dreams, Philo of Alexandria, Origen, Ambrose of Milan, Exegetical Influence

**Book Discussion**

Discussione del libro di Francesco Benigno, Vincenzo Lavenia, <i>Peccato o crimine. La Chiesa di fronte alla pedofilia</i> , Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2021, V + 284 pp. (I Robinson. Letture).....	245
---	-----

<b>Book Reviews</b> .....	263
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Catherine Hezser

## Between Scholasticism and Populism: Rabbinic and Christian Networks in the Roman Empire

In Roman and early Byzantine times Palestinian rabbis and early Christian leaders formed network connections with their colleagues, students, and sympathisers. Rabbinic and Christian networks emerged in the context of Roman imperialism, which connected, integrated, and to some extent homogenized the various sectors of the population through road connections, infrastructure, and Romanization in the administrative and cultural realms. Both rabbis and Christian leaders tried to distinguish themselves from certain aspects of their Graeco-Roman cultural environment by, at the same time, functioning within it and adopting some of its features. Their networking activities enabled them to build communities of like-minded people whose attitudes, teachings, and moral and legal advice constituted alternatives to the prevalent Roman ideals.

Studies on Christian networks have increased in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Czachesz and Duling have introduced network theory to New Testament studies and investigated the expansion of Christianity through Christian participation in the social networks of the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> Kloppenborg has suggested to view Christian associations as social networks, “arrays of people related to one another by multiple connections”.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars have focused on developing episcopal networks and emphasized in-group connections as well as inter-cultural exchange. Schor has investigated the roles of friendship, mentorship, and patronage in the fifth-century Syrian bishop Theodoret’s network connections to fellow-clerics, which played an important role in doctrinal conflicts between Syrian and Egyptian church leaders: “Friendship

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<sup>1</sup> See also Hezser 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Czachesz 2011a; 2011b; 2017, 187-205; Duling 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Kloppenborg 2019, 56.

and mentorship linked bishop to bishop. Patronage ties bound bishops to people across late Roman society. Doctrinal alliances nurtured a sense of community that extended beyond the clergy”.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Cvetković and Gemeinhardt point to the “interconnectivity” of late antique Christianity and “the emergence of a web of Christian belief and practice that spread over much of the later Roman Empire”.<sup>5</sup> Dekker’s study of the social networks of two Egyptian bishops has linked them to monastic communities, civic officials and lay people.<sup>6</sup> The wide-ranging correspondence of the second-century bishop Dionysios of Corinth has led Cavan W. Concannon to investigate trade routes and mobility as the basis of the constantly changing local and regional network connections surrounding him.<sup>7</sup>

As far as Greek and Roman society is concerned, network studies have focused on the Mediterranean region. According to Malkin, networking amongst Greeks turned this region into a “small world”, in which Greek culture and identity were increasingly shared.<sup>8</sup> We may assume that by the first century CE Roman Palestine had become an integral part of Mediterranean political, economic, and cultural networks, yet the region is not mentioned in a joint volume on Greek and Roman networks in the Mediterranean.<sup>9</sup> Networks amongst pagan monotheists and Diaspora Jews are the subject of Collar’s analysis. Like scholars before her she stresses that “social networks facilitate the spread of ideas”.<sup>10</sup> Shared monotheistic beliefs amongst Diaspora Jews and non-Jews may have developed through inter-cultural connections.

In this essay I shall compare rabbis’ and Christian leaders’ networking activities within the Roman imperial context of the first five centuries CE to determine similarities and differences. I shall focus on the nature of ties between network participants and the type of communication between them before investigating broader issues such as the scope and function of the networks in question. Networks are not stable entities but constantly changing and fluctuating. From the first to fifth century, rabbinic and Christian network connections would have mutated and expanded, gaining in complexity. Therefore, a sociological approach that looks at societies from a synchronic perspective needs to be supplemented by a diachronic historical investigation.

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<sup>4</sup> Schor 2011, 2. See also Schor 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Cvetković, Gemeinhardt 2019b, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Dekker 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Concannon 2017, 8-9.

<sup>8</sup> Malkin 2011, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Malkin 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Collar 2013, 3.

## I. THE NATURE OF THE TIES

Our first investigation concerns the nature of ties within the respective networks. Who is connected to whom and what is the basis, frequency, and content of their exchanges? Can the respective ties and network components be described as weak or strong?<sup>11</sup> Did they change over time? In contrast to modern sociologists, who are able to answer these questions on the basis of fieldwork within contemporary societies, our evidence is limited to a circumscribed set of literary sources that are written from particular perspectives. The specific interests of the authors and editors of the texts need to be taken into account. The combination of literary and epigraphic material can lead to illegitimate harmonisations, as the controversy about “epigraphical rabbis”, that is, the question whether and to what extent individuals with the title mentioned in inscriptions and in rabbinic literature can be considered to have belonged to the same social group, has shown.<sup>12</sup> There are very few Diaspora inscriptions referring to a “rabbi”, and whether the title was used for Torah scholars in these contexts remains uncertain.<sup>13</sup>

Rabbinic literature is our primary evidence for analysing the network connections of ancient rabbis. Rabbinic documents were probably written by scholars for scholars.<sup>14</sup> Therefore they almost exclusively mention rabbis and their students, at least as far as named individuals are concerned. This does not necessarily mean that rabbis socialized and talked only amongst themselves. We cannot draw direct conclusions from the literature to social and historical reality. Rabbis must have had more or less close connections to their family members, neighbours, (non-rabbinic) friends, work partners, and clients, which may be absent from the texts. The evidence of rabbinic networks that the literary documents provide is therefore biased in favour of intra-rabbinic ties and incomplete as far as other ties are concerned. Furthermore, encounters between sages mentioned in stories and editorially constructed halakhic disputes cannot be considered historically reliable. The editors of rabbinic documents seem to have been interested in presenting rabbis as an interlinked network of Torah scholars who were in continuous dialogue with each other over halakhic matters.<sup>15</sup>

In rabbinic literature rabbis’ ties to others are based on their role of being Torah experts. As experts in the interpretation, application,

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<sup>11</sup> For an introduction to network theory see Prell 2012.

<sup>12</sup> See Cohen 2010, 227-243; Lapin 2011, 311-346; Miller 2004, 27-76; 2014, 239-273; Price 2018, 491-509.

<sup>13</sup> See van der Horst 2015, 58.

<sup>14</sup> See Kraemer 1993, 125-140.

<sup>15</sup> On rabbinic networks, see Hezser 1997, 228-254.

and development of Torah rabbis are connected to a few contemporary colleagues with whom they allegedly discussed halakhic matters and with a few students who were linked to them personally. One may argue that besides kinship ties rabbis' closest connection was to their students, who are presented as members of rabbis' households present in various circumstances, accompanying rabbis everywhere.<sup>16</sup> Ties between rabbinic teachers and their students constitute the densest form of ties that existed in rabbinic circles. They were based on the actors' spatial proximity, duration of their interaction, shared interests, and potential frequency of communication. On the other hand, students had a much lower status than their teachers within the rabbinic network. Whereas spatial distance could separate rabbinic colleagues who lived at different locations, social distance would have separated established rabbinic scholars from their disciples who sought their instruction and proximity.

Status differences are of great significance for the nature of network ties. They allow the higher-status-higher person to control the frequency and nature of interactions, limiting the lower-status person's access to power and communication. At the same time, the connection to a high-status individual, such as a rabbi, may have elevated the status of his students within the local Jewish population. Therefore, status is both "an antecedent" and "a consequence of network ties".<sup>17</sup> Lomi and Torló have pointed to the important distinction between "senders" and "receivers" in advice relationships: "Status-conferring acts define a directed social relation connecting a sender and a recipient actor".<sup>18</sup> The "senders", who ask others for advice, send status to the "receivers" who give that advice. Those who give advice are in control of the knowledge: they are free to distribute it to those who request it from them. This consideration also applies to the relationship between rabbis and other Jews reflected in rabbinic sources. The more sought-after a rabbi's advice, the higher his status within the rabbinic network and probably also within Palestinian Jewish society at large. On the other hand, rabbinic texts present non-rabbinic Jews as seekers and recipients of the "goods", i.e. halakhic advice, that rabbis had to offer. The way in which the relationship between rabbis and non-rabbis is presented elevates rabbis' status within society.

A similar yet also different picture emerges with regard to the early Jesus-movement. According to the gospels, Jesus's strongest ties were to his disciples, who were with him permanently and had constant access to him as far as communication and observation of his actions are

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<sup>16</sup> On relations between rabbis and their students see Hezser 1997, 332-352.

<sup>17</sup> Lomi, Torló 2014, 408.

<sup>18</sup> Lomi, Torló 2014, 413.

concerned.<sup>19</sup> Like individual rabbis' relations to their students, Jesus's relationship to his disciples is presented as hierarchical, with Jesus as the higher-status-higher teacher-sage around whom crowds gather in search of healing and advice. In contrast to rabbinic literature, however, the christological ideology of the gospels places Jesus on an exceedingly high level that is out-of-reach for ordinary humans. The gospels' presentation of these relationships, with the alleged distance between Jesus and his contemporaries, rhetorically increases his power over those who believe in him but also makes him the subject of ridicule by those who do not share this perception.

What is absent in the gospels but reflected in rabbinic texts is an equal-status collegial network that enables intellectual pluralism.<sup>20</sup> Whereas rabbinic texts present a largely horizontal network of like-minded Torah scholars, each of whom have vertical connections to students and followers deemed to be of an inferior status, the gospels present a strictly vertical network with Jesus at the very top, beyond any worldly hierarchy. Jesus and the disciples would also have had connections to other Jews, that is, Pharisees, priests, sick people, and the anonymous audience of Jesus's sermons. They were situated at the same horizontal level as the disciples, but their ties to Jesus (and his disciples) would have been loose and temporary only. The great distance between Jesus and all other humans that the gospels create minimizes the distance between the disciples and their contemporaries. In contrast to the collegial scholarly network projected by rabbinic documents, in the gospels a super-human Jesus confronts a popular mass.

It is important to emphasize that the representation of relationships in the literary sources does not necessarily reflect historical and social reality. This is especially true for the christological representation of Jesus in the gospels. From a historical point of view, Jesus's relation to his students and followers was probably similar to that of rabbis with their circles of students and others who asked them for advice. As such, he would have been one of many self-proclaimed Jewish teachers, healers, exorcists, or "mystics" who functioned in early first-century Galilee.<sup>21</sup> As far as rabbis are concerned, they considered themselves the embodiment of Torah and receivers of the divine word in line with Moses at Sinai. As such, they distinguished themselves from non-rabbinic Jews and may have been considered "holy men" by their followers.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> On Jesus's relation to his disciples in the context of ancient Judaism see Hezser 2018, 71-86.

<sup>20</sup> See Hidary 2010, 370.

<sup>21</sup> Rajak 1984, 115. On Jesus as a mystic see Joseph 2020, 220-243.

<sup>22</sup> This is particularly evident in Hekhalot literature such as the Sar Torah texts, see Swartz 2007, 216. On rabbis as embodied Torah see Lindbeck 2010, 96-97.

At least after Jesus's death, that is, in his absence, relationships amongst his followers seem to have become hierarchical. Leadership figures emerged (e.g., Paul, Peter, Barnabas, James), whose network ties to each other would have been more or less equal, whereas their ties to ordinary Christians would have been determined by their status-superiority.<sup>23</sup> On his missionary journeys Paul seems to have established contacts to householders who facilitated his activities.<sup>24</sup> These householders would have been local nodal points between Paul and local communities. Yet his letters were addressed and probably read out to ordinary Christians at the places he had visited, that is, they were directed at the Christian populace rather than to fellow-leaders.<sup>25</sup>

By the second century C.E. an internal Christian hierarchy had emerged that governed network relations amongst Christians. At least from the fourth century onwards, Christian leaders sought to establish and maintain good relations to Byzantine political rulers and high officials. The emperors' commitment to and privileging of Christianity led to the establishment of strong ties between the ecclesiastical and imperial elites, rendering political, social, and economic power to the church. The papers in Cvetković and Gemeinhardt's volume provide many examples of this development.<sup>26</sup> Under Constantine and his Christian successors, bishops were granted privileges, such as the use of the *cursus publicus*, which increased their mobility, influence, and networking capacity in more distant locations.<sup>27</sup> Concannon has identified "diplomatic relationships and social dependencies" between bishop Dionysios of Corinth and Christian authorities in Rome, a situation which seems to have amounted to patronage.<sup>28</sup> Bishops came to occupy an intermediate role between the government and the masses. Imperial support increased their local communal authority. Local bishops defended illegal Christian practices such as the destruction of synagogues before the emperor and were able to exert pressure on him.<sup>29</sup>

Besides differences in access to imperial power, differences in clerical offices or rather the lack of them would have distinguished

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<sup>23</sup> On Paul, see Doohan 1984; on James, see Painter 2004, 42-57.

<sup>24</sup> Balch 2003, 258-292; Wood 2011.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Adam Copenhaver's study of the audience of the Letter to the Colossians. "Paul's intended audience composes an ensemble with multiple layers of audience" ranging from the community of Colossae to other churches: "He expects that the churches in the region are in communication with one another and will share the letter..."; "he has written the letter in anticipation of it being circulated regionally" (Copenhaver 2018, 77).

<sup>26</sup> Cvetković, Gemeinhardt 2019a.

<sup>27</sup> Cvetković, Gemeinhardt 2019b, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Concannon 2017, 197.

<sup>29</sup> See Ambrose, *Letter* 31.6, written in connection with events in Callinicum, where Christians burned down a local synagogue at the end of the fourth century C.E. There is a huge amount of literature on this incident. See, e.g., Kaatz 2012, 129-132; Chin 2016, 63-75.

rabbis from bishops. While particular *amoraim* (rabbis of the third and fourth centuries) may have been appointed elders, judges, or *parnasim* (rabbinical scholars placed in charge of the congregational affairs) of specific localities, rabbis as such were not community leaders or leaders of synagogues in antiquity.<sup>30</sup> As Torah experts and “wise men” they would have had contact to small circles of students and individual colleague-friends and clients, who asked them for halakhic advice, rather than to congregations and communities.<sup>31</sup> Typically, their ties to other Jews would have been ties between individuals rather than ties between an individual and a local or regional community of fellow-religionists, as was the case with bishops.<sup>32</sup> These different types of links also had different qualities. We may assume that late antique bishops’ ties to ordinary Christians would have been much less direct and dense than those of rabbis, who worked alongside other people and could be approached by anyone in the street and marketplace. This situation may have changed, at least to some extent, in the third and fourth centuries, when some rabbis are said to have given sermons to a popular audience on the Sabbath.<sup>33</sup> But the sermons were incidental and supplementary to rabbis’ role of halakhic advisers. They did not change rabbis’ individual personal relations to non-rabbinic Jews in a qualitative way.<sup>34</sup> The Jewish patriarchs and exilarchs of late antiquity would have had a higher status and larger following than ordinary rabbis. Our information about them is almost exclusively rabbinic, however, and rabbinic literature assimilates these leadership figures with other rabbis rather than providing information about their communal and inter-regional significance.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The entire notion of a local Jewish religious community has been questioned and its emergence postponed to the fourth to sixth centuries, when synagogues and churches were built in the land of Israel, see Schwartz 2001, 199-202. On appointments to specific roles see Hezser 1997, 86-93.

<sup>31</sup> See Hezser 1997, 329-404.

<sup>32</sup> Sometimes rabbis complain about the non-observance of their fellow-Jews at particular locations, such as the inhabitants of Lydda (y. Sanh. 1:2, 18c-d) and Sepphoris (y. Taan. 3:4, 66c), but such complaints were expressed from their own perspective and at their own initiative, not because they were appointed community leaders.

<sup>33</sup> See Hidary 2010, 46-48, who overstates the matter, though (see Hezser 2019).

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, the story about the woman who listened to R. Meir’s sermon and was consequently locked out of her home by her husband (Lev. R. 9:9). The rabbi is said to have helped her to restore domestic peace. On this story see Hasan-Rokem 2003, 55-85.

<sup>35</sup> On the presentation of the patriarchs in rabbinic, legal, and papyrological sources see Jacobs 1995. Rabbinic literature focuses on the internal, scholarly functions of the patriarch. His role in the wider Jewish community within Roman Palestine and the Diaspora is uncertain and widely disputed amongst scholars.

## II. THE FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

A few exceptions notwithstanding, communication between rabbis and their colleagues, students, and other Jews would have taken place orally.<sup>36</sup> Oral communication requires the participants to be present at the time when the communication takes place. It is also always incidental, fitting the specific circumstances in which it occurs. If oral statements and decisions are remembered and expressed again later, their details and formulation is prone to change. Written forms of communication in the form of letters are rarely mentioned in rabbinic texts. It is probably telling that among the few letters mentioned, one that was allegedly sent to Jewish communities abroad to inform them of the intercalation of the year and festival dates (T. Sanh. 2:6) stands out. This is the only letter mentioned in the Mishnah and Tosefta and its official and communal nature is evident.<sup>37</sup> Similarly official are the occasional letters of recommendation that rabbis are said to have requested from the patriarch (y. Hag. 1:8, 76d par. y. M.Q. 3:1, 81c), and letters the patriarch received from Babylonian scholars (y. Git. 46d). When such letters are mentioned, they are meant to enable communication over long distances.<sup>38</sup> By contrast, rabbis' ordinary everyday life communication would have been local, oral, and immediate, based on direct connections within the rabbinic network. Even if second- or third-tier connections had to be reached, oral transmission through intermediaries seems to have been preferred. Long lines of attributions ("R. X. said that R. Y. said in the name of Rabbi Z.") and narratives about travelling rabbis who meet colleagues at distant places (e.g., Babylonia) and discuss halakhic issues with them point into this direction.<sup>39</sup> The possibility of occasional written requests for halakhic information or (quasi-)official communication between colleagues at different locations does not refute this trend.<sup>40</sup>

In ancient Christian circles, on the other hand, letters were used as a form of communication in the first century already. Lutz Doering has pointed to the quasi-official character of Paul's letters to Christian communities.<sup>41</sup> He has stressed that letters were used to maintain network connections between a Christian missionary such as Paul and

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<sup>36</sup> Jaffee 2001, 66 refers to "the oral-performative tradition cultivated among the Sages".

<sup>37</sup> See Hezser 2016, 101.

<sup>38</sup> See Hezser 2016, 102.

<sup>39</sup> See Hezser 2015, 224-250, for examples.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, y. Meg. 3:2, 74a: where R. Hiyya, R. Yose, and R. Immi (probably imagined to be in Galilee) are said to have communicated with R. Abbahu in Caesarea by letter concerning the case of a woman named Tamar, who allegedly complained about the rabbis at the governor's office. Perhaps her official complaint necessitated a written apology.

<sup>41</sup> Doering 2012, 383.

the communities he established – and then left under the care of his local connections or “co-workers” – in various geographical regions.<sup>42</sup> As an analogy, Doering points to “philosophical letters that were used in maintaining a network of followers of a particular school”.<sup>43</sup> The emphasis here is on followers – like ancient philosophers Paul used letters to maintain contacts with and guide lay people who followed his theological and moral leadership.

By contrast, ancient rabbis were not community leaders, as already pointed out above. They are presented as scholars with small circles of students who also occasionally advised individual lay people in halakhic matters. This advice was incidental and immediate and could best be delivered orally. Only in the Middle Ages did a *responsa* tradition develop, with prominent rabbis answering questions that distant communities had sent to them in written form.<sup>44</sup> The very phenomenon of this new form of communication was due to these rabbis’ elevated status, reputation in distant communities, and function as communal advisers, circumstances that did not exist in this form in antiquity. On the rare occasions when ancient rabbis are said to have instructed Jews at specific locations (e.g., in Bosra and Tyre and within the Land of Israel), they are said to have gone there themselves and talked to them directly.<sup>45</sup>

Church fathers, on the other hand, were eager letter writers who used this written medium to communicate with each other, with political authorities, and with local Christian communities. This practice is already evident in the second century, as Concannon has shown. Dionysios of Corinth used letters to maintain connections with “Christian collectives” in other parts of the Mediterranean. As in the case of Paul, the communities had been established by other means beforehand: “Dionysios’ ability to write to other places is parasitic on these potentialities for collectivity”.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, amongst Syrian clerics of the fourth century, “[m]ost social interaction ... relied on written letters”.<sup>47</sup> Theodoret corresponded with his distant colleagues and allies “several times a year, to keep a connection active”.<sup>48</sup> During festivals such as Easter bishops sent so-called festal letters to clerics and lay people, which “provided tangible mementos of Christian community”, creating and confirming “consensus of faith”.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Doering 2012, 383.

<sup>43</sup> Doering 2012, 389.

<sup>44</sup> On the development of this literary form and its prevalence in the Middle Ages, see Haas 1996; Washofsky 1994.

<sup>45</sup> See the examples in Hezser 1997, 366.

<sup>46</sup> Concannon 2017, 23.

<sup>47</sup> Schor 2011, 33.

<sup>48</sup> Schor 2011, 33.

<sup>49</sup> Schor 2011, 34.

More or less large letter collections are preserved for prominent early Byzantine church fathers such as Augustine (4th-5th c.), Jerome (4th-5th c.) Ambrose (5th c.), and Isidore of Pelusium (5th c.).<sup>50</sup> Such letters could be read out aloud, copied, circulated, and collected. In fact, a tradition of letter collecting developed that is probably responsible for the survival of those letters that came down to us.<sup>51</sup> The fact that certain letters were copied, stored and redistributed implies that they had a use and value that went beyond the mere transmission of circumstantial and time-bound information. They could be re-read in different settings and distributed as the authoritative moral guidelines and theological treatises of the highest echelons of the church. The frequent use of this written medium of communication indicates the spatial – and in the case of lay-recipients also the status-related – distance between the episcopal letter writers and their audiences (since letters were read out loud). In general, bishops' and church fathers' relations to lay people were not personal and direct, as in the case of rabbis, but collective and generic. For example, Dionysios' letters are addressed to communities in particular geographical regions such as Achaia, Pontus-Bithynia, and Crete, e.g. to settle local disputes.<sup>52</sup> Through the use of letters, Christian leaders were able to maintain and control a network of Christian communities around the Mediterranean.

### III. THE GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE OF THE NETWORKS

From the middle of the first century onwards, Christian leaders such as Paul and his companions were eager to expand their network beyond its initial ethnic and geographical boundaries. They decided to reach out to non-Jews and to the inhabitants of other regions across the Mediterranean. Both the book of Acts and Paul's letters refer to the many and wide-ranging journeys undertaken by Paul and some of his fellow-apostles to make contacts and establish communities in various parts of the Roman Empire.<sup>53</sup> Local synagogues and individual householders, such as Lydia in Thyatira, seem to have served as first contacts.<sup>54</sup> They constituted the basis from which further connections could be made. Paul allegedly proclaimed his new beliefs and argued with visitors in the synagogues of Damascus in Syria (Acts 9:20), Salamis in Cyprus (Acts 13:5), Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:14), Iconium (Acts 14:1), Thes-

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<sup>50</sup> Clark 2019, 63-82.

<sup>51</sup> See the contributions in Neil, Allen 2015.

<sup>52</sup> Concannon 2017, 23.

<sup>53</sup> On Paul' journeys see, e.g., Schellenberg 2011, 141-161; Lampe 2016, 204-238.

<sup>54</sup> See Balch 2003, 258-292.

salonica (Acts 17:1), Beroea (Acts 17:10), and Athens in Greece (Acts 17:17). It seems that he reached out to fellow-Jews first, then to “devout persons”, commonly identified as so-called God-fearers, that is, non-Jews with monotheistic leanings, and finally everyone he met “in the marketplace” (Acts 17:17). The book of Acts creates a fixed pattern of missionizing activities that start with the ethnic groups (Jews) and regions (Syria-Palestine) Paul was familiar with and gradually expand toward meetings with strangers in other, unfamiliar terrain.<sup>55</sup>

The establishment of contacts to householders in distant places gave Paul a firm base and contact point for the local expansion of his network. An example of such a contact is “a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, one who worshipped God” (Acts 16:14). Paul meets her in Philippi in Macedonia, after a meeting with local women at the riverside (*ibid.* 16:13). She allegedly offered Paul and his companions to stay in her house. If the description in the book of Acts is correct, this Lydia was a boundary figure: a woman from Asia Minor who lived in Macedonia, a gentile interested in (Jewish and Christian) monotheism, a (probably widowed) woman in charge of her own house. That wealthy non-Jewish women were attracted to Paul’s message is also suggested elsewhere (Acts 17:4). In 1 Corinthians the household of a certain Chloe is mentioned (1 Cor. 1:11). They seem to have kept Paul up to date about developments in Corinth (*ibid.*). Other named households are those of Stephanas (1 Cor. 1:16 and 16:15: “the first fruits of Achaia”) and Aquila and Priscilla (1 Cor. 16:19). In connection with the latter an “assembly” in their house is mentioned (*ibid.*). The houses of these probably wealthy converts to Christianity seem to have constituted central nodes or clusters that could advance the development of local Christian communal networks.<sup>56</sup> Greetings to and from his local connections, mentioned in his letters, served to maintain inter-regional connections between the various local network bases.

By the second century, Christian communities existed throughout the Roman Empire and around the Mediterranean. From that time onwards, bishops served as the central nodes of inter-regional networks. They used letters to retain connections to their status-equal colleagues and the communities under their supervision. For example, in the second century Dionysios of Corinth maintained contacts to Christian collectives around the Mediterranean.<sup>57</sup> In late antiquity, “[t]he South of Hispania had hosted a dense and consolidated Episcopal network...”.<sup>58</sup> By

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<sup>55</sup> On Paul’s strategy see also Schnabel 2008, 310; Matthews 2001, 54-60. On the establishment of network connections amongst women and in charitable frameworks see Czachesz 2011b.

<sup>56</sup> See also Matthews 2001, 70.

<sup>57</sup> Concannon 2017, 23.

<sup>58</sup> Ventura 2013, 259.

the sixth century, Severus, a former monk and patriarch of Antioch, was the central figure in a network of non-Chalcedonians.<sup>59</sup> Cvetković and Gemeinhardt argue that the inter-connectivity of Christian communities across geographical, linguistic, social, and ethnic boundaries contributed to the expansion of Christianity in late antiquity.<sup>60</sup>

The rabbinic movement, on the other hand, remained an ethnically Jewish and local Near Middle Eastern phenomenon throughout antiquity. In rabbinic literature the majority of rabbis' encounters are said to have taken place in Roman Palestine and Sasanian Persia. In the Land of Israel meetings with non-Jews include Roman soldiers and officials. A few stories deal with individual rabbis' encounters with philosophers, "matrons", Samaritans, and anonymous others encountered on the road or in the marketplace.<sup>61</sup> The identity of these non-Jews remains anonymous, unless they were Roman emperors or generals. The stories cannot be considered historically reliable. They were part of internal rabbinic identity and boundary definitions. Except for the stories about R. Yehudah ha-Nasi and his imaginary Roman emperor friend, rabbis are never said to have reached out to non-Jews, especially not in the systematic way in which Paul's missionising activities are described in Acts.<sup>62</sup>

Geographically, rabbis' networking activities seem to have been limited to the Near and Middle East. Palestinian rabbis rarely left the rabbinically defined Land of Israel other than for travels through Syria to Sasanian Babylonia.<sup>63</sup> Babylonian scholars' main travel destination was the Land of Israel. References to Palestinian rabbis' journeys to adjacent areas such as Samaria, Transjordan, and Egypt are very rare.<sup>64</sup> Similarly rare are stories about rabbis' trips to Rome.<sup>65</sup> Even if a few wealthy rabbinic merchants travelled to Rome in the second and third centuries for business reasons, there is no indication that they tried to influence Roman Jews or even establish a rabbinic movement there. The stories about rabbis in Rome present rabbinic perspectives on slavery (R. Yehoshua notices a boy from Jerusalem in a slave market: T. Hor. 2:5-6), wealth (R. Gamliel and three of his colleague-friends complain about Roman wealth and idolatry: Sifre Deut. 43:4), and opulence (protected columns versus poor people in rags: Gen. R. 33:1).

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<sup>59</sup> Evers 2013, 177.

<sup>60</sup> Cvetković, Gemeinhardt 2019b, 1.

<sup>61</sup> See the contributions in Niehoff 2017; e.g., Hezser 2017.

<sup>62</sup> On Rabbi and Anthoninus see Jacobs 1995, 125-154.

<sup>63</sup> On rabbinic travel between Roman Palestine and Sasanian Persia see Hezser 2015. Rabbinic travel served to establish new network ties and to maintain existing ones. By the third century, rabbinic travellers could use their social networks for accommodation and support.

<sup>64</sup> See Hezser 2011, 242-243.

<sup>65</sup> See Hezser 2011, 264-272.

If late fourth century traditions about the *comes* Joseph's and the patriarch's "apostles" travel to the Jewish Diaspora are historically reliable, they may indicate that some patriarchs reached out to Diaspora Jews at that time.<sup>66</sup> If and why they did so remains highly questionable, though.<sup>67</sup> The most likely explanation is that they tried to collect money for the patriarchate itself. As I have already argued elsewhere, these travellers are unlikely to have "served as vectors of rabbinic influence in the Diaspora", as Seth Schwartz has maintained.<sup>68</sup> The emissaries are never identified as rabbis or scholars or associated with halakhic advice. Moreover, references about such individuals, which are almost exclusively found in patristic texts, are likely to be modelled on Christian bishops' networking activities. There is no persuasive evidence that "rabbis were actively bringing knowledge to Diaspora communities", as Anna Collar claims.<sup>69</sup>

In their book on two types of Jewish Diasporas, Arye Edrei and Doron Mendels have stressed the striking difference between a Near Middle East, in which rabbis were active from the late first century onwards, and a Western Diaspora without a noticeable rabbinic influence until the Middle Ages.<sup>70</sup> This observation seems to be correct as far as rabbis and rabbinic Judaism are concerned. Rabbinic networking activities seem to have been concentrated in the Near and Middle Eastern regions. From Roman Palestine in the first two centuries, rabbis were able to expand their influence to Babylonia from the third century onwards.<sup>71</sup> Prominent Palestinian rabbis, probably wealthy merchants with business connections in Persia, constituted the nodal points of these inter-regional networks.<sup>72</sup> Rather than having been planned at the outset, this expansion seems to have been a natural and gradual development based on these rabbis' private contacts to fellow Aramaic-speaking Jews. Palestinian rabbis who met Babylonian Jewish business partners could also discuss other topics of shared interest on these occasions. Eventually some Babylonian Jewish youngsters decided to temporarily move to the Land of Israel to study Torah with local rabbis. When they

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<sup>66</sup> See Jacobs 1995, 308-318.

<sup>67</sup> Hezser 2011, 255-262.

<sup>68</sup> Schwartz 1999, 221.

<sup>69</sup> Collar 2013, 197. Her discussion is based on Babylonian Talmud texts that are taken literally. She notes that "[o]nly a handful of rabbis are known epigraphically from the Diaspora" (*ibid.*) but seems unaware of the controversy surrounding the meaning of the title "Rabbi" in inscriptions (see notes 9 and 10 above). She follows Millar 1992, 111, who argues that these inscriptions "tend to confirm the importance there too of the study of the Law, the gradual revival of Hebrew, and the coming into currency of the title 'rabbi' ...". See also Everton 2018, 139-144, who repeats Collar unquestioningly.

<sup>70</sup> Edrei, Mendels 2010.

<sup>71</sup> Hezser 2011, 311-364. See now also Kiperwasser 2021.

<sup>72</sup> Hezser 2015, 224-250.

moved back to Babylonia, they brought rabbinic halakhic knowledge with them there.

When comparing the geographically limited rabbinic network with the cross-regional Christian network in late antiquity, language must be considered an important factor. From the time of Paul onwards Greek-speaking Hellenized Christians carried Christianity across the Mediterranean to Asia Minor, Greece, Rome, and Western Europe, whereas their Aramaic-speaking Jerusalem-based fellow-believers confined themselves to the establishment of Jewish Christianity in the Near East.<sup>73</sup> Rabbis' use of (Hebrew and) Aramaic and their reservations toward Graeco-Roman culture and idolatry would have played an important role in the geographically, linguistically, and ethnically circumscribed reach of their network activities. In the late fourth century, the Greek-speaking patriarchs and their "apostles" may have had an advantage on the linguistic front, but they may have lacked the rabbis' scholarly interests.

#### IV. THE FUNCTIONS OF THE NETWORKS

The functions of the networks would have varied internally from one section within the rabbinic and Christian networks to the next and chronologically from one time period to another. As far as Paul's networking activities are concerned, his goal was to expand the pool of Christian believers and to establish local communities at as many locations around the Mediterranean as possible. His written correspondence and maintenance of connections to local contacts would have enabled him to assert continuous theological and moral control, especially if quarrels broke out. Greetings from distant fellow-Christians showed local communities that they were part of a wider Christian network of Pauline communities.

In late antiquity, when Christian communities were already well-established and Christianity had expanded much further, garnering the support of ideological allies and the theological and administrative control over local communities seem to have been the dominant functions of episcopal networks. Bishops used letters to create unanimity, to maintain what they considered "orthodox" beliefs and Christian ethics throughout their sphere of influence. The so-called Catholic Epistles of the New Testament are already indicative of a broader scope that reaches beyond specific issues within local communities. As Lockett has pointed out, "the Catholic Epistles are concerned with teachings and

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<sup>73</sup> On the importance of the shared Greek language for the spread of Christianity see already Thebaud 1878, 126-135. See also Jaeger 1961, 5, who considers the Greek language "the decisive fact in the development of the Christian mission and its expansion in and beyond Palestine."

practices that would have been of interest to a wide variety of communities in the first century”.<sup>74</sup>

The later church fathers used letters to engage in theological disputes and to defend their fellow-Christians’ practices before the Byzantine emperor. From the fourth century onwards, when the Roman Empire had become Christian, bishops’ tone seems to have become more entitled and assertive as far as a claimed Christian superiority over Jews and pagans was concerned. The bishops’ authority and influence had increased. As Stowers has already pointed out, “letters from bishops concerning the governance of the church became characteristic of the fourth and fifth centuries”.<sup>75</sup> These letters can be polemical in tone, criticising “heretical” beliefs and practices within Christianity and disqualifying the legitimacy of non-Christian religions.

Throughout the first five centuries C.E., rabbis never obtained the official authority that bishops held. They were neither official leaders of local communities nor were they backed by the emperor. Their networks were much more limited in geographical and ethnic scope. The main function of the rabbinic collegial networks was to discuss and develop halakhah. The function of the wider rabbinic networks, including disciples and lay people, was the expansion of the pool of Torah scholars, Torah instruction and halakhic advice.

Nevertheless, certain similarities between rabbis’ and Christian leaders’ networks existed. Both rabbis and some church fathers such as Origen and Clement of Alexandria had circles of students.<sup>76</sup> Rabbis and bishops established and maintained ties to more or less small groups of colleague-friends they considered allies. They were both keen on instructing, advising, and controlling the views and practices of their lay co-religionists. Just as Christian leaders wanted lay-Christians to follow their theological and moral advice, rabbis wanted Jewish lay-people to adhere to their halakhic instructions. The difference is that rabbis lacked the authority of bishops with regard to enforcing their rules. They depended on lay people’s veneration and respect rather than on official control mechanisms. Whereas Christian leaders used letters to communicate with local and regional Christian collectives, rabbis focused on oral debate and discussion with fellow-scholars and disciples. We can therefore conclude that the rabbinic network leaned more to the scholastic side, whereas the Christian network was more populist in nature. These distinctions must be considered relative rather than categorical, though.

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<sup>74</sup> Lockett 2012, 3.

<sup>75</sup> Stowers 1986, 43.

<sup>76</sup> On Origen, see Heine 2010, 48-64. On education in the late antique church and monastic circles see Stenger 2018.

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