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A Relational Account of Structure and Agency via 'Lived Ancient Religion' and the 'Processing Approach', with a Case Study of Circumcision in Ancient Judaism*

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A Relational Account of Structure and Agency via 'Lived Ancient Religion' and the 'Processing Approach', with a Case Study of Circumcision in Ancient Judaism*

Abstract

Addressing studies of the concepts of structure and agency, in 2008 sociologist François Dépelteau called for a 'relational approach' that compared the 'trans-actions' of actors, but notably left open the question of how such a study should be conducted. The present article attempts to operationalise Dépelteau's call, albeit in a manner tailored specifically to meet the needs of researchers in the area of 'lived ancient religion'. The study of 'trans-action' is operationalised here by employing key terms drawn from Staf Hellemans's 'processing approach' to the study of religion, in which agents 'process' their environments through selection, modification, assembly, performance, integration, and resonance. In the study of the religions of Mediterranean antiquity, questions of structure and agency can be addressed relationally by comparing the performances of specific actors, to the extent that such performances are accessible in the material evidence; for example, in the form of texts, statuary, art, and architecture. In an attempt to demonstrate the utility of this approach, a case study of the ritual of circumcision in ancient Judaism is offered.

In his 2005 monograph *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised*, Shaye Cohen draws attention to Michel de Montaigne's detailed, first-hand account of a circumcision ceremony. In an entry in his *Travel Journal* dated 30 January 1581, he writes the following:[1]

(3a) But as for the circumcision, it is done in private houses, in the most convenient and lightest room in the infant's house. Where he [here Montaigne refers to himself in the third person] was, because the house was inconvenient, the ceremony was performed at the entrance door. They give the infants a godfather and a godmother, as we do; the father names the infant. They circumcise them on the eighth day from their birth. (3b) The godfather sits down on a table and puts a pillow on his lap; the godmother brings him the infant and then goes away. The infant is wrapped in our style; the godfather unwraps him below, and then those present and the man who is to do the operation all begin to sing, and accompany with songs all this action .... (3c) The minister may be other than a rabbi, and whatever he may be among them, everyone wishes to be called to this office, for they hold that it is a great blessing to be employed at it often ....

On the table where the godfather is seated, there is at the same time a great prepa-ration of all the instruments necessary for this operation. Besides that, a man holds in his hands a phial full of wine and a glass. [Then ...] finding the child all stripped, as the godfather holds him on his lap with his head toward him, [the circumciser] takes hold of his member and with one hand pulls back toward himself the skin that is over it, with the other pushing the glans and the member within .... With a knife he cuts off this skin, which is immediately buried in some earth, which is there in a basin among the other preparations for this mystery. (4b) After that the minister with his bare nails plucks up also some other particle of skin which is on this glans and tears it off by force and pushes the skin back beyond the glans.

(5a) It seems that there is much effort in this, and pain; however they find no danger in it, and the wound always heals in four or five days. The infant's cry is like that of ours when they are baptized. (5b) [*Metzitza*, a component of the ritual in which the circum-ciser sucks the blood from the wounded area, spits it out, then takes a sip of wine, is described; a salty powder is subsequently applied to the area] and then he very tidily wraps this boy's member with cloths cut specially for this. (5d) [The circumciser again sips from a glass of wine, applies a drop to the circumcised infant's lips with his finger, and then sends the remaining wine] to the mother and the women, who are in some other part of the house, to drink what wine is left. [Incense is burned:] they suppose that these are odors to confirm and enlighten minds for devotion.

Cohen notes that 'Montaigne knew no Hebrew and had little familiarity with Jews and Judaism, yet his account of the circumcision ceremony is extraordinarily accurate – in rigorously traditional circles it is still carried out today almost exactly as Montaigne described it over four centuries ago'.[2] Despite the attention to detail with which Montaigne framed his account, he did not understand the liturgical language in which the ceremony was conducted and consequently made errors: the naming of the infant usually

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1   Cohen 2005, 3–4.
2   Cohen 2005, 4.

occurs after, not before, the circumcision; and what Montaigne took to be songs included chanted prayers.[3] Typically, in the late medieval and early modern ritual, these prayers included the following: 'The Holy One, blessed be he, said to Abraham, our father, "Walk in my ways and be perfect [*tamim*]"', citing the foundational text of Gen 17, which stipulates that male children be circumcised when they are eight days old. God's command to Abraham to 'be perfect' in medieval Jewish interpretation concerns the removal of the foreskin, which by that time had been identified as a bodily imperfection, whose removal constituted the sine qua non of masculine bodily perfection.[4]

In his comments on Montaigne's account, Cohen emphasises the stability of the tradition involved, noting that in 'traditional circles it is still carried out today almost exactly as Montaigne described it'.[5] An assemblage of relatively stable and fixed elements is present; for example, circumcision is performed on the eighth day, citing Abraham as the guarantor of an ancient tradition. However, some aspects of the ritual are more flexible, and call for active decision-making on the part of participants: godparents had to be chosen, the infant's name selected, and the agent responsible for performing the surgical procedure had to be selected. As Montaigne notes, the circumciser 'may be other than a rabbi, and whatever he may be among them, everyone wishes to be called to this office'. The account gives no indication that there existed in Rome in 1581 a ritual agent who specialised in performing circumcisions; that is, the *mohel* known in the contemporary period. Rather, with some degree of hyperbole, Montaigne writes that '*everyone* wishes to be called to this office'. The location in which the ritual took place was relatively fixed: 'It is done in private houses'. However, a degree of flexibility was permitted as to which room in the house was utilised: in Montaigne's account, 'because the house was inconvenient, the ceremony was performed at the entrance door'. Traditional or fixed elements of the ceremony commingled with its more flexible aspects, in which participants exercised selectivity, tailoring the ritual to their particular circumstances and to the architectural affordances available to them.

In contrast to Montaigne's detailed account, the evidence from antiquity seems remarkably vague: the fact of circumcision is often noted, but the way in which it was carried out, the details of the surgico-ritual procedure, and the implements used to perform it typically go unmentioned. Although scholars frequently note that circumcision is stipulated in the law and that,

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3   On the liturgical performance, see Hoffman 1996, 64–77.
4   See Cohen 2005, 149, 162.
5   Cohen 2005, 4.

in the Greco-Roman period at least, it was understood as a significant factor distinguishing Jews from non-Jews, the mechanics of the procedure largely remain out of view.[6] Although Cohen highlighted aspects of stability in the ritual from the medieval to the modern period, he could just as easily have pointed to other aspects involving contingency and change. To the best of my knowledge, no one has yet examined the interplay between relatively fixed or traditional aspects of the circumcision ritual, on the one hand, and more flexible and open-ended aspects, on the other.

In what follows, I examine this interplay, first by introducing two method-ological perspectives that, I submit, can be of use in approaching this topic; specifically, the 'processing approach' and 'lived ancient religion'; second by drawing on recent sociological discussions of structure and agency; and third by examining some salient texts that help to shed light on these issues, with an emphasis on antiquity, particularly the Greco-Roman period, but with occasional recourse to late antique and medieval sources, like that of Montaigne, for comparative purposes. By proceeding in this way, I propose (1) to explore the dynamics of the ritual practice of circumcision, and (2) to outline a relational approach with which to reframe discussions of structure and agency, specifically in the 'lived religion' of Mediterranean antiquity, but with the potential for application more broadly in religious studies and the sociology of religion.

1 The 'Processing Approach' and 'Lived Ancient Religion'

The processing approach (PA) was introduced in a volume entitled *The Making of Christianities in History: A Processing Approach*, published in 2020 and edited by Staf Hellemans and Gerard Rouwhorst.[7] Hellemans developed the approach in an attempt to delineate the process by which the Western Catholic Church adapted to 'modernity' in nineteenth-century Europe.[8] The modernisation of the church implies agents who act within their environments: 'The environment is as necessary as the actor. It con-stitutes a pool from which all sorts of objects, resources, values, options, and threats that are of interest for the agent are drawn and subsequently processed.'[9] 'Processing' is the key term here.

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6   For circumcision as a mark distinguishing Jews from others and a 'sign of the covenant', see, e.g., Sanders 1994, 213–214.
7   Hellemans and Rouwhorst (eds) 2020.
8   Hellemans 2020, 23–58.
9   Hellemans 2020, 27.

The *processing* of environments by agents consists of six components:[10] (1) agents *select* particular elements and options presented by their environments, while neglecting or overlooking others; (2) the objects and opportunities thus selected are *modified* to meet the situation-specific needs of the individual or group: 'affordances, opportunities, resources (personnel, goods, other things), and ideas that an agent finds interesting for processing are tailored for re-use in his or her lifeworld';[11] (3) the modified objects and opportunities selected from the environment require *assembly* into a 'new, often fragile unity'. Thus, 'the twin processes of modification and assembling … are a complex and iterative affair'.[12] (4) Cultural elements thus selected, modified, and reassembled into new unities are subsequently expressed in *performances*, which may either succeed or fail, be accepted or rejected by other constituencies, both individual and corporate, within the cultural milieu in which the performance takes place. (5) Performances may subsequently be *integrated* into the agent's repertoire of action, which may in turn lead to (6) modifications of the structuring environment, referred to as *resonances*. 'Resonances, in their turn, can be the start of another round of processing.'[13]

Hellemans and Rouwhorst indicate that 'innovation stands at the heart of every case of processing, since all the material involved in the processing, both old and new, is continually modified and re-assembled in the process'.[14] From this perspective, history has an 'anarchic' character: it is not governed by abstract principles, laws, or controlling institutions, but instead results from the myriad decisions, selections, omissions, and transformations of innumerable agents within overlapping fields of cultural (re)production.[15]

Complementing the processing approach of Hellemans and Rouwhorst is the *lived ancient religion* (LAR) approach elaborated in a project involving Jörg Rüpke, Rubina Raja, Anna-Katharina Rieger, Richard L. Gordon, and Emiliano R. Urciuoli, among others, at the University of Erfurt from 2012 to 2017; the work has since continued.[16] Like PA, LAR privileges the notion of agency, rejecting approaches in which 'the balance between structure and individual agents is shifted to the one pole of an overwhelming and encaging

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10 The wording of the following list and the language used to describe PA and LAR below is expanded from Blanton 2021, 144–146.

11 Hellemans 2020, 42.

12 Hellemans 2020, 44.

13 Hellemans 2020, 46.

14 Hellemans and Rouwhorst 2020, 16; see also Rouwhorst 2020, 83–118.

15 On the language of 'fields', see Bourdieu 1993.

16 Rüpke 2011, 191.

structure'.[17] Also like PA, LAR addresses the relation between agents and culture: 'Rather than stressing the "reproduction" of culture, *appropriation* focusses on the partiality, the occasional character, the deficits, the incoherency, but above all on the strategic selectivity of the individual agent's making prefabricated meanings one's own. Accordingly, the cumulated effect of these appropriations is the precarious and ever-changing character of what claims to be normative tradition.'[18]

LAR is distinct from PA, however, in that it draws explicitly on the field of 'lived religion', an approach involving scholars in both the sociology of religion, such as Meredith McGuire and Nancy Ammerman; and religious studies, such as Robert Orsi.[19] Jörg Rüpke summarises the approach: 'Rather than analyzing expert theologies, dogma, or the institutional setting and history of organized religion, the focus of lived religion is on what people actually do: the everyday experience, practices, expressions, and interactions that are related to and constitute religion.'[20] Janico Albrecht and others note that '"LAR" does not pretend to be either a distinctive methodology or a general theory of religion, but is an eclectic approach marked by a specific range of interests' that 'seeks to complement other approaches by framing new questions that can be posed to a wide range of different types of evidence', primarily pertaining to Greco-Roman antiquity.[21] Lived *ancient* religion thus takes the 'lived religion' of Mediterranean antiquity as its subject.

LAR identifies four key terms 'intended to sharpen the accounts of the dynamics of ancient religious experiences, practices and beliefs'. These include (1) *appropriation*, denoting 'the situational adaptation and deployment of existing practices and techniques, institutions, norms and media to suit contingent individual or group aims and needs'; (2) *competence*, which highlights 'the priority of personal engagement, knowledge and skill in the provision of services of all kinds, … including public and private performance, authorship, teaching and networking'; (3) the *situational construction of meaning*; that is, religious meanings are assumed to be generated not by 'by world-views but by the complex interplay of interests, beliefs and

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17 Raja and Rüpke 2015, 12.

18 Raja and Rüpke 2015, 13 (emphasis mine).

19 McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2014; Ammerman 2016; Orsi 1997. I thank Staf Hellemans for pointing out to me that the processing of structures already implies that all religion is 'lived', religion in institutional settings no less than that outside of such settings. For a critique of the ways in which Rüpke's focus on individuals causes him to reject attempts to study religion 'from an organizational point of view', see Bremmer 2021, 246, 253 n. 65.

20 Rüpke 2019.

21 Albrecht et al. 2018, 3.

satisfactions in specific situations'; and (4) *mediality*,[22] referring to the ways in which agents communicate religious meanings materially; for example, through utterances, prayers, gestures, texts, objects (statuary, altars, votives etc.), and the manipulation of objects (e.g., depositing votives in a space marked as 'sacred'). Rüpke argues that 'religion', defined as 'the temporary and situational enlargement of the environment – judged as relevant by one or several of the actors – beyond the unquestionably plausible social environment inhabited by co-existing humans who are in communication (and hence observable)', provides resources that effectively expand or restrict the agency of individual actors: expanding agency by opening up 'new realms of imagination and creative individual intervention' or restricting it by 'shifting agency from human to divine actors'.[23]

2 Structure and agency in recent discussion

Placing the approaches of LAR and PA within the context of recent discussions of structure and agency in the field of sociology helps to clarify the issues at stake and provides an opportunity to suggest ways in which LAR and PA might fruitfully contribute to those discussions. Sociology has long had an interest in identifying the relationship between structure and agency, and treatments of the topic abound. Consequently, I attempt here only to provide a very general outline of some salient points in an ongoing discussion.

Treatments of agency and structure are frequently predicated upon a series of irreconcilable dichotomies: freedom versus constraint; free will versus determinism; autonomy versus compulsion; the individual and the collective; the micro and the macro. Agency is typically associated with the first members of these dyadic groupings, and structure with the second. *The Sage Dictionary of Sociology*, for example, states:

Agency denotes individual capacity for free thought and action; structure denotes the constraints on individuals that result from the fact that repeated patterns of action, legitimated by ideologies, form the environment that shapes us (e.g. as we are socialised into a particular set of beliefs, values and attitudes in childhood) and limits our actions (by, for example, allocating the resources necessary for certain actions in an uneven manner).[24]

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22 Albrecht et al. 2018, 3.
23 Rüpke 2015, 348, 352.
24 Bruce and Yearly 2006, 7.

How then do individual agents exercise their capacity for 'free thought and action' when their options are shaped and constrained by their structuring environments? Given paradoxical formulations of this sort, it is small wonder that Stephan Fuchs declared that 'the relationship between agency and structure is one of the many unresolved core enigmata in social science and social theory.'[25] In his critical assessment of previous research in the area, François Dépelteau notes that voluntaristic approaches – those that posit as the central building blocks of their theoretical framework individual actors who autonomously make choices that best serve their own interests – tend to theorise social (or economic) structure as resulting from the aggregation of the choices made by all the individuals who jointly comprise the social system (agency → structure).[26] Conversely, deterministic approaches – Dépelteau would place structural Marxism in this category – tend to theorise the actions of individuals as the direct result of (economic, social etc.) structures (structure → agency).[27] What Dépelteau labels 'codeterministic' theories attempt to mediate these methodological polarities by positing a reciprocal influence between agency and structure. As Sharon Hays puts it, 'people make structures at the same time as structures make people: through everyday practices, the choices made by agents serve to create and recreate [and sometimes to transform] structures continuously.'[28] Dépelteau categories the approaches of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, Pierre Bourdieu, and Anthony Giddens, among others, as codeterminist, with all due respect to the very significant differences among the various theorists so lumped together.[29]

Dépelteau criticises codeterministic approaches because in some instances, they seem to reify both agency and structure. He argues that 'pure conceptual inventions and distinctions (structure/agency, micro/meso/macro etc.) should not be seen as real things.'[30] In a similar vein, Stephan Fuchs rejects what he refers to as 'agency essentialism': 'Agency essentialism

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25 Fuchs 2001, 24.

26 Dépelteau 2008, 52–56. The rational, utility-maximising consumer of classical economic theory constitutes a prime example of the voluntaristic approach, otherwise known as methodological individualism; see, e. g., Hodgson 2007.

27 One could arguably include the discussions of Althusser and Bourdieu in this category: see Althusser 2000. See the apropos comments on problems with classifying the work of Bourdieu in Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1003, 1005. Bourdieu's formulations incline toward the structural side of the equation; see, e. g., Bourdieu 1970. On the complexity of Bourdieu's thinking and its relation to structuralist Marxism, see Swartz 1997, 65–94.

28 Hays 1994, 63.

29 Berger and Luckmann 1967; Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu 1990; Giddens 1984.

30 Dépelteau 2008, 68.

thinks of agency, intentionality, and mind as something qua persons. They are what makes actors essentially human. They are internal properties or states of persons, defining what it means ... to be a human actor.'[31] Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische helpfully trace the roots of this conception, which derives from Immanuel Kant, among others.[32] Thus, Fuchs is correct when he rejects that particular understanding of 'agency' as a 'moral concession' and a philosophical concept rather than a social fact.[33] As will become clear below, however, the rejection of one particular (which is not to say 'straw man') definition of agency does not provide adequate grounds to reject the use of the term altogether.

In order to avoid reifying the concepts of structure and agency, Dépelteau proposes instead a relational model predicated on the notion of *trans-actions*, understood as 'interdependent' and 'interconnected' actions: 'individual action is always one piece of a moving puzzle composed by interdependent actions.'[34] Using this notion, Dépelteau writes that 'social structures, if any, [are seen] as effects of trans-actions between various social actors (actor ↔ actor ⇒ social structure, if any). The social universe is seen as the effect of trans-actions between various and inderdependent social actors.'[35] This relational perspective 'denies that social actors and their actions can be understood as preexisting "things" outside social relations. Social actors and actions are what they are, at some specific time and space, only through empirical chains of trans-actions.'[36] From this perspective, structures are understood not as static entities, but as processes, or 'chains of trans-action'. Borrowing from Emirbayer, Dépelteau proposes that 'the social universe should be depicted "in dynamic, continuous, and processual terms".'[37] Thus, it follows that '"structure" refers simply to specific transactions that share some similarities and that are more or less reproduced through time and space. In this sense, social structures are fixed only in our imagination or on paper. In reality, "structures" are always in motion.' Taking trans-action as the basic unit of analysis, Dépelteau proposes that 'we do not need the notion of agency'. What we need, he proposes, are 'complex and *empirical* studies of trans-actions to see and understand the fluid dynamics of inter-

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31 Fuchs 2001, 32.
32 Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 985–997.
33 Fuchs 2001, 27, 32.
34 Dépelteau 2008, 60.
35 Dépelteau 2008, 59. This view builds on Emirbayer 1997.
36 Dépelteau 2008, 61.
37 Dépelteau 2008, 62, citing Emirbayer 1997, 281.

dependent people who create their social universe through their constant transactions'.[38]

In essence, Dépelteau 'solves' the problem of structure and agency by reimagining structure in processual terms and dispensing with the notion of agency, replacing it with the relational concept of trans-action. Dépelteau's warnings against the reification of agency and structure are well taken, as are his proposal for a relational sociology and his reconceptualisation of structure within that framework. His approach moves the notion of structure out of the realm of metaphysics and into the realm of sociology proper, and it is at that point where, as we will see, it becomes most useful for the study of lived ancient religion.

However, we need not go so far as to reject the notion of agency, a term that *Merriam-Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* defines as follows: 'the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power: action or activity'.[39] Clearly, the notions of acting and action are central to this definition, just as they are to Dépelteau's relational sociology; 'trans-action' implies agents capable of acting, or, in *Merriam-Webster*'s terms, exercising agency. For that reason, the concept of agency retains its utility, despite Dépelteau's attempt to sideline it. I suggest that despite his demurral, Dépelteau's framework provides the means to reconceptualise agency in relational terms: the agent is not the (imaginary) free-willed individual acting apart from structural influence, that is, acting apart from others; rather, the agent is to be understood relationally, as the individual who trans-acts among other agents in chains of interdependent and interconnected actions. Agency may thus be defined as *the capacity to act relationally*. All action, we note, is relational: there can be no action without other agents or objects in relation to which the action takes place and gains meaning.[40] This implies further that agency is not a faculty which, in a binary mode, one either does or does not exercise; one may, however, exercise greater or lesser degrees of agency, depending in

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38 Dépelteau 2008, 69 (emphasis is Dépelteau's). For possible Belgian antecedents of Dépelteau's transactional approach, see Vanden Broeck and Mangez 2020 (I thank Hellemans for bringing this article to my attention); for the subsequent development of his approach, see Vandenberghe 2018.

39 *Merriam-Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, Brittanica Digital Learning, https://unabridged.merriam-webster.com/unabridged/agency, last accessed 17 September 2021.

40 It is for this reason that Jörg Rüpke subsumes action under the heading of communication within his framework focused on communicative action; see Rüpke 2015, 355: 'Every interaction implies communication. In the extreme case of symbolic interaction, action is determined by the intent to transmit a message, even though it is highly encoded. To communicate means to act, as speech-act theory posits'. See also the comments of Graham 2021, 11–12.

part on the quantity and quality of one's trans-actions. To build on Rüpke's formulation, religion may enhance agency by positing that nonevident actors are present in the environment, thus increasing the number of trans-actions imaginable in a given situation.

We hasten to add that agency, as the capacity to act and to exert effects on other agents and objects within a given environment or 'social universe', can hardly be limited to human actors (as Dépelteau seems to do). In addition to taking into account the 'situational enlargement of the environment' facilitated when nonevident or not 'unquestionably plausible' actors are posited as being present, we note that as Chris Gosden has argued, *objects* also exert agency, not in the sense that they possess 'will' or 'intention', but in the sense that they exert effects on human and other actors: an altar, for example, elicits certain behaviours from human agents, who might burn incense on it or invoke a deity nearby it.[41] Built and geographic environments also exert effects on human (and animal) agents; thus, the system of trans-actions that makes a 'social universe' is composed not only of human and posited nonevident agents, but also animals, objects, and environments, both built and geographic. Dépelteau's sociological approach must be broadened to encompass both religion and materiality.

3 Proposing a relational approach to Lived Ancient Religion

Dépelteau's relational approach bears obvious similarity to PA when he notes that 'the social universe should be depicted "in dynamic, continuous, and processual terms"' and that '"structures" are always in motion'. LAR similarly notes the 'precarious' character of 'what claims to be normative tradition', pointing to dynamism and change in the structuring environment. Moreover, both LAR and PA fall broadly into the category of what Dépelteau labels codeterminist approaches; that is, those that view structure and agency as mutually generative. Thus, Jörg Rüpke writes, 'Structure and agency constitute each other, or reformulated in communicative terms, the attribution of structural givenness and situational agency constitute each other. This balance is, of course, always distorted by the resistance of objects, the durability of institutions, and the tenacity of human bodies and minds.[42] From the processing perspective, Hellemans and Rouwhorst write, 'Actors become what they are in society through processing clues from

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41 Gosden 2005. See further Graham 2021, 11.
42 Rüpke 2015, 351–352.

the surrounding environment' (structure → agency); and at the same time, 'agents relate to and process selected parts of their environment – adopting or rejecting them, but in any case using them for their own purposes, and in the process changing them as well as transforming themselves and their surroundings' (agency → structure).[43]

It is dubious, however, whether the label 'codeterminist' can rightly be applied to either LAR or PA, as neither approach assumes that structure or agency 'determines' anything: both emphasise the selective appropriation and creative refashioning of structure by agents who are themselves continually being constructed and reconstructed in that very process. Hellemans is explicit: 'the processing of the environment is done at the initiative of the agent and it is a creative act with an open, nondetermined result.[44] A more apt description might be provided by Emirbayer and Mische, who speak of 'the *double constitution of agency and structure*: temporal-relational contexts support particular agentic orientations, which in turn constitute different structuring relationships of actors toward their environments.[45] In speaking of the double constitution of agency and structure, however, it must be borne in mind that these are attributional devices (on which, see below), not 'things'.

Dépelteau's call for a relational sociology notably leaves open the question of how the 'complex and *empirical* studies of trans-actions' for which he calls ought to be conducted.[46] Helleman's processing approach, I suggest, provides conceptual tools needed to address that question, at least as it applies to the study of lived ancient religion (I leave it to others to decide if and how it might be applied in other areas). By employing the tools of PA, we are able to operationalise empirically a relational notion of agency in a way that does not fall prey to the fallacy of 'agency essentialism': rather than studying the philosophical notion of 'free will', the sociologist – and more importantly for present purposes, the historian of religion – can empirically study *the processing of structures by agents* by utilising the terms of Hellemans's six-step procedure.

The first three elements that Hellemans identifies in the processing of structures – selection, modification, and assembly – all leave their traces in literary and archaeological records: one can chart in detail, for example,

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43 First citation: Hellemans 2020, 24; second citation: Hellemans and Rouwhorst 2020, 9.

44 Hellemans 2020, 26.

45 Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1004 (emphasis in original).

46 See Dépelteau 2008, 70: Researchers must 'develop methodological tools to deal with the high complexity of these empirical chains of transactions. There is a lot of work to do; a lot of empirical and conceptual work.'

the patterns of selection, omission, and modification evident in the book of Jubilees or the writings of Philo of Alexandria as each appropriates aspects of, say, the biblical book of Genesis for its own purposes; and one may observe how biblical and other traditions are assembled together into new literary patterns in those writings. Similar observations can be made with respect to art, statuary, monuments, and architecture: relations and patterns of relations can be charted, thus providing an empirical grounding for the study of trans-actions in antiquity.

The fourth element of the processing approach, performance, is more difficult to operationalise, as the historian of ancient religion lacks detailed information on most performances, unlike the contemporary sociologist or scholar of religion, who is able to observe and question subjects directly. However, performances, too, leave traces in the historical and archaeological record: texts themselves constitute performances, as do (once again) statuary, art, and architecture, all of which involve the processing of structures and their appropriation and rearticulation in the (creative and reiterative) productive acts of agents. This implies that the results of selection, modification, and assembly are observable in performances, encountered in the form of artefacts.

Hellemans's fifth element, integration into a repertoire of action, is often difficult to link with the *specific* performances of particular actors in antiquity, due to the endemic problem of lack of data. The problem, however, is not insurmountable: texts that are copied and recopied can be said to be integrated into a corporate, if not an individual's, repertoire of action – demonstrably through the reiterations of copyists – and architectural and artistic styles can attain a certain degree of regularity through the same process, which is precisely what led Gosden to propose that objects exert agency.[47] We note, however, that artistic and literary conventions inevitably distort some types of data: our access to the rituals of antiquity, for example, is always mediated by artisans and writers, each with their own interests and utilising their own strategies of selection, modification, and assembly; thus trans-action has already taken place in the *depiction* of rituals and other social practices. The sixth and final element, resonances, in Hellemans's sense of modification of the environment, are in some cases detectable in the material record, and for similar reasons: texts, once written, may be stored, transmitted, and reproduced; rituals reenacted; and new artistic and architectural forms copied or modified, in turn initiating subsequent rounds of processing.

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47 Gosden 2005.

In short: Dépelteau's notion of trans-action, involving interdependent and interconnected actions, is operationalised when the historian makes detailed comparisons between texts, works of art, monuments, architectural features, and so on, in attempts to clarify the interdependence and interconnection between the actions of agents, whether those actions occur relatively contemporaneously or are separated by vast intervals. The enterprise of comparison, therefore, is presupposed by the relational approach.[48] Moreover, Dépelteau's category of action is accessible to the historian of ancient religion in the material artefacts of performance (to use Hellemans's term), or, in Rüpke's terms, 'communicative acts'.[49] Finally, in claiming that questions of structure and agency in the lived religion of antiquity can be addressed through the empirical study of transactions, that is, on the basis of studies that compare performances as evident in texts and other material artefacts, I am of course adopting what Rüpke calls 'the good old fashion of methodological atheism'.[50]

4 A relational approach to agency and structure: Circumcision as a case study

As a practice that, for Judeans, is legally mandated yet, at the same time, subject to local autonomy, the issue of circumcision provides an interesting case study to assess the relations between structure and agency. (We note in passing that the focus on Judaism here is in keeping with the aims of the Erfurt LAR project, which has 'criticized the descriptive reproduction of disciplinary boundaries and the practice of treating "pagan" religion, Judaism, and Christianity as though they each had existed historically in separate worlds.')[51] Since as early as the sixth or fifth century BCE, the text of Gen 17, part of the so-called Priestly material of the Pentateuch, has provided a salient structuring element in Judaic circumcision rituals:[52]

God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you. … This is my covenant, which you shall keep …: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. … Every male among you shall be circumcised when

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48 On comparison as a central component of the academic study of religion, see, inter alia, Smith 1982, 19–35; Smith 1990.
49 Rüpke 2015, 348 and passim.
50 Rüpke 2015, 358.
51 Gasparini et al. 2020, 2.
52 On the dating of the Priestly material in the Pentateuch, see, e. g., Collins 2004, 47–65, 107; differently, Dozeman 2009, 37–43.

he is eight days old. … Any uncircumcised male … shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.' (Gen 17:9–12, 14 NRSV)

This story, which functions as an aetiology for the Judaic practice of infant circumcision, seems remarkably short on detail in comparison with later, medieval accounts, such as that of Montaigne. Males in the lineage of Abraham are to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth; circumcision is interpreted as a 'sign of the covenant' between Yahweh and Abraham's lineage. Uncircumcised males are to be 'cut off' from the people; that is, they are to be expelled from the community for nonperformance of the ritual that is understood to define its boundaries. Details about how the ritual is to be performed are wholly lacking.

The notion that circumcision should be performed on the eighth day after birth was largely adopted during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, although some Jews apparently either neglected to circumcise their sons altogether or circumcised them, but removed only a portion of the prepuce, leaving the glans partly covered (Jub 15:33; 1 Macc 1:48; perhaps Philo, *Migr.* 89–93).[53] To cite only two examples: 1 Macc 1:48 portrays the Syrian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes as sending letters to the towns of Judea circa 168 BCE indicating that the inhabitants should 'leave their sons uncircumcised'; that is, the circumcision of infants was prohibited. If 1 Maccabees is to be believed, competing legal systems operated within Judea around 168 BCE, precipitating the Hasmonean Revolt beginning the following year. The book of Jubilees, written around the 160s or 150s BCE, indicates that some 'Israelites' or Judeans 'made themselves like the nations', 'leaving their sons uncircumcised just as they were born', while others performed the ritual, but left 'some of the flesh of their circumcision when they circumcise[d] their sons.'[54] Jubilees thus complains of two problems: the non-performance of circumcision and the removal of only part of the foreskin in some cases when the surgery was performed.

Aside from issues of law, Greek and Roman cultural preferences favouring an elongated *akroposthion*, a term referring to the portion of the foreskin that overhangs the glans penis, rendered the circumcised phallus as an 'object of mockery' and scornful derision, as Philo of Alexandria pointed out early in the first century CE (*Spec.* 1.1–3). During this period, Greeks and Romans associated the presence of a long, tapering *akroposthion* with culture and self-control, while circumcision was associated with barbarism

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53 On eighth-day circumcision, see Thiessen 2011, 17–42, 67–86. On the passage in Jubilees, see VanderKam 2018, 1:524–525.

54 On the dating, see VanderKam 2018, 1:38. Translations of Jubilees herein are those of VanderKam.

and lack of sexual restraint.[55] During the Greco-Roman period, 'structure' was thus contested and unstable, as the conflicting legal norms and bodily aesthetics of different ethnic groups were promoted or enforced.

We note in passing that this evidence already belies those theoretical accounts that tend to conceptualise structure as a single, integrated entity.[56] Structure is, on the contrary, internally plural, and, from a relational perspective, needs to be understood not in the abstract but in terms of particular decrees, aesthetic judgments, and so on, and the ad hoc and sporadic attempts by agents to promote or enforce them; that is, structure demands to be studied in terms of the trans-actions that produce it. Viewing structures empirically as internally plural rather than singular further implies that agents are *obliged* to engage in processes of selection and appropriation; consequently, the incentives and disincentives (e. g., forms of legal and social punishment and reward) involved in agents' selection of particular aspects of their structuring environments need to be considered in more detail in future studies.

Since circumcision was practiced locally in antiquity (as it is today), its implementation was never subject to direct administrative oversight, whether from the Jerusalem Temple or its priesthood – entities that Simon Claude Mimouni posits as exercising the authority to structure the identities and practices of Jews during the Second Temple period.[57] In the imaginary portrayal of the Gospel of Luke, both John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth are circumcised in local contexts (Luke 1:57–66; 2:15–21), John evidently in the home. This coheres with Montaigne's later notice that circumcision 'is done in private houses' and, from a much earlier time, with Gen 17's narrative, in which Abraham circumcises himself, his sons, and his male slaves, apparently on-site at his family estate. In the literary frame of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is apparently circumcised not at home in Nazareth, but in the very same stable (!) in which he was born in Bethlehem, to where his family had supposedly travelled to be recorded for a Roman census (Luke 2:1–21). This fictive account can hardly have represented the experience of most Jews, however. Although it reflects a later period, as it was compiled circa

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55 See Blanton 2019.

56 See, for example, Althusser 2000 (quotation: 129), who posits that individual subjectivities are 'constituted' by the ideological state apparatus and the repressive state apparatus; the former imprints subjectivities through its control of governing ideologies, and the latter by violence. The state's ideology, a product of the ruling class, is borne in different but mutually reinforcing forms by churches, schools, the family, and the media, among others; and all '*ideology has the function (which defines it) of "constituting" concrete individuals as subjects*' (emphasis in original).

57 Mimouni 2007; on Mimouni's approach, see Blanton 2021.

200 BCE and after, the Mishnah's statement that a bandage may be trans-
ported from one courtyard to another to help staunch the bleeding caused
by circumcision also implies a domestic setting (*m. Shabb.* 19.2). Although
Emil Hirsch and others claimed that 'as early as the geonic time [spanning
the late sixth to eleventh centuries CE] the ceremony had been transferred
from the house of the parents to the synagogue', Montaigne's journal entry
indicates that the practice of household circumcision nonetheless continued
in his day, at least in Rome.[58]

Were there designated ritual agents who specialised in performing circum-
cisions in antiquity? we now ask. There is evidence to suggest that in some
cases circumcisions were performed by local ritual experts or surgeons,
although as we will see, this seems to be the exception rather than the rule.

In his *Jewish Antiquities* (*Ant.* 20.2.1–4, §§ 17–48), the historian Josephus
relates a story in which Izates II, king of Adiabene in the early- to mid-first
century CE, is circumcised as a convert to Judaism.[59] Adiabene was a Par-
thian client kingdom in Western Asia, in present-day Iraq. According to
Josephus, Izates, like his mother, Helene, was a sympathiser of Judaism who
'hastened to adopt' Jewish customs (*Ant.* 20.2.4 [§ 38]). In the course of time,
he met with a Galilean Jew, Eleazar, whom Josephus describes as 'extremely
strict [ἀκριβής] concerning the ancestral decrees' (*Ant.* 20.2.4 [§ 44]).[60]
Eleazar advises Izates that by failing to be circumcised, he was thereby vio-
lating the greatest laws and so 'wronging' God (*Ant.* 20.2.4 [§ 45]). Josephus
writes that Izates 'did not postpone the act; but, departing to another room
and summoning the physician, he accomplished what was commanded'
(*Ant.* 20.2.4 [§ 46]). The 'physician' (ὁ ἰατρός) who excised Izates's foreskin
was presumably a non-Judean who may have utilised a surgical procedure
otherwise known to Greek medicine to treat phimosis, or inflammation
of the penis.[61] The case of Izates, however, is (like Luke's account of Jesus's
circumcision, although for different reasons) hardly representative of the
experience of most Jews in antiquity. Izates was able, on a moment's notice,
to summon an experienced court physician only because he was a king.

Perhaps surprisingly, it is only in a later period, around the fifth to eighth
centuries CE,[62] that we find evidence for ritual experts who specialised in cir-

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58 Hirsch et al. 1906.

59 For fuller discussions of the Izates narrative, see Nanos 2015; Blanton 2021, 146–152.

60 Translations are those of the author unless noted otherwise.

61 Nanos 2015, 118 n. 22, also presumes the surgeon to be non-Judean. On the procedure, see
Celsus, *Med.* 7.25 (also *Med.* 6.18; 25.2); Hodges 1999.

62 For the complicated issues of dating the Babylonian Talmud and its sources, see Strack and
Stemberger 1992, 211–225.

cumcision: the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Shabb.* 130b [§ 6]) mentions a certain Rabbi Yehuda 'the Cutter' *(hagozer)* in a section discussing circumcision on the Sabbath. The designation *mohel*, specifically indicating a 'circumciser', is attested in the Aramaic form *maholah* in *b. Shabb.* 156a (§ 11). Both noun forms, *gozer* and *maholah*, are grammatically masculine, and thus denote male ritual experts. The dates of these texts indicate, however, that this is a relatively late development that can only be documented beginning around the fifth century CE.

According to Montaigne, in Rome in the 1500s, the responsibility for performing the surgical procedure did not rest with a single ritual expert; but rather (hyperbolically), 'everyone wishes to be called to this office'. If Montaigne's report is accurate on that point, there seems to have been no specifically designated *mohel* in Rome; rather circumcision was performed by a diffuse group of non- or semi-experts chosen from within the local Jewish community. Thus, we need to consider the likelihood of regional variations in practice: the developments observed in one region and chronological period cannot be presupposed to be normative for all later places and times. Again, this finding argues in favour of structural plurality and at least a limited degree of freedom regarding the actual performance of the ritual procedure; even more so if, as Montaigne avers, 'everyone' could do it.

Moving chronologically backward to the second century BCE, rather than involving ritual or medical experts specifically trained for the task, the book of Jubilees depicts the patriarch Abraham performing circumcisions at his family estate (Jub 15:23).[63] In this regard, Jubilees follows closely the structuring narrative of Gen 17, which indicates that

> Then Abraham took his son Ishmael and all the slaves born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised [*wayyamal*] the flesh of their foreskins that very day … Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised [or: 'when he circumcised himself'; *behimmolo*] in the flesh of his foreskin. And his son Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised [*behimmolo*] in the flesh of his foreskin. (Gen 17:23–25 NRSV)

The verb *mwl*, 'to circumcise', occurs three times in the passage, each time with Abraham as subject. In the first instance, Abraham circumcises Ishmael and his household slaves. The transitive, *qal* form of the verb is used. In the second and third instances, Abraham and Ishmael appear as the objects of the verbal action. In the latter cases, the *niphal* form of the verb is used, which may either be reflexive ('to circumcise oneself') or passive ('to be

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63 See VanderKam 2018, 1:518.

circumcised').[64] Although Abraham seems to be the ritual agent who performed the circumcisions in all three cases, the *niphal* verb leaves some ambiguity as to who was the subject of the action in the case of Abraham's circumcision. As Andreas Blaschke notes, the verbal form in the Septuagint is less ambiguous, Αβρααμ δὲ ἦν ἐνενήκοντα ἐννέα ἐτῶν, ἡνίκα περιέτεμεν τὴν σάρκα τῆς ἀκροβυστίας αὐτοῦ, 'Abraham was ninety-nine years old when *he circumcised* the flesh of his foreskin', using an active, transitive form.[65] In this case, however, it is possible that the possessive pronoun 'his' could refer to Ishmael's foreskin rather than Abraham's. The ambiguity, however, would seem to be removed by Gen 17:23, where Abraham is said to have circumcised 'every male among the men of Abraham's house', and no ritual agent other than Abraham is said to have performed the surgical procedure. We are thus left with the impression that Abraham not only circumcised the other men in the text, but himself as well.[66]

Abraham's self-circumcision is more likely a literary fiction than a reflection of an actual practice current around the sixth to fifth centuries BCE when the text was perhaps written, drawing attention to Abraham's efficacy as a primary agent on his family estate authorised to perform the ritual.[67] In contrast, in other narratives in the Hebrew Bible, and in reliefs from Egypt, individuals are depicted as being circumcised by someone other than themselves (e.g., Exod 4:24–26; Josh 5:2–7), as, for example, in a relief from the Tomb of Ankhmahor from Saqqara, Egypt, dating around the 2300s BCE, where a specially trained surgeon is shown performing the ritual in a seated position (cf. Joshua's seated posture in Josh 5:2 LXX).[68]

That said, the fourteenth-century Bible illuminated by the artist known as the Master of the Bible of Jean de Sy or the Master of the Boqueteaux (who was active 1350–1380 CE) colourfully depicts the scene of Abraham's self-circumcision as the artist imagines it; an angel stands nearby, gesturing with an index finger towards the exposed phallus of the patriarch, apparently instructing him how to perform the surgical procedure.[69] But the Master of

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64 Koehler and Baumgartner 2001, s.v. *mwl* I; see also Kautsch and Cowley 1910, 137–138, § 51.2.

65 Blaschke 1998, 109.

66 For traditions of Abraham's self-circumcision, see *Genesis Rabbah* 49.1; *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Vayera* 2. I thank Matthew Thiessen for drawing my attention to these passages.

67 VanderKam 2018, 1:518.

68 On circumcision in Egypt, see Jean 2016; on the relief and the debates surrounding its interpretation, see Quack 2012, 568–573.

69 The image is viewable at 'Circumcision of Abraham (Bible of Jean de Sy).jpg', Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Circumcision_of_Abraham_(Bible_of_Jean_de_Sy).jpg, last accessed 20 September 2021.

the Boqueteaux was not the only medieval European male whose imagina-
tion was captured by the Gen 17 narrative. Leonard Glick relates an episode
from the life of Luis de Carvajal (1566–1596), a Jew who had converted to
Catholicism in sixteenth-century Spain and subsequently became governor
of New Spain in Central America. Carvajal's biographer reports that at the
age of eighteen, immediately after reading the text of Gen 17:14, which states,
'Any uncircumcised male … shall be cut off from his people; he has broken
my covenant', Carvajal did the following:

> Without even taking the time to close the Bible, he jumped up from his seat, found a
> pair of shears, and as quickly as his legs could carry him, ran down to a tree by the bank
> of the Pánuco River to perform the sacred rite upon himself. Though the operation was
> painful and clumsily executed, Luis's anxieties turned to felicity once he had fulfilled the
> divine precept. Thereafter he always believed that the circumcision provided a powerful
> restraint to his lust.

Several years later, Carvajal's older brother was seriously injured when he,
too, attempted to perform a similar operation using a barber's knife. At age
thirty, Carvajal was burned at the stake by the Spanish Inquisition after he
was convicted of crypto-Judaism.[70]

   In sum, although cases of self-circumcision are not unattested, they rep-
resent the exception rather than the norm. We note here that in the cases of
Carvajal and his brother, structure presented itself in contradictory ways:
persecution, pogroms, and edicts of expulsion caused many Jews in fifteenth
and sixteenth-century Spain to convert to Catholicism and to abandon their
traditional rituals, including circumcision. His reading of a key scriptural
text provided the catalyst for Carvajal to exercise agency in carrying out his
spontaneous self-circumcision, a decision that put him at considerable risk
from the Spanish Inquisition. For Jews in medieval Spain, navigating these
structural contradictions involved making choices, some of which carried
potentially lethal consequences.

   Carvajal's biographic narrative attributes considerable agency not only
to Louis himself, but also to a physical object, the Bible, specifically to the
narrative of Gen 17. Upon reading the narrative, Carvajal 'jumped up from
his seat', 'without even taking the time to close the Bible', and circumcised
himself. Structure here takes the form of a physical object, a medieval Bible;
the relational aspect of the trans-action is clearly on display. What is more,
the Bible itself, as a material object, exercises agency as it elicits a dramatic
effect when Carvajal jumps up, hastily to imitate Abraham's self-circum-
cision. The Bible as an object in this instance serves as an element of *struc-*

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70 Glick 2005, 83.

ture in transmitting an ancient ritual – albeit in modified form, as shears rather than a stone knife are employed. At the same time, it is an object that exercises *agency* by eliciting Carvajal's response. Thus, the Bible here takes a hybrid role as a 'structuring agent', indicating that structure and agency do not stand in irreconcilable opposition, nor even as two poles of a continuum.[71] Rather, as Fuchs already pointed out, they are 'attributional devices', that is, two different ways of framing the analysis: whether seen from the 'macro' perspective, envisaging continuity across broad geographic and spatial units; or from the 'micro' perspective, with individual actions or trans-actions in view.[72] And as the case of Carvajal's trans-action with his Bible indicates, the same incident may be viewed from both perspectives.

The perception that only males served as authorised ritual agents in the performance of circumcision is reinforced by Carvajal's example as well as the account of Montaigne, not to mention Gen 17. In each of those accounts, males play all the leading roles: in Montaigne's account, for example, the godfather holds the infant immobile in his lap while another male removes the foreskin. The godmother makes a cameo appearance when she delivers the baby to her husband, and subsequently 'goes away', presumably to sit with 'the mother and the [other] women, who are in some other part of the house' in Montaigne's report. Aside from this brief appearance, women are relegated to the margins of the ritual activity, and they likewise play no role in the scenes in Gen 17:9–14, 23–27, or in Carvajal's self-circumcision.

There is some evidence, however, to indicate that women may have played a more active role in some cases.[73] For example, Exod 4:25 clearly indicates that it was Moses's wife, Zipporah, who circumcised their son Gershom. The Hellenistic-era text of 1 Macc 1:60–61 indicates that circa 168 or 167 BCE, mothers 'who had circumcised [τὰς περιτετμηκυίας] their sons' were executed by order of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The use of a form of the transitive verb περιτέμνω ('to circumcise') would seem to imply that mothers themselves acted as the ritual agents, although the text is not explicit.[74] Women are similarly the subjects of the verb περιτέμνω in 2 Macc

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71 For the metaphor of poles on a continuum, see, e. g., Fuchs 2001, 24, 33; Rüpke 2015, 344, 354.

72 See also Rüpke 2015, 351–352, who speaks of 'the attribution of structural givenness and situational agency'.

73 The discussion that follows expands on Blanton 2021, 153–155.

74 According to Goldstein 1976, 139, 'the circumcision of babies appears to have been the responsibility of the mother, even though she did not perform the operation herself.' The *Jewish Encyclopedia* article that he cites in support, however, says 'While in Biblical times the mother (perhaps generally) performed the operation, it was in later times performed by a surgeon', meanwhile citing Josephus's account of Izates and the Talmudic passages

6:10 and 4 Macc 4:25, just as men are subjects of the same verb in LXX Gen 17:23–24, 21:4; Josh 5:2–3, 7; and 1 Macc 1:61. Although more could be said, the use of the transitive verb περιτέμνω with women and men as subjects suggests that both were understood to perform circumcisions in antiquity, in the books of Maccabees at least, as in Exod 4.[75] Moreover, whether the active ritual agent was the patriarch or the matriarch of a given household, the fact that 'in-house' expertise is called upon in carrying out the rite suggests that some degree of local adaptation and ritual flexibility was involved. I note in passing that Dr. Deborah Cohen became the first woman certified to perform circumcisions in Reform Judaism in 1984; the demand for *mohelets* (the feminine version of *mohel*) has reportedly increased in the United States in recent years.[76]

Whereas today's *mohels* and *mohelets* might use surgical-grade stainless steel blades to perform the operation, biblical accounts favour the use of stone knives (Exod 4:25; Josh 5:2–3). Flint was the best and most readily available stone used for making blades in the Levant in antiquity. Obsidian, which could similarly be knapped to create sharp edges, was less plentiful in that region. Stone blades were the predominant type in the Levant from the Neolithic Period (ca. 8500–ca. 4500 BCE) until the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2200–1550 BCE), at which time they were largely but not entirely supplanted by metal cutting tools made of iron or bronze, as Haskel Greenfield has demonstrated. Stone cutting tools continued in use, however, well into and even after the Byzantine and Ottoman periods.[77]

In Josh 5:2–3, Yahweh commands Joshua to make 'stone blades' with which to perform a mass circumcision on Israelite males of various ages who had been born during the forty years of nomadism in the desert, during which time, the text reports, circumcision was not practiced. The Greek versions of Joshua take a special interest in these stone knives, adding material not present in the Hebrew Masoretic Text: Joshua retained the blades, we are told, and deposited them in the city of Thamnasarach, where he lived (Josh 21:42d LXX). After his death, he was buried in a tomb along with the stone

already noted above; see Hirsch et al. 1906. For mothers as circumcisers, see Bloch 1980, 9; Meyers 2002, 289.

75 For a more extended treatment of the various issues involved, including the possibility of a causative use of the verb περιτέμνω, see Thomas R. Blanton IV, 'Did Jewish Women Perform Circumcisions in Antiquity? A Reassessment of the Evidence', *Journal of the Jesus Movement in Its Jewish Setting* (under review).

76 Berit Mila Program of Reform Judaism, National Organization of American Mohalim, https://web.archive.org/web/20131007073323/; http://beritmila.org/, last accessed 21 September 2021; Krueger 2020.

77 Greenfield 2013. For an overview of lithic tools in the Levant, see Rosen 1997.

knives 'with which he had circumcised the sons of Israel in Gilgal'; the text adding, 'and they are there until this day' (Josh 24:31, 31a LXX). It remains an open question whether the translator was consciously archaising in his repeated references to Joshua's stone knives, or whether he was influenced by a ritual practice that prevailed in his own day.

Eliot Braun and Orit Shamir uncovered a bronze or copper blade from Horvat Avot in far northern Galilee, whose bone-carved handle was formed in the shape of a circumcised phallus.[78] Braun and Shamir speculate that the Iron I-period (1200–1000 BCE) knife 'had some ritual significance'; noting, however, that it was found in a domicile. Émile Puech describes an ivory-handled metal knife from Tell Keisan in western Galilee, which was controlled by Phoenicians during the early part of the Iron-II period (beginning in 1000 BCE).[79] Although Puech identifies the shape of the ivory handle as a ram's head, Braun and Shamir more plausibly indicate that it was 'carved into the shape of an uncircumcised phallus.'[80] The *akroposthion* at the tip and the V-shaped area where the corona flanks the frenulum on the underside of the phallus are clearly indicated in the published drawing.[81] Braun and Shamir add that 'one may only speculate as to whether the anatomical differences in these representations of the male member reflect the ethnicity of their owners and/or the inhabitants of the sites from which they derive.'[82] In light of Braun and Shamir's notice that the bone-handled knife may have held a ritual significance, one might be tempted to speculate that it was used specifically to perform circumcisions, but the fact that Phoenician knives could have ivory handles in the shape of a phallus with the foreskin fully intact argues against such a limitation. In addition to serving as a functional means of grasping the knife, the phallus-shaped handles may have served a decorative purpose; or, in light of the well-known apotropaic powers attributed to the phallus in Greece and Rome, perhaps they were understood to protect the household against evil.[83]

The Mishnah commends the use of an 'iron instrument' to perform circumcisions (*m. Shabb.* 19.1).[84] Maimonides would later indicate that glass and stone implements were permissible, although scissors or a knife made

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78 Braun and Shamir 2015.

79 Puech 1980. Briend and Humbert 1980 date the stratum where the knife was found to approx. 900–850 BCE, but the knife cannot be securely dated because it was dislodged from the balk.

80 Braun and Shamir 2015, 44.

81 Briend and Humbert 1980, plate 101, fig. 13.

82 Braun and Shamir 2015, 44.

83 On the use of phallic images to ward off the evil eye, see Blanton 2022.

84 Strack and Stemberger 1992, 149–155.

of iron was the instrument of choice in the twelfth century (*Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer Ahavah*, *Milah* 2.1).[85] Although biblical texts specifically indicate that stone knives were the preferred implements for performing circumcisions – the material of the blade being specified by none other than Yawheh himself – a great deal of latitude appears to have been exercised in actual practice. We note in passing that in a 2010 article, Orthodox legal scholar J. David Bleich could even address the question of whether laser surgery was a halakhically permissible method of performing circumcisions.[86] (Perhaps not surprisingly, he argues for its impermissibility.) We note that unlike the stipulation that circumcision be performed on the eighth day after birth, biblical injunctions that stone knives be utilised in the procedure were eventually ignored; here is a case in which 'structure' was malleable, and older ritual practices were modified or rejected in favour of newer expressions, as cutting implements made of stone gave way to iron and even glass or, in the modern period, steel.

We may also note here that the technology available in a given period and region, and the affordances each technology offered – flint may be knapped to produce sharp edges, although metal blades produce a more uniform incision – served as structuring elements: some technologies were more readily available and more commonly in use in a given period than others.[87] Since the biblical texts were written more than a millennium after the Middle Bronze age (ca. 2200–1550 BCE), when metal blades had largely supplanted flint as the dominant tools in use – at least for butchering meat, as Greenfield has shown – it is interesting that they continued for a long time to insist on the use of the older technology.[88] The fact that the Septuagint takes a special interest in the stone knives used by Joshua in the mass circumcision at Gilgal (Josh 5:2–3) indicates that this structuring motif was not lost on the translators/editors of that version, as they not only passed it on, but also augmented it, the blades even taking the role of valued grave goods at Joshua's burial (Josh 24:31, 31a LXX). Other texts of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, including Jubilees, the Gospel of Luke, and the letters of Paul of Tarsus, make no mention of the blades used for circumcision, the

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85 Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon ('Maimonides'), 'Milah: Chapter Two,' Chabad-Lubavitch Media Center, Chabad.org, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/932327/jewish/Milah-Chapter-Two.htm, last accessed 15 March 2021.

86 Bleich 2010. On the recent use of Gomco and Mogen clamps, see Glick 2005, 196–198.

87 On relatively smooth incisions created by metal blades in comparison to stone ones, see Greenfield 2013.

88 Greenfield 2013, esp. 173, fig. 11. As Rosen 1997 makes clear, the use of stone knives persisted long after metal came into dominant use; thus, notions of a sudden 'replacement' of stone by metal are simplistic.

structuring element of the stone blade seemingly having been discarded as the result of changing technologies.

Having looked at the possible instruments with which circumcision was performed, we move finally, and very briefly, to the question of time. Although the non-Priestly material of the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic history does not specify an age at which circumcision should to be performed (Josh 5), or associates it with a premarital rite for males (Gen 34; Exod 4: 'bridegroom of blood'), the Priestly material proposes that male infants born in Judean communities should be circumcised on the eighth day after birth (Gen 17:9–12). The practice is widely presupposed in subsequent Jewish literature (e. g., Jub 15:11–14; Phil 3:5). Gen 17 exerted a potent structuring influence in that respect. The eighth-day stipulation, however, could come into conflict with other biblical injunctions, such as the prohibition of performing work – surgical procedures included – on the Sabbath (e. g., Exod 20:10–11; 31:14–16). In that case, Mishnaic interpreters recognised the contradiction and resolved it in favour of circumcision: 'Rabbi Jose says: Great is circumcision, since it overrides the stringent Sabbath' (*m. Ned.* 3.11; see also *m. Shabb.* 18.3–19.2).[89] Maimonides concurs, but adds that all the necessary instruments had to be made ready in advance, presumably based on the view that although performing the circumcision itself was legally permissible, the work of assembling the necessary tools was not, since it could foreseeably be carried out prior to the Sabbath (*Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer Ahavah*, *Milah* 2.6).

Accommodations, moreover, were sometimes in order: if an infant was sick, he should not be circumcised until he had recovered, according to *m. Shabb.* 19.5. A child born at twilight, that is, when the new day is just beginning according to Jewish calendrical reckoning, was to be circumcised on the ninth day, unless the ninth happened to fall on a Sabbath, in which case the procedure was delayed until the tenth. If the tenth fell on a festival day, however, or on the two-day New Year festival, the circumcision was delayed until the eleventh or twelfth day (*m. Shab.* 19.5).

Lastly we note briefly that although Gen 17 specifies that infants ought to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth, the *time of day* at which the ritual was to take place was left unspecified. The Greek text of Gen 17:23 states that 'Abraham took Ishmael his son … and every male from the men who were in Abraham's household, and he circumcised their foreskins at the appropriate time of that day [ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τῆς ἡμέρας ἐκείνης], just as God had told him [to do]'. Just what constituted the 'appropriate time',

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89 Trans. of Blackman 2000.

however, is not stated. In *b. Shabb.* 132a (§ 15), Rabbi Yoḥanan infers from the wording of Gen 17:12 – an infant should be circumcised when he is 'eight *days* old' – that the ritual must take place during the daytime, and not at night. Maimonides again concurs, but offers the following specification: 'Circumcisions are only performed during the daytime after sunrise. … If the circumcision takes place after daybreak, it is correct. The whole of the day is proper for circumcision. Still it is a duty to perform it in the early part of the day, for the zealous fulfil their religious obligations at the earliest possible time' (*Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer Ahavah*, *Milah* 1.8; trans. Moses Hyamson).[90] Although the day on which the circumcision was to take place was relatively fixed – barring mitigating circumstances, as we have seen – a degree of latitude seems to have been involved in choosing, based on local or familial preferences, what constituted the 'appropriate time' to carry out the ritual.

   The tensions and contradictions that could arise when ritual injunctions – or their notable absence – collided with calendrical demands resulted in a process of halakhic elaboration that spanned millennia. In Hellemans's terms, selection in this case required that a decision be made as to the relative importance of the two structural elements: 'Great is circumcision, since it overrides the Sabbath.' The resultant ranking scheme entailed a modification of the biblical mandates, which are assembled unranked in the Pentateuch. (That the injunctions of the Pentateuch took the form of an *assemblage* rather than a planned and ordered unity itself speaks to the instability of both 'structure' and 'normative' tradition.) The utterances of Rabbi Jose and other interpreters constituted performances, which the tradents of the Mishnah subsequently integrated into a repertoire, indicating that resonance had already taken place. The process recapitulates one that had taken place centuries earlier, when the words of the Pentateuchal texts were written down as performances in their own right. Throughout this prolonged series of trans-actions, the double constitution of agency and structure is on display.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope that this brief study will contribute to ongoing discussions concerning structure and agency by bringing historical data from Mediterranean antiquity (and elsewhere) to bear on the question, shifting

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90 Maimonides 1937–1965; online at Sefaria, https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.17.12?lang=bi &aliyot=1&p2=Mishneh_Torah%2C_Circumcision.1.8&lang2=bi&w2=all&lang3=en, last accessed 31 August 2021.

the focus away from abstract theoretical discussion in favour of a relational approach that entails comparison of the performances of specific actors and objects; that is, an approach that cannot be carried out in the abstract, but must always be tethered to artefacts and the patterns discerned between and among them; texts, statuary, architecture, and so on providing the data. The processing approach has provided terms with which to operationalise Dépelteau's call for a transactional analysis, framing discrete and instantiated trans-actions in terms of selection, modification, assembly, performance, integration, and resonance.

    As the data assembled here indicate, selection is incumbent on agents, whose environments are characterised by multiple legal and institutional demands: we may think of Carvajal, caught between the threat of penalty by the Spanish Inquisition and the influence of the biblical text upon him; or Judeans in the second century BCE who were faced with the choice of whether to follow biblical injunctions or those of Antiochus IV. These extreme cases point to structural pluralities that are always and everywhere present, albeit not always in such dramatic forms. The process of modification is seen, for example, in Rabbi Jose's ranking of injunctions concerning circumcision and Sabbath that were assembled unranked in older, biblical texts; and in Maimonides's opinion that not only stone knives, but also iron or glass tools might be used to sever the foreskin from the penis. Assembly is, moreover, a ceaseless task of agents: in Montaigne's account, for example, the results of prior selections of godparents, a circumciser, the infant's name and the cloth with which he would be swaddled, ritual implements (knife, pillow, cup, wine, incense), and even guests had to be assembled for a particular performance of the rite. Performances, whether real or imagined, may be integrated into behavioural repertoires as they are emulated by other agents: Abraham's imagined self-circumcision was seconded in actual practice by Carvajal, whose own act, in turn, was seconded by his brother. Although self-circumcision was not frequently integrated into a stable repertoire of communal praxis, the timing of the ritual performance on the eighth day after birth was more reliably so integrated, a point reiterated in Jubilees, although other factors complicated the issue of temporality; for example, calendrical matters and the health or illness of the infant. Given the local character and situational contingency involved in selection, modification, assembly, performance, and integration, resonance necessarily entails the production and reproduction not of structure, conceptualised as singular or abstract, but of a plurality of localised and contingent structures: processing is thus open-ended and ongoing. These brief observations hardly begin to describe the rich complexity of the trans-actions involved in each of the epi-

sodes related; a monograph, not an article, would be required to delineate them in greater detail.

In parting, we note that while the present contribution suggests the directions a relational approach to lived religion might take, and indeed provides a brief case study pointing to the continuities and transformations of the circumcision rite in ancient Judaism, additional studies will be required to analyse the processing of structure by agents in other historical situations and sequences. And as Dépelteau himself noted, 'there is a lot of work to do'.

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

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