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KATELL BERTHELOT

POWER AND PIETY: ROMAN AND JEWISH PERSPECTIVES

For consider these past few years in order, with their successes and reverses; you will find that all things turned out well when we obeyed the gods, and ill when we spurned them (*invenietis omnia prospera evenisse sequentibus deos, adversa spernentibus*).

(Livy, *Roman History* 5.51)

Introduction

¹From the perspective of ancient peoples, power had everything to do with the gods, and was dependent on their support or providence. Angelos Chaniotis remarks that, in the Greek world, “success in a violent activity (war, piracy, raid) cannot be achieved without the support of the gods and may be viewed as the punishment of the defeated party”.² As Dionysius of Halicarnassus put it, enjoying the favour of the gods (*παρὰ τῶν θεῶν εὐνοίαν*) is what “gives success to men’s every enterprise” (*Roman Antiquities* 2.18.1).³ Roman victories, and Roman power and hegemony more broadly, therefore, represented not merely a political challenge, but also a religious challenge for the peoples subjugated by Rome. The gods could be perceived as – and were claimed to be – actively supporting the Romans in their imperial enterprise.

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² Chaniotis 2004, p. 196. On the theology of victory at Rome, see Rufus Fears 1981.

³ Cf. Josephus, *B.J.* 2.140: a new member of an Essene community swears to be loyal, especially towards those who rule, “since no ruler attains his office save by the will of God”.

What was original in the Roman claim of divine support was the notion that it should be ascribed first and foremost to the exceptional and exemplary piety of the Roman people.⁴ In antiquity, piety was considered a crucial quality for rulers in general. However, the emphasis the Romans put on their own *pietas* – understood as the meticulous observance of the rites and duties towards the gods – was indeed striking.⁵ The only people who could match the Romans in their boasts of piety were the Jews.

The notion that Roman victories were due to the gods' support could be shared by many provincials, but the connection to Roman *pietas* met with more criticism. From a Jewish perspective, it is clear that a distinction had to be drawn between divine support and piety, as well as between impiety and divine chastisement (impious people were not necessarily punished in the present time and could be used by God as an instrument to chastise Israel). Josephus for example clearly states that the Romans enjoyed the support of the God of Israel, but nowhere does he claim that this was due to Roman *eusebeia*.⁶ Later, Tertullian would similarly distinguish between God's support of Rome and the emperor on the one hand, and the Roman religion on the other, sharply criticizing the latter. Tertullian thus utterly rejected the idea that the rise of the Roman Empire was the result of Roman piety (*Apology* 25.2, 12-17).⁷

In this paper I shall explore several aspects of the connection that ancient sources drew between power and piety, from both Roman and Jewish perspectives. I shall analyze how ancient

⁴ See Charlesworth 1943, p. 1. *Pace* Peter A. Brunt, who writes that "What was most novel in the Roman attitude to their empire was the belief that it was universal and willed by the gods" (Brunt 1978, p. 161 [or 291]). In fact, the idea that the empire was willed by the gods was not that novel or unique, although it may have been more intensely expressed.

⁵ On the meaning of Roman *pietas*, see Ulrich 1930; Scheid 2001. Erika Manders defines *pietas* as follows: "Generally, *pietas* can be described as a course of practices characterized by a sense of duty, devotion, and piety aimed at benefiting gods, people [mainly family], and homeland, and, during the Empire, the emperor. The emperor himself did thus not only express *pietas* himself, he was also its object" (Manders 2012, p. 178).

⁶ See for example *B.J.* 2.390, where Agrippa II says that "without God's aid [or: power, *hēgemonia*] so vast an empire [as the Romans'] could never have been built up"; 5.343; 5.367 (God is now in Italy); 5.368 (God is with the Romans); 5.378 (Josephus to the rebels: you are waging war against God). See Lindner 1972, p. 21-25, 40-48, 85-94; Stern 1987; Sterling 2000, p. 145-146.

⁷ At 25.2 Tertullian writes: "Yet, since specific mention has been made of the Roman name, I must not shirk the encounter challenged by the assumption of those who say it is as a reward for their eminently religious attitude that the Romans have reached so high a point of grandeur as to hold the whole world; and that the gods are so conspicuously gods that those flourish beyond all others who beyond all others render them obedience" (trans. Glover and Rendall, LCL, p. 135).

sources deemed Roman power a consequence of Roman piety and as potentially threatened by religious negligence. I will also show how Roman victory over the Jews was associated in Roman sources with Jewish superstition or impiety, and how Israel's faithfulness to the covenant could be seen by Jews as a threat to the power of Rome. Needless to say, behind the different terminology in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, lie significant conceptual differences: Roman *pietas* is not equivalent to the Jewish observance of the *mitzvot* and the keeping of the covenant. Moreover, the use of the same term by different authors can also be misleading: when Josephus praises Jewish *eusebeia*, this means something different than in Dionysius of Halicarnassus' celebration of Roman *eusebeia*. Nevertheless, Romans, Greeks, and Jews did live in the same world and many Jews were exposed to Greek and Roman views, and at least some Romans to Jewish views. We are, therefore, not dealing with completely isolated worlds, and thus it makes all the more sense to compare the Roman and the Jewish discourses, which, as we shall see, sometimes mirror one another.⁸

Roman piety as the foundation of Roman power

Roman piety and the support of the gods

The connection between the Romans' extraordinary piety and the support they received from the gods is attested as early as the beginning of the 2nd century BCE, in the famous inscription *IGR* iv 1557 (= *Sylloge*³ 601), which reproduces a letter sent by the Roman authorities to the Greek city of Teos in 193 BCE.⁹ According to the inscription, the fact that "we (Romans) have, absolutely and consistently, placed reverence towards the gods (τῆς πρὸς τοὺς θεοὺς εὐσεβείας) as of the first importance is proved by the favour (εὐμενείας) we have received from them (παρὰ τοῦ δαίμονιου) on this account".¹⁰ As John North comments, "it is the extraordinary emphasis on the Romans' unique religious character that is so important".¹¹ The argument used in the letter is that Roman successes are due to the favour of the gods, and this favour clearly

⁸ Historians favoring the approach of anthropological history do not necessarily limit comparatism to societies that shared a common world and were actually in contact with one another (see, for example, Detienne 2008). However, the existence of such contacts makes the comparative approach all the more legitimate.

⁹ See Sherk 1969, p. 214-216; Errington 1980; Beard – North – Price 1998, p. 350, no. 13.1a.

¹⁰ Trans. by Beard *et al.*, *op. cit.*

¹¹ See North 1993, p. 134.

proves the exemplary piety (*eusebeia*) of the Romans. Put simply, piety brings success.

In the 1st century CE, Cicero also suggests that the military successes of Rome, divine support, and the exceptional *pietas* and *religio* of the Romans are all interconnected. In a famous passage from the treatise *On the reply of the haruspices* (19), Cicero writes:

Indeed, who is so witless that, when he gazes up into heaven, he fails to see that gods exist, and imagines that chance is responsible for the creation of an intelligence so transcendent that scarce can the highest artistry do justice to the immutable dispositions of the universe? Or who, once convinced that divinity [or : gods] does [do] exist, can fail at the same time to be convinced that it is by its power [or: their will/power, *eorum numine*] that this great empire has been created, extended, and sustained? However good be our conceit of ourselves, conscript fathers, we have excelled neither Spain in population, nor Gaul in vigour, nor Carthage in versatility, nor Greece in art, nor indeed Italy and Latium itself in the innate sensibility characteristic of this land and its peoples; but in piety [*pietate*], in devotion to religion [*religione*], and in that special wisdom [*sapientia*] which consists in the recognition of the truth that the world is swayed and directed by divine disposal [or: the will/power of the gods, *deorum numine*], we have excelled every race [or: people] and every nation [*omnes gentes nationesque*].¹²

Two points here are worthy of note. Firstly, Cicero states that the empire of the Romans has been willed by the gods, who continue to guide it, and who continue to guarantee its persistence and growth. Secondly, Cicero substantiates this statement by claiming that the Romans are the most pious and religious people on earth and that *pietas*, *religio*, and the correct understanding of divine providence (or: the will of the gods) are what constitute Roman superiority over other peoples. Hence, Cicero implicitly correlates Roman piety with the support the gods provide to the Roman Empire.

Valerius Maximus, who is thought to have lived during the reign of Tiberius, dedicates the first chapter of the first book of his *Memorable Doings and Sayings* to several examples of the admirable religious praxis of the Romans, and writes:

No wonder therefore if the indulgence of the gods has persisted, ever watchful to augment and protect an imperial power [*imperium*] by which even minor items of religious significance are seen to be weighed with such scrupulous care; for never should our community [*civitas*] be thought to have averted its eyes from the most meticulous practice of religious observances" (*Memorable Doings and Sayings* 1.1.8).¹³

¹² Trans. Watts, LCL, p. 339-341.

¹³ Trans. Shackleton Bailey, LCL, p. 21.

His intention could not be clearer: their meticulous observance of the religious rituals has won the Romans the benevolent support of the gods, who watch over the Roman *imperium*.

Although the perspective arising from the writings of Cicero and Valerius Maximus was quintessentially Roman, it is nevertheless echoed in the work of a Greek writer, Dionysius of Halicarnassus. In his *Roman Antiquities*, Dionysius criticizes the opinion of Greek authors who expressed their hostility toward Rome and argued that the empire was simply the product of Fortune; according to these detractors, Rome arrived at world domination “not through reverence for the gods (εὐσέβεια) and justice (δικαιοσύνη) and every other virtue, but through some chance and the injustice of Fortune (ἀλλὰ δι’ αὐτοματισμόν τινα καὶ τύχην ἄδικον), which inconsiderately showers her greatest favours upon the most undeserving”.¹⁴ Dionysius, by contrast, points to the virtues of the Romans and minimizes the role played by Tychē in their successes. In particular, he emphasizes the Romans’ piety (*eusebeia*) and justice. While Dionysius does not refer explicitly to the support of the gods, the way he links the Romans’ *eusebeia* and the creation of their empire implies that the gods favour Rome as a result of the latter’s piety.

The Romans’ conception of their own piety is also echoed by Josephus in his *Jewish War* (*B.J.*). Contrary to Dionysius, Josephus does not praise the *eusebeia* of the Romans. However, in his retelling of the speech he delivered to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, Josephus affirms that the Romans show respect toward the *sacra* (*ta hagia*) of their enemies, and thus prove to be more pious than the Jewish rebels who controlled the Jerusalem temple, and whose impiety Josephus denounces from the very beginning of his account of the Judean war (*B.J.* 5.363).¹⁵

In addition to the literary sources mentioned here, numerous numismatic sources can also be added, as well as monuments and reliefs, showing how widespread and well-known the Romans’

¹⁴ *Roman Antiquities* 1.4.2, trans. Cary, LCL, p. 15: [...] οὐ δι’ εὐσέβειαν δὲ καὶ δικαιοσύνην καὶ τὴν ἄλλην ἀρετὴν ἐπὶ τὴν ἀπάντων ἡγεμονίαν σὺν χρόνῳ παρελθούσης, ἀλλὰ δι’ αὐτοματισμόν τινα καὶ τύχην ἄδικον εἰκὴ δωρουμένην τὰ μέγιστα τῶν ἀγαθῶν τοῖς ἀνεπιτηδαιοτάτοις.

¹⁵ He exhorts them “to spare themselves and the people, to spare their country and their temple, and not to display towards them greater indifference than was shown by aliens. The Romans, he urged, though without a share in them, yet revered the holy [things] of their enemies [ἐντρέπεσθαι τὰ τῶν πολεμίων ἅγια], and had thus far restrained their hands from them; whereas men who had been brought up in them and, were they preserved, would alone enjoy them, were bent on their destruction”. Translation by Thackeray, LCL, p. 313. See also *B.J.* 5.334, in which Josephus claims that Titus tried to preserve the city and the temple.

representation of themselves as a pious people was – but I shall limit myself to this brief overview.¹⁶

Roman impiety as a threat to Roman power

The logical consequence of the discourse associating Roman *pietas* with Roman power, however, was the idea that the converse, impiety, represented a threat to Rome's hegemony. It is, therefore, not surprising that throughout the history of the Roman Empire, the importance of properly performing religious rituals was generally taken quite seriously by the Roman authorities.

Extant Jewish sources from the time, such as the *Sibylline Oracles*, apocalyptic works, and rabbinic texts, generally portray the Romans as impious. The justification for this is twofold. First, like most non-Jews, the Romans are idolaters. Second, they exhibit particularly impious or wicked behaviour. This, in turn, logically meant that they would ultimately be punished by God, and that their empire would disappear. In other words, Jewish authors did sometimes correlate what they described as Roman impiety with the ultimate destruction of Roman power. However, they were obviously not defining impiety in the way Romans or Greeks did, as negligence in performing the traditional religious rituals. From a Jewish perspective, Roman impiety meant idolatry and wickedness.

In rabbinic sources, the impiety of the Romans is intrinsically connected to the latter's attitude towards Israel and their God, and has little to do with Roman religion, beyond the general characterization of Roman religious practices as *'avodah zarah* (idolatry). Some rabbinic sources recount stories about specific Roman individuals who behaved impiously. The sources dealing with Titus' victory in Jerusalem provide a particularly interesting perspective. Far from being described as respectful towards all the gods, including those of conquered peoples, as Roman sources or even Josephus would have it, Titus is depicted in rabbinic sources as a blasphemer who willingly desecrates the sacred space and cultic objects of the temple in Jerusalem.¹⁷

¹⁶ Of particular significance are the representations of Aeneas on coins and monuments (such as the Ara Pacis). Aeneas, a symbol of *pietas*, came to represent the virtues of the Roman people as a whole.

¹⁷ On these rabbinic traditions, see in particular Hasan-Rokem 1993 and 1998; Levinson 2003 (these papers focus on the version found in Leviticus Rabbah 22). The description of the Romans as respectful towards all the gods, even defeated ones, is also found in Minucius Felix' *Octavius*, §6 (the discourse is attributed to a young Roman who has not yet converted to Christianity, Q. Caecilius Natalis). In this passage Minucius Felix also refers to the practice of *invocatio*. The underlying idea is: the more universal the worship of the gods, the more universal the dominion.

Hence, in the 3rd-century midrash (biblical commentary) Sifre on Deuteronomy, Titus is said to have torn the curtains of the Holy of Holies with his sword. Moreover, he questions God's power and even his very existence. In the context of the biblical passage being commented upon, Deuteronomy 32:37-38, Israel has been chastised by God for worshipping idols, and God has delivered them into the hands of their enemies. While God shall ultimately save Israel, he now asks ironically: "Where are their [Israel's false] gods, the rock in which they took refuge, which ate the fat of their sacrifices and drank the wine of their libations? Let them rise up and help you! Let them be your protection!" (Deut 32:37, NRSV). The idea expressed in this verse is that Israel has abandoned the worship of the true god in favour of the illusory gods of the nations, which are nothing but powerless idols. The midrash elaborates on the words "Where are their gods?" and suggests two interpretations:

Then he will say: Where are their gods [...] Rabbi Yehudah expounds that it refers to Israel, and Rabbi Nehemiah expounds that it refers to the nations of the world.

Rabbi Yehudah says: in the future Israel will say to the nations of the world: Where are your consuls [or: governors; Hebrew *hapitqim*, from the Greek *hypatikos*] and governors [or: generals; *hegmonim*, from the Greek *hēgemōn*][...]? *Let them rise up and help you [...]*

Rabbi Nehemiah says: This refers to the wicked Titus [*Titus ha-rasha*], the son of the wife of Vespasian, who entered into the Holy of Holies and tore the two curtains with a sword and said: If He is really a god, let Him come and protest! [*The gods*] which ate the fat of their sacrifices (Deut 32:38). He [Titus] said: "Moses misled them and said: Build for yourselves an altar and sacrifice burnt-offerings and pour libations upon it, as it is stated [in Scripture]: *One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight* (Num 28:4). *Let them rise up and help you, let them be your protection!* (Deut 32:38)". The Holy One Blessed be He forgives everything, [but] regarding the desecration of His name He punishes immediately.¹⁸

This text has a parallel in another 3rd-century midrash, the Mekhilta on Deuteronomy (on the same verses),¹⁹ and the tradition is attested in later sources as well.²⁰ In the Mekhilta we encounter the same protagonists, Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Nehemiah, to whom the same kind of teaching is attributed, with minor variations: Rabbi Yehudah explains the biblical statement "Where are their gods?" as "Where are the auxiliary troops [or: cavalry; *alot* in

¹⁸ Sifre Deuteronomy 327-328, ed. Finkelstein, 378-379 (my translation). On this text, see Schremer 2010, p. 28.

¹⁹ See Kahana 1988; Kahana 2005, p. 354.

²⁰ See Genesis Rabbah 10:7 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 82-83); Leviticus Rabbah 20:5 (ed. Margulies, p. 458); Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana, Aharei Mot, 5 (ed. Mandelbaum, p. 392); Ecclesiastes Rabbah 8:5; etc. See Schremer 2010, p. 161.

Hebrew, probably from the Latin *ala*] and the legions that raised *annona* for you?” As for Rabbi Nehemiah, he relates the verse to Titus “who tore the two curtains with a sword, cursed and blasphemed, and said: ‘If He is *their God*, let Him come and stand up for His sons’”, which is a way to question and challenge the covenant and the relationship between God and Israel.

According to rabbinic tradition, both Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Nehemiah were disciples of Rabbi Aqiva and were active in the second third of the 2nd century CE, that is, in the generation following the Bar Kokhba revolt. In spite of the recent defeat of the Jews at the hands of the Roman legions, Rabbi Yehudah contends that the day will come when Israel will be able to tell the Romans: “where are your consuls and your governors – the leaders of your armies?” or, in the version of the Mekhilta, “where are your armies?” This implies that in the future, the Roman legions will be destroyed and the power of Rome, which is based on its military forces, shall be no more. Moreover, Rabbi Yehudah’s interpretation, which correlates the gods mentioned in the biblical verse with armies or generals, actually echoes the Roman notion that the victories of the Roman legions are the result of divine support. One could paraphrase Rabbi Yehudah’s interpretation as follows: “Where are your gods, which you claimed gave your armies victory after victory?” If their armies are gone, so are their gods, demonstrating their non-existence.

However, the midrash also considers another hermeneutical possibility, namely, that it is Israel’s enemies who are posing the question “Where are your gods?” (or: “Where is your god?”), suggesting that God has abandoned Israel, is weak and powerless, or even does not exist at all. It is Titus, the destroyer of the Temple, who personifies this theological challenge addressed to Israel. The midrash attributes to him a provocative and derisive declaration: “If He is really a god, let Him come and protest”. The apparent weakness and powerlessness of the God of Israel casts doubt on his divinity, which, from a Jewish perspective, amounts to blasphemy.²¹ In connection with Deuteronomy 32:38, which follows the question “Where are their gods?”, Titus further states that Moses misled Israel by teaching them the divine ordinances concerning the sacrifices and the burnt-offerings. Whereas in the biblical perspective these rituals would atone for the sins of Israel and thus bring back God’s blessing upon his people, Titus

²¹ In another midrash, Esau (who symbolizes Rome) is said to have “taunted and blasphemed” (Genesis Rabbah 63:13, ed. Theodor-Albeck, 697), and this expression recalls the one used in Sifre and Mekhilta on Deuteronomy to describe Titus’ challenge to God’s divinity. See Schremer 2010, p. 56.

suggests that these prescriptions are ineffective. There are at least two possible ways to understand this passage. The first, and most obvious way to understand the text is that Israel's sacrifices failed to prevent the Romans from gaining the upper hand, which shows that God was unable to protect his people. But there may be more in Titus's challenge to Israel: he may also be suggesting that now that the temple has fallen into Roman hands (because God was unable to defend it), the sacrifices can no longer be performed, and thus Israel has no recourse of atonement, forgiveness, and salvation. Responding to this distressing statement, the midrash affirms that God can forgive any sin (apparently implying: even if no sacrifices are performed), except for the desecration of his name. In any case, Rabbi Nehemiah's teaching ends with the idea that God shall punish Titus (or, more generally, the Romans) for having desecrated his name, although the nature of the punishment is not actually described.²² The conclusion is ultimately similar to that reached by Rabbi Yehudah; in both cases, Rome's hegemony is described as coming to an end, a consequence of Roman impiety and *hybris*. These early rabbinic texts are clearly challenging Roman and pro-Roman claims about Roman piety and power.

Interestingly enough, the claim that Jewish sacrificial rituals are ineffective, attributed to Titus by the redactors of *Sifre* and *Mekhilta Deuteronomy*, is not without echoes in Latin sources. It may be compared to the idea often expressed by Greek and Roman authors, that the Jews are a superstitious people who are in many ways wrong about the gods and the makeup of a proper religion. Moreover, there were Roman and Jewish authors who correlated Jewish religious practices with their defeat at the hands of the Romans, and thus with Roman hegemony. We will now, therefore, turn to an analysis of the perceived relationship between Roman power and Jewish piety or lack thereof.

Jewish piety and Roman power: A complex relationship

Jewish superstition, impiety or sin as a cause of Roman victory

Numerous Roman sources – Cicero, Quintilian, Tacitus, Cassius Dio, etc. – testify to the fact that the Romans perceived the Jews as a superstitious people, and in some cases an impious one.²³ By characterizing them like this, these authors implicitly

²² The description of the punishment is found in later sources such as *Leviticus Rabbah* 22:3.

²³ For the Jews as a superstitious people, see Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 67; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 3.7.21 (Moses is “the author of the Jewish superstition”

cast the Jews as the foil to the Romans, who, as mentioned above, are presented as exceptional in their *pietas*, and as religious but not superstitious.

Superstitio, from a Roman perspective, referred to religious practices which were incorrect, excessive, and ineffective.²⁴ The fact that the Jews were superstitious meant that they did not know the proper way to worship a deity, and performed many ineffective rituals. Their refusal to fight on the Sabbath, for example, was perceived as a manifestation of superstition, which had led to their defeat against Pompey in 63 BCE, and against Sosius (and Herod) in 37 BCE.²⁵ Tacitus also emphasizes that during the war of 66-70, prodigies (*prodigia*) took place which the Jews should have interpreted as augurs of the war's negative outcome; the Jews, however, misunderstood and read them as harbingers of the messiah. Tacitus adds:

But to avert them [these prodigies] either by victims or by vows is held unlawful [or: is not considered a divine law, *neque hostiis neque votis piare fas habet*] by a people which, though prone to superstition (*gens ... superstitioni obnoxia*), is opposed to all propitiatory rites (lit. opposed to religions or religious practices, *religionibus adversa*).²⁶

In other words, although the Jews are superstitious and involved in all kinds of ritual practices, they do not know how to propitiate the gods (*piare*) with proper rituals. The consequence in Tacitus' view is that the gods depart (or, rather, the god departs) from the Jerusalem temple, leading to the Jewish defeat at the hands of

[*Judaicae superstitionis auctor*]]; Tacitus, *Histories* 5.13.1-2; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 37.16.2-4 and 37.17.4. Roman authors like Cicero may have been influenced by the work of Posidonius, who apparently described the Judaism of his time as imbued with superstition (if one agrees that Strabo, *Geography* 16.2.36-37 reflects Posidonius' understanding of Judaism). For the Jews as an impious people, see below.

²⁴ See the brief and helpful history of the notion of *superstitio* in Janssen 1979. *Superstitio* could also have a political dimension and be perceived as "a serious offense to the Roman gods and a direct attack upon the Roman state" (Janssen 1979, p. 136). Judaism was sometimes perceived in such a way, as Tacitus' remarks in *Histories* 5.5.1-2 show.

²⁵ See in particular Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 37.16.2-4 (where he uses the word *ptoësis* to describe the attitude of the Jews who fear to transgress the Sabbath), 37.17.4 (where again the idea of fear is expressed through the verb *timeō*) and 49.22.5.

²⁶ Tacitus, *Histories* 5.13.1, trans. Jackson, LCL, 197. Josephus also addresses these prodigies, and may have been one of Tacitus' sources, although the issue remains debated. See Josephus, *War* 3.404; 6.288, 295, 310. See also Suetonius, *Vespasian* 5. In *Annals* 2.85.4, Tacitus mentions the descendants of freedmen who were "infected" by the Jewish superstition (*ea superstitione infecta*), and he refers to their religious practices as "impious rites" (*profanos ritus*).

the Romans. The Jews' inability to conform to the true – that is, Roman – *pietas* leads to Roman victory and the strengthening of the Romans' hegemony and power.

Furthermore, in the eyes of some authors, the Jews were not merely superstitious; they were also a *gens impia*. Scholars have argued that this characterization of the Jews was developed during the so-called Diaspora revolt of 115-117 CE,²⁷ but in fact Diodorus already reports this type of accusation in the context of the narrative of the siege of Jerusalem by Antiochus VII, in which the king's counsellors argue that “the ancestors of the Jews had been driven out of all Egypt as men who were impious and detested by the gods (ὡς ἀσεβεῖς καὶ μισουμένους ὑπὸ τῶν θεῶν)”.²⁸ Moreover, Tacitus' *Histories* – which were probably completed as early as 110 CE, before the Diaspora revolt – also testify to a perception of the Jews as an impious people.²⁹ In his famous excursus on the Jews in Book 5 of the *Histories*, Tacitus fulminates against those who adopt a Jewish lifestyle, undergo circumcision, and join the Jewish people; he writes that “the earliest lesson they receive is to despise the gods, to disown their country, and to regard their parents, children, and brothers as of little account [*contemnere deos, exuere patriam, parentes liberos fratres vilia habere*]”.³⁰ In Tacitus' perspective, worshipping the Jewish god and adopting the Jewish laws and lifestyle amount to a complete rejection of the fulfilment of one's duties not only towards the gods of Rome, but also towards the members of one's own family, and the Roman state. Judaism is thus presented as completely antagonistic to Roman *pietas* in all respects.³¹

Despite these early attestations, the notion of Jewish impiety becomes much more common in sources written during and after the Diaspora revolt under Trajan. Two papyri from Egypt that pertain to the revolt refer to the *anosioi Ioudaioi*. Likewise, papyri fragments of *Acts of the Alexandrian Martyrs* claim that Trajan's

²⁷ See Fuks 1953, p. 157: “The term *anosioi Ioudaioi* came into use only during the revolt in Egypt; it became almost an official designation by its end, and is echoed shortly after it in a specifically anti-Semitic literature viz. the A. A. M. (*Acts of the Alexandrian Martyrs*). Thus the real question seems to be what is the connection between the revolt of 115-117 and the *anosioi Ioudaioi*”.

²⁸ See Diodorus, *Historical Library* 34-35.1.1.

²⁹ See also Tacitus, *Annals* 2.85.4. In Tacitus' perspective, this impiety is directly connected to the Jews' defeat. See Lewy 1943; Blumenkranz 1951-52, especially p. 189.

³⁰ Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5.2, trans. Moore, LCL, p. 181.

³¹ In this text, Judaism also runs against the Stoic notion of *oikeiōsis* and the duties it implies; see Berthelot 2003, p. 176.

council was filled with impious Jews.³² In addition to Greco-Egyptian papyrological sources, several literary sources dating from the 2nd and 3rd century CE document the perception of the Jews as an impious people. In his epitome of the history of the Roman Republic, Florus (ca. 70-140), who mentions the Jews in his account of the conquests of Pompey, calls them an *impia gens*, an “impious people” (*Epitoma* 1.40.30). At the end of the 2nd century CE, Aelius Aristides also seems to cast the Jews in such a light when he speaks about “the impious who live in Palestine”, and adds that “the sign of their impiety [*dyssebeia*] consists in that they do not recognize their betters [i.e. the gods]” (*Orations* 46, §309).³³ Moreover, at the beginning of the 3rd century CE, Philostratus writes in his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, that when Vespasian asked Apollonius to meet him in Judea, the latter “declined to enter a country which its inhabitants polluted (*ἐμίανον*) both by what they did and by what they suffered”.³⁴ The idea of “pollution” is closely associated with the notion of impiety.³⁵ Furthermore, Philostratus presents Titus as being aware of his role as an instrument of God’s design to punish the Jews whose actions had kindled divine wrath.³⁶ Logically, if God’s wrath had become manifest, it was because the Jews had triggered it with their impious behavior.

This perspective comes surprisingly close to that voiced by Josephus. As Julia Wilker has emphasized, for Josephus “the Jews themselves were responsible for losing God’s protection, for being occupied, for the loss of their freedom and for the eventual defeat, since they had enraged God by their sinful behavior”.³⁷ Most interesting is the way Josephus describes the events that precipitated the

³² See P. Brem. 1 (= *CPJ* II [Tcherikover – Fuks 1960], no. 438), l.4, which mentions a fight against the “impious Jews” during the second half of 116 CE; and P. Giss. 41 (= *CPJ* II, no. 443), col. 2, l.4-5, which probably dates from the end of 117 CE. Regarding the *Acts of the Alexandrian Martyrs*, see Musurillo 1954, no. VIII = P. Oxy. 1242 = *CPJ* II, no. 157, col. 3, ll. 43, 49-50; and *CPJ* II, no. 158a, col.6, l.14. Alexander Fuks suggested that “the Jews became specifically *anosioi* to the gentiles not as an outcome of the long-standing antagonism between them, but as the result of the Jews’ violent attack on the pagan gods and their holy places” during the revolt; see Fuks 1953, p. 158.

³³ Some scholars argue that this passage refers to the Christians. See Stern 1980, p. 217-220.

³⁴ *Life of Apollonius* 5.27, trans. Conybeare, LCL, p. 525.

³⁵ See Josephus, *B.J.* 2.414, and below.

³⁶ “After Titus had taken Jerusalem, and when the country all round was filled with corpses, the neighbouring peoples offered him a crown; but he disclaimed any such honour to himself, saying that it was not himself that had accomplished this exploit, but that he had merely lent his arms to God, who had so manifested his wrath [...]”; *Life of Apollonius* 6.29, trans. Conybeare, LCL, p. 111-113.

³⁷ Wilker 2012, p. 182.

beginning of the war, that is the cessation of the sacrifices brought on behalf of Romans and the rebels' refusal to accept offerings and sacrifices from strangers (i.e., non-Jews). Josephus describes how the chiefs of the priests and the most prominent Judeans exhorted the rebels to change their mind, arguing that forbidding foreigners to offer sacrifices was most sacrilegious (ἄσεβέστατον) and that "besides endangering the city, they would lay it open to the charge of impiety (ἄσέβειαν), if Jews henceforth were to be the only people to allow no alien the right of sacrifice or worship" (*B.J.* 2.414).³⁸ Josephus' formulation suggests that there are standards of piety that all human beings agree upon, such as not preventing someone from bringing an offering or a sacrifice.

In another passage, Josephus makes clear that God used the Romans to punish Jewish sinners, and thus declares that it was God Himself "who with the Romans (was) bringing the fire to purge His temple and removing a city so laden with pollutions (τὴν τοσοῦτων μiasμάτων γέμουσαν πόλιν ἀναρπάζει)".³⁹ Long before Philostratus wrote his *Life of Apollonius*, Josephus was thus already using the notion of pollution (*miasma*) to refer to the sins committed by the rebels, which at this stage of the war implied not only the refusal to perform sacrifices on behalf of foreigners, but also numerous acts of murder within the precinct of the sanctuary. However, in this same discourse Josephus refers to biblical prophecies foretelling that Jerusalem would fall on the day when fellow countrymen would slaughter each other within it (*B.J.* 6.109). Josephus' definition of Jewish sin thus remains anchored in biblical traditions, and first and foremost concords with the Deuteronomistic vision of Israel's history – sin is repaid with divine chastisement, whereas repentance and faithfulness to the covenant grant Israel victory against their enemies.⁴⁰ Josephus' definition of Jewish sin fundamentally differs from Roman notions of Jewish impiety. Most conspicuous is the fact that Josephus nowhere criticizes Jewish rituals; to the contrary, he blames the rebels for diverging from traditional Jewish practice.

Rabbinic literature is also replete with passages claiming that the Jewish defeats at the hands of the Romans – in 70 CE, or at Betar during the Bar Kokhba revolt – were due to Israel's sins, which consisted mainly of greed and fraternal hatred.⁴¹ Some rabbinic texts even convey the idea that there was a kind of meta-historical

³⁸ *B.J.* 2.412-414, trans. Thackeray, LCL, p. 485.

³⁹ *B.J.* 6.110, trans. Thackeray, LCL, p. 407, slightly modified.

⁴⁰ Günter Stemberger also emphasizes the influence of the Book of Daniel upon Josephus' interpretation of the events. See Stemberger 1983, p. 33-37.

⁴¹ See Tosefta Menahot 13:22-23; y. Yoma 1:1 (38c).

correlation between the rise of Roman power and the severity of Jewish sin. This is for example the case in the well-known passage of the Jerusalem Talmud, tractate 'Avodah Zarah, which discusses the meaning of the feast of *Kratēsis* (from *krateō* in Greek), originally understood as “the day on which the Romans seized power”. A discussion ensues considering the possibility that the Romans seized power several times in history. Rabbi Levi (a third generation Palestinian amora, from the end of the 3rd century) then suggests *Kratēsis* be identified as:

The day on which Solomon intermarried with the family of Pharaoh Necho, king of Egypt, on that day Michael came down and thrust a reed into the sea, and pulled up a sandbank, and this was turned into a huge thicket, and this is the great city of Rome. On the day on which Jeroboam set up the two golden calves, Remus and Romulus came and built two huts in Rome. On the day on which Elijah disappeared, a king was appointed in Rome: *There was no king in Edom, a deputy acted as king* (1Kings 22:48).⁴²

According to this tradition, the very existence of Rome and her founding figures is a consequence of the sins of the ancient kings of Israel. The different stages that led to Rome's *imperium* over the world correspond to various transgressions committed by Israel or Israel's leaders in the absence of a proper leader or a prophet like Elijah, who fought against the wicked king Ahab and thus offset the negative consequences of his behaviour. As Peter Schäfer notes, “Israel itself is responsible for the growing success of Rome”, but on the other hand “The message is clear: if we only repent, we can finally stop the seemingly unstoppable rise of Rome's power”.⁴³

Jewish piety as an obstacle to Roman power

Indeed, from a Jewish perspective, the corollary of the idea that it was Israel's sinful behaviour that led to Roman domination was that repentance and faithfulness to the covenant could turn the tables and liberate Israel from Roman power. In other words, not only were the Jews (some of them at least) responsible for the disasters that befell Israel; they also had the capacity to create the conditions for the reversal of this situation, even if the exact moment of redemption depended on God alone. This is what the other part of Josephus' discourse to the rebels in Book 5 of the *War* (§§376-390) suggests.⁴⁴ Some passages of Philo's treatise *On Rewards and*

⁴² See y. Avodah Zarah 1:2, 39c; translation in Schäfer 2002, p. 342. See also Kattan Gribetz 2016.

⁴³ Schäfer 2002, p. 342.

⁴⁴ Josephus references numerous biblical episodes in which the Israelites' exemplary faith in God and pious behavior granted them victory, sometimes even

Punishments also reproduce this line of thought, which may be characterized as Deuteronomistic.⁴⁵

The vision inspired from the Book of Deuteronomy also underlies several passages of rabbinic literature. In Sifre Deuteronomy 41, we encounter this notion in the framework of a discussion concerning the respective importance of study (*talmud*) and deeds (*ma'aseh*) – i.e., the practice of the commandments of the Torah. In this context, the punishment that awaits Israel if they give up the commandments is evoked not merely in connection with the teaching of Deuteronomy, but also with a quotation of Isaiah 5:24, “Therefore, as the tongue of fire the stubble devours, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will become rotten, and their blossom go up like dust; for they have rejected the instruction of the Lord of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel”.⁴⁶ Commenting on the beginning of the verse, the midrash states:

Therefore, as the tongue of fire the stubble devours, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame. Is it really so [that] for you there is stubble that devours fire? This stubble is [none other than] Esau the wicked [= Rome]. Because all the time that the hands of [the people of] Israel grow weaker in the [practice of] the commandments, he [Esau-Rome] rules over them [Israel].⁴⁷

without a fight, through a pure miracle. Josephus refrains from openly stating that the same causes will produce similar effects, and that God has the ability to free Israel from Roman dominion, but such a conclusion is nevertheless possible, and even inevitable. In the context of the *Judean War*, however, Josephus' discourse aims to convince the rebels to give up fighting. On the idea, in Josephus' work, that the tables will turn and Israel shall rise again, see Rajak 1991, esp. p. 132; Spilisbury 2002; Price 2005; and Sharon's article in this volume.

⁴⁵ Philo states that God promises to those who “keep the divine commandment in obedience to his ordinances and accept his precepts”, and are thus pious and virtuous, that “the first boon you will have is victory over your enemies” (*Praem.* 79, trans. Colson, LCL, p. 361, in connection with Deuteronomy 28:1). Building upon Deuteronomy 4:7, Philo further writes a few paragraphs later: “So that if one should ask ‘What manner of nation is great?’, others might aptly answer ‘a nation which has God to listen to its prayers inspired by true religion and to draw nigh when they call upon him with a clean conscience’”. Later on, in §95, Philo seems to describe the messiah at the head of his army, and in §125, Philo interprets Deuteronomy 28:13, “The Lord will make you the head, and not the tail; you shall be only at the top, and not at the bottom”, as meaning “that the virtuous one, whether single man or people, will be the head of the human race and all the others like the limbs of a body which draw their life from the forces in the head and at the top”. It seems that Philo did not lose hope that Israel would rise again and rid itself of the Roman domination, as §§169-171 at the end of the treatise also seem to indicate. However, this hope remains as implicit as in Josephus' *War*, since Rome is – cautiously – not mentioned by name.

⁴⁶ Translation according to the New Revised Standard Version.

⁴⁷ Sifre Deuteronomy 41, ed. Finkelstein, p. 85 (my translation).

Due to the odd syntax of the verse in the Book of Isaiah, where the subject and the object can be inverted, the question arises whether there is such a thing as stubble that devours fire. The answer is positive, but only insofar as the stubble is a symbol for Rome, identified with Esau, Israel's twin brother.⁴⁸ No matter how powerful Rome currently is, its true nature is to be only stubble, whereas Israel by nature is a devouring fire. However, when Israel neglects the *mitzvot*, the divine commandments, a paradoxical situation emerges; the stubble is able to consume (that is, dominate) the fire. So far this seems like nothing more than a new version of the argument analysed previously – that Roman power is a consequence of Israel's inability to remain faithful to God's covenant. However, the expression *kol zman she-*, literally "all the time that [...]" indicates that the time could (and should) come when Israel will once again be meticulous in the observance of the commandments. The consequence then will be the restoration of the natural order of things, in which fire eats stubble, and Israel overcomes and destroys Rome.

The problem with this line of argument, however, was that it remained deeply rooted in the Deuteronomistic vision of history which attributed Israel's defeats to its sins, an argument that could paradoxically resemble the discourse adopted by Israel's enemies. Therefore, the question arises: Did Jews develop another way of dealing with the challenge of Roman power?

Israel as the cornerstone of Roman power

There was in fact another way to subvert the Romans' claim that they deserved their empire because of their piety, and to explain Roman power without placing the blame on Israel. This was to claim that the empire's prosperity was actually the result of Jewish piety and a consequence of the sacrifices and prayers they bring on Rome's behalf.⁴⁹ In my opinion, this apologetic strategy is present in the works of Philo. In order to emphasize how deranged it was on Caligula's part to order the erection of a statue of himself in the Holy of Holies within the Jerusalem temple, Philo argues that this "inmost part of the temple" is the one "into which the High Priest enters once a year only on the Fast as it is called, to offer incense

⁴⁸ On the identification of Rome with Esau, see the seminal work of Cohen 1967. For a more recent bibliography and synthesis, see Berthelot 2016, and the whole thematic issue in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 233/2 (2016).

⁴⁹ A similar claim is made in the name of the Christians by Melito of Sardis in his *Apology*, written in the second half of the 2nd century. See Grant 1988, p. 95. In Judith Lieu's words, the *Apology* "celebrates the co-terminence of church and Empire" (Lieu 1999, p. 43).

and to pray according to ancestral practice for a full supply of blessings and prosperity and peace for all mankind" (*Legatio* 306, trans. Colson, LCL, p.155). The population of the Roman Empire is necessarily included in "all mankind". In a similar way, in *De Specialibus Legibus*, Philo presents the cult at the Jerusalem temple and the priestly function of the people of Israel as a whole as a source of blessing for the universe, and thus for the empire as a whole.⁵⁰ By emphasizing the piety of the Jews who continuously pray and sacrifice for the welfare of the empire, Philo seems to suggest that the successes of the latter did in fact depend upon the former to a great extent. Such a claim could have both an apologetic and a subversive dimension, namely that the empire would crumble without the Jewish support.

Such a strategy was of course more difficult to adopt during and after the Jewish revolts. However, it resurfaces in late rabbinic writings, where one occasionally encounters the idea that the strength of Rome comes from the original blessing which Isaac bestowed upon Esau or from the presence of Jews within the empire. The first idea is found in *Leviticus Rabbah*, a commentary of Leviticus the final redaction of which dates to the 5th century CE. In a passage that interprets Leviticus 13:2, which lists different skin diseases, associated symbolically with the different empires that confronted Israel, Rome is associated with leprosy (*tzara'at*), the most problematic skin disease in the Bible. The midrash explains that: "A *plague of leprosy* alludes to Edom [= Esau = Rome], because it[s power] comes from the strength of [the blessing of] the old man [Isaac]; and it turns into a *plague of leprosy on the skin of his flesh*".⁵¹ According to Genesis 27, Jacob stole the blessing of the first born from his aging father. Esau nevertheless did receive another blessing from Isaac. Since Esau is identified with Rome, the author of the midrash is able to state that Rome benefits from Isaac's blessing, and thus receives divine support from the God of Israel. This teaching conveys an important message: if the power of Rome is greater than that of other empires, it is not because of some intrinsic strength or quality – be it *pietas* or *virtus* – but only because the Romans benefit from the blessing of one of Israel's patriarchs.

Finally, the idea that the presence of Jews within the Empire is what holds it up together is explicitly found in the Babylonian Talmud. In b. 'Avodah Zarah 10b, a wicked emperor plans to eradicate the people of Israel, but falls short of doing so because a

⁵⁰ See *Spec.* 2:167 in particular, as well as *Spec.* 1:97, 168, 190; *Mos.* 1:149 (on the universal priestly role of Israel). On this issue see Umemoto 1994, p. 42-43.

⁵¹ *Leviticus Rabbah* 15:9, ed. Margulies, p. 339, my translation.

Roman officer opposes the emperor's project, arguing on the basis of Zechariah 2:10 ("I have spread you [Israel] abroad like the four winds of heaven" – 2:6 in the NRSV) that "Just as the world cannot exist without four winds, it cannot exist without Israel". In addition, the officer argues that without Israel "you [Rome] will be called an amputated kingdom [*malkhuta qeti'ata*"]". In the story, the officer himself is nicknamed "amputation (or, according to Boyarin 1995: the Cut One) son of peace" (Qeti'a bar Shalom). This name may be meant to commemorate his deed: through his argumentation about an "amputated" kingdom, he brought peace to Israel, insofar as the latter was not destroyed. The name could also refer to the fact that Qeti'a later underwent circumcision.⁵² Whatever the case, the end of the story makes clear that the wicked emperor abandoned his plan, admitting that Qeti'a bar Shalom "had spoken very well"; nevertheless, the emperor had the officer thrown into a furnace for contradicting the king. We are told that Qeti'a bar Shalom "converted" to Judaism by having himself circumcised before he was killed, and that he received a share in the world to come – as Daniel Boyarin points out, this conversion was not valid from a halakhic point of view, and Qeti'a bar Shalom probably received such a reward as a righteous gentile.⁵³ Beyond the description of Qeti'a's pious end, the main point to draw from the story is that without the Jews, the Roman Empire would be considerably weakened, and would possibly even crumble.⁵⁴ Ironically enough, this affirmation, which is accepted by the wicked emperor himself, stems from a Roman officer, who quotes the Bible and happens to be righteous.

Conclusion

Romans and Jews each considered themselves very pious peoples. Moreover, they shared certain fundamental religious notions, such as the idea that victory was given by the gods / God; that faithfulness in the practice of the religious rites or commandments brought the favour of the gods / God, and thereby success against one's enemies; and that impiety, which manifested itself in the negligence of the religious rituals prescribed by the Deity, led to disaster.

This kind of theology of victory and religious explanation of military defeat had already become common in Jewish thought

⁵² See Boyarin 1995.

⁵³ Boyarin 1995.

⁵⁴ See also b. Pesahim 87b-88a (the version found in mss Munich 6, JTS, and Columbia), and the analysis of these two passages in Naiweld 2016, esp. p. 275-277.

before the Jews experienced the *imperium* of the Romans, and as such this was not a new development prompted by the confrontation with Rome. The repeated Jewish defeats against the Romans from 63 BCE to 135 CE simply made these traditional theological views even more problematic than in the past.

In opposition to Roman or pro-Roman sources, some Jewish authors maintained that the Romans were wicked and impious, and thus doomed to eventual defeat at the hands of the Jews and their God. Yet, the Roman Empire endured. In opposition to numerous Greek and Roman sources that depicted the Jews as superstitious and impious, Jewish authors claimed that Israel's holiness was still a valid vocation that would one day be fully realized and lead to the destruction of the empire. Still, the Roman Empire endured.

Rather than following the apocalyptic path, as the authors of 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch did, or merely reproducing the Deuteronomistic explanation of defeat, some rabbis (and maybe Philo before them) contended with the political and religious challenge of Roman victory and power by boldly twisting the theology of victory, claiming that Rome's peace and prosperity in fact depended upon Israel.

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