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Title: Roman prejudices against Jews

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Citation style: Sapota Tomasz. (2004). Roman prejudices against Jews.
"Scripta Classica" (Vol. 1 (2004), s. 43-51).



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Roman Prejudices against Jews

While reading the texts of Roman authors, one has a tendency to be struck by a relatively high number of instances of Roman arrogance. This is remarkably explicit when the subject of a narration centres on evaluating alien nations. The Roman opinions on the Easterners were almost always disdainful, although the Masters of the Ancient World appeared more lenient to the Greeks thought of as the pioneers of arts. The task of the present paper is to establish what the Latin conquerors' attitude was towards the Jews. Because the anti-Semitic sentiments are still being rekindled, it behooves one to examine what the ancient convictions on the matter were.

The Jews are not mentioned in the preserved texts of the archaic period. It was Cicero who made the first comment on the nation in question while he was a barrister for Lucius Valerius Flaccus. The defendant, a Cicero's ally during a battle against Catilina, a former governor of the province of Asia, after having returned to Rome, was accused of a serious fraud by the subject people (*de pecuniis repetundis*). A significant part of accusation regarded Jewish gold. Flaccus had prohibited the export of gold out of Asia, which had hit the Jewish population hard (there was a general outcry) and had left the governor open to charge. Cicero, advocating the Flaccus' cause, rejects the governor's responsibility for creating the export law in order to purloin the gold remaining in the province for his own use. The orator explains that the quantity of metal has not been diminished, but, since this argument does not seem sufficiently valid, he reaches out for the historic evidence of Jewish moral debasement. He depicts the nation as forsaken by gods and defeated in the war. Using the rhetorical apparatus, Cicero introduces a slander image of Jews as a political group, whose members are so tightly bound together that they exercise

an enormous power at the rallies (*contiones*), but they avail themselves of it only in order to inflict considerable damage on the state. In Rome, Jews are a mob of anarchists that should be restrained by the sensible politicians.

Ob hoc crimen hic locus abs te, Laeli, atque illa turba caesita est; scis, quanta sit manus, quanta concordia, quantum valeat in contionibus.¹

Cum aurum Iudaeorum nomine quotannis ex Italia et ex omnibus nostris provinciis Hierosolymam exportari soleret, Flaccus sanxit edicto, ne ex Asia exportari liceret.²

Since the Jewish religion, as the orator explains, is a barbarian superstition, the protest against its expansion should be valued as a proof of a resplendent severity in execution of a citizen's duties. Furthermore, remaining firmly opposed to opinions voiced by the Jewish minority (Cicero uses the word *multitudo* – a multitude) during political meetings is a mark of the mind concerned with state's welfare, a sign of moral authority's gravity:

Huic autem barbarae superstitioni resistere severitatis, multitudinem Iudaeorum flagrantem non numquam in contionibus prae re publica contemnere gravitatis summae fuit.³

Continuing the speech, the orator ascribes restraining the troupes from plundering the Jerusalem temple to the wisdom of Pompeius. The commander having acted in this way did not permit malicious libels to be produced, because Jews are naturally prone to spread rumours:

[...] in tam suspiciosa ac maledica civitate locum sermoni obtrectatorum non reliquit.⁴

Summing up this part of the defence speech Cicero tries once more to bring discredit upon his adversaries by using as arguments: 1) religious difference between Roman and Jews, 2) Jewish hostility towards a Roman state being the result of their religion, 3) Jewish defeat in the war caused by gods' hatred for this nation:

Stantibus Hierosolymis pacatisque Iudaeis tamen istorum religio sacrorum a splendore huius imperii, gravitatis nominis nostri, maiorum institutis abhorrebat; nunc vero hoc magis, quod illa gens, quid de nostro imperio sentiret, ostendit

¹M. Tullius Cicero: *Pro L. Flacco oratio*, 66, 8–10.

²Ibid., 67, 1–4.

³Ibid., 67, 6–9.

⁴Ibid., 68, 1–3.

armis; quam cara dis immortalibus esset, docuit, quod est victa, quod elocata, quod serva.⁵

As one can see, his entire argumentation is based on imperialistic convictions: the winner of the war has a moral right to rule, which is guaranteed by the divine protection (gods' will resulted in the war's outcome). Also, gaining new subject domains for the empire is exalted as the supreme law. The politics and the religion are inextricably entwined in this imperial attitude towards other nations. So, the conflict between Romans and Jews is fuelled by cultural distinctions, and these differences, especially religious ones, produce hostility: *istorum religio sacrorum a splendore huius imperii [...] abhorrebat*. The triumph of Pompeius has proved the Jews' religious opinions to be utterly erroneous: the gods are in favour of Romans: *quam cara dis immortalibus esset*.

Cicero employs religious arguments in his political attack on Jews in order to elevate the importance of his argumentation, which is a new factor in the history of Roman xenophobia. The Latin conquerors used to despise vanquished nations, regarding them as barbarians, a lower cast of human beings. They did not, however, disdain local cults and tried to secure for themselves the assistance of gods worshipped on the subdued territories. It was a typical Roman attitude to that matter, therefore a contempt for Jewish religion and transferring hatred into the sphere of Unnatural leaves a reader of Cicero's speech astonished.

The same tendency for describing the Jews only in terms of or in relation to their religion is apparent in the literature of the Augustan period. Horace's malicious remarks conjure up an image of Jewish community as a strict religious brotherhood aggressively capturing new adepts:

[...] ac veluti te
Iudei cogemus in hanc concedere turbam.⁶

Horace's detachment and reserve towards activities connected to any cult are typical for a dweller of the capital during the regime of August. The monarch's efforts to re-establish the authority of the traditional religion give ample evidence of a growing indifference towards these matters among the Roman elite. In the eyes of a splendid representative of this elite, zealotry indicates a limited mind prone to fall prey to superstitions.

dum flamma sine tura liquescere limine sacro
persuadere cupit. Credat Iudeus Apella,
non ego; namque deos didici securum agere aevom

⁵ Ibid., 69, 4–10.

⁶ Q. Horatius Flaccus: *Sermones*, l. 4, 142–143.

nec, siquid miri faciat natura, deos id
tristis ex alto caeli demittere tecto.⁷

Horace thoroughly despises this vice and, as an Epicurean, rejects every religious belief that brings fear of gods on the followers. The Jews in his writings have been chosen as an example of religious oppression, because of their social position of an ethnic and religious minority, poor yet industrious⁸ and competitive. The exclusiveness of the Jewish religion was one more reason for provoking the antipathy of Romans. It stood in stark contrast to Roman and Greek customs of recognizing the gods of other nations as their own and paying respects to foreign deities while staying abroad⁹. Nonetheless, despite the divergences, the Romans knew Jewish rituals quite well. The evidence to that effect can be found in this satire of Horace, where the excuse of keeping the rules of Sabbath gives the narrator the opportunity to wriggle out of listening to a boring friend:

“certe nescio quid secreto velle loqui te
aiebas mecum”. “memini bene, sed meliore
tempore dicam; hodie tricensima sabbata: vin tu
curtis Iudaeis opedere?” “nulla mihi” inquam
“religio est”. „at mi: sum paulo infirmior, unus
multorum. ignosces; alias loquar”. [...] ¹⁰

The Jewish minority should have been recognisable in the city, if the Poet did not have to explain to his public what the ritual exigencies of Sabbath were. Horace uses this knowledge to project an image of superstitious and grotesque worshippers of Jehova (*curtis, opedere*) standing opposed to the proud portrait of the Lucretian narrator (*nulla mihi [...] religio est*). The instances cited above allow one to state that the Venusian poet while referring to Jews employs the ethnic name as a figure of zealotry.

The attitude of Romans towards Jews does not change with the time passing: they are aliens cherishing the irritatingly outrageous traditions. The satires of Juvenal manifest growing anti-Semitic tensions among the born Romans. Jews are presented in his texts as an actual challenge to the traditional Latin values. Sketching pictures of dirty Jewish beggars profaning the most sacred places in Rome the Poet produces a new type of anti-Semitic metaphor, in which a Jew is a figure of an enemy of the national values:

⁷ Ibid., 1.5, 99–103.

⁸ Such conclusions seem to be appropriate upon reading J.H. Leon's *The Jews of Ancient Rome*. Philadelphia 1960, p. 235.

⁹ Cf. A.D. Nock: *Conversion*. Oxford 1965, pp. 1–16.

¹⁰ Q. Horatius Flaccus: *Sermones*, 1.9, 67–72.

Hic, ubi nocturnae Numa constituebat amicae,
 Nunc sacri fontis nemus et delubra locantur
 Iudaeis, quorum cophinus foenumque supellex;
 (Omnis enim populo mercedem pendere iussa est
 Arbor, et eiectis mendicat silva Camenis;)¹¹

Juvenal in his writing conjures up an image of the fall of the Rome of his times, and he blames Eastern and Greek influences for the decline of what he strongly affirms to be once a social reality and not only a propaganda fairy tales of a society formed of Cincinati, Curatii and Corvini. Jewish beggars' camp in a sacred forest of Egeria is a sign of a blasphemy committed by foreigners and sanctioned by indifferent majority. It is even a more blatant sign of contempt for the old Roman religion since the myths claimed Egeria to be the source of inspiration for Numa while he was organising Roman cults.

In the 6th *Satire* the Poet sheds a new light on Jewish community: not all of them are mendicants, some are dedicated to astrology. But the mind of the Author is not clear of venom, so he depicts this activity as kind of beggary:

[...] cophino foenoque relicto,
 Arcanam Iudaea tremens mendicat in aurem¹²

The inflated allusions to the Jewish religion are only made to strengthen the ironic tone of the whole passage that ends in revealing the very small price for the charlatan services of “the priests of the Tree”:

Interpres legum Solymarum et magna sacerdos
 Arboris ac summi fida internuntia coeli.
 Implet et illa manum, sed parcius; aere minuto
 Quali acumque voles Iudaei somnia vendunt¹³

In the 14th *Satire* Juvenal derides the Egyptian customs, yet he finds it amusing to attack the Alexandrian Jewish community. Once again the religion is used as a vehicle of expressing xenophobic hatred. Moreover, Juvenal, while writing the libel, does not trouble himself to gain the actual information on the matter. He entertains the opinion that Jews worship clouds and the divine power of the sky, and they do not discern the difference between human flesh and pork¹⁴. He accentuates the role of the tradition in a life of a Jew: the life of a son should be an exact copy of his

¹¹ D. Iunius Iuvenalis: *Satirae*, 3. 12–16.

¹² *Ibid.*, 6. 542–543.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6. 544–547.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14. 96–97.

father's life¹⁵. The Poet notices the evident disregard of the Roman law on the part of Jews (it is substituted with the Moses rules), and he delineates the typical feature in a literary portrait of a Jew, i.e. superstitious fear:

Iudaicum ediscunt et servant ac metuunt ius¹⁶

Furthermore, their tendency for isolationism is stressed: their like to confine their life to the society and services of the co-believers, which can produce acts of disrespect for the uncircumcised:

Non monstrare vias eadem nisi sacra colenti,
Quaesitum ad fontem solos deducere verpos,
Sed pater in causa, cui septima quaeque fuit lux
Ignava et partem vitae non attigit ullam.¹⁷

Some of these objections, regardless of the hate speech ardour they exude, could have been considered justified, e.g. the laws of the exclusive Jewish religion barred presence of Jehova worshippers at the public feasts that were deemed idolatrous. Moreover, the synagogues, where not only the religious, but also the intellectual activities concentrated, differed from other temples, especially because of their national character. The sense of alienation on one hand, and of self-importance on the other, fomented continuous emerging of prophets and acts of bigotry unknown to other ethnic groups¹⁸.

The rest of Juvenal's criticism is based entirely on racial prejudices caused probably by the economic situation of the Poet. In his view, the Jews are a nation of indescribably greedy usurers, of abject outward appearance and sloppy attire, emulating their fathers in their quest for opulence¹⁹. The anger expressed in the *Satires* may invite suspicion that Juvenal did not take into consideration why the Jews should be recipients of his satiric blows. It is not the actual "guilt" of Jewish minority that provokes the onslaught, but their scapegoat qualities (ostensibly different customs and religion) giving rise to preconceived notions. The effects of such an attitude of the writer are paradoxical, since Jews are detested for their wealth as well as for their poverty. Considering the longevity of Cicero's accusations, to appoint Jewish communities of the Roman Empire as an official scapegoat of a troubled society is not a misrepresentation.

The Jews living in hellenised territories were aliens, despite their fluency in Greek (some did not know Hebrew or Arameic at all), they bore Greek names, fre-

¹⁵ Ibid., 14. 96, 99.

¹⁶ Ibid., 14. 101.

¹⁷ Ibid., 14. 103–106.

¹⁸ Cf. A. D. Nock: *Conversion...*, pp. 61–62.

¹⁹ D. Iunius Iuvenalis: *Satirae*, 14. 107–121.

quented therms and gymnasiums and were part of guilds formed by non-Jews as well²⁰. The Jewish religion attracted converts willing to regard Jehova as a god of force (the name of the god can be found in some of the magical papyri), and even to keep the Jewish tradition (Sabbath, fastening, candle burning). There were a considerable number of “God-fearers”, i.e. followers of the cult who abstained, however, from being circumcised and refrained from engaging in all activities of a religious community. Despite these tendencies, there was a widespread ignorance about Mosaic religion, sometimes creating such abhorrent notions as the one about children being sacrificially slain. The historian Tacitus can be regarded as a source of information on the general perception of the Jews in the 1st and the 2nd century A.D.

In the 5th book of *Historiae* the writer, presenting the Jewish war waged by Titus, makes an excursion into the history of Judea²¹, during which he holds a strong opinion that Jews were expatriated from Crete and they inhibited the extremes of Lybia (i.e. Africa) at the time when Jove seized the power from Saturnus. Tacitus backs this concept with a linguistic argument: *Inclutus in Creta Idam montem, accolas Idaeos aucto in barbarum cognomento Iudaeos vocitari*²². Furthermore, he cites other opinions that are not plausible according to his judgement: about the Egyptian, Aethiopic, Assyrian and Solymian – known from Homerus – origin of the Jews. After that, the historian tells the story about the eviction of Jews from Egypt, where they were incriminated of causing the gods’ wrath ending in a plague:

[...] orta per Aegyptum tabe, quae corpora foedaret, regem Bocchorim adito Hammonis oraculo remedium petentem purgare regnum et id genus hominum ut invisum deis alias in terras avehere iussum.²³

The Roman historian cites an oracle, but he does not explain why Jews should have been presumed hated by gods. It seems apparent to him and to his public, although it is worth noticing that it could not have been a religious difference, because, according to the author, it did not exist at that particular time.

The text proves the suspicion that prejudices and hostility against Jews formed a part of the Roman convictions in the 2nd century A.D. Tacitus’ silence on the reasons of the persecutions of the Jews in Egypt is a kind of *vaticinium ex eventu*: the Jews were detested in his times, so he estimates it is only natural that this attitude has existed elsewhere at any time. Nor he explains the cause of the Jewish immigration to Egypt. He considers it valuable, however, to remind that Moses has guided the marching through the desert, and that he was the one to introduce a new cult:

²⁰ Cf. M. Sartre: *Wschód rzymski*. Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków 1997, pp. 437–438.

²¹ Cf. P. Cornelius Tacitus: *Historiae*, 5. 2.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 5. 3.

Moyses, quo sibi in posterum gentem firmaret, novos ritus contrariosque ceteris mortalibus indidit. Profana illic omnia quae apud nos sacra, rursum concessa apud illos quae nobis incesta. Effigiem animalis, quo monstrante errorem sitimque depulerant, penetrali sacravere, caeso ariete velut in contumeliam Hammonis; bos quoque immolatur, quoniam Aegyptii Apin colunt.²⁴

This passage gives other evidence of the absurd reasons of anti-Semitism: the Jewish religion challenges all the rules known to the human race. Animal sacrifices should be considered offensive to the worshippers of Apis and Hammon. The animal celebrated by the Jews is, in the historian's relation, an ass. The description of the Jewish customs is tinted with the same ignorance and hatred: *cetera instituta, sinistra foeda, pravitate valere*²⁵. The Jews reject the option of being a part of a society they live in. It is proved by the fact that they finance the country of their ancestors (it was mentioned above in the passage of the Cicero's oration). They despise non-Jews, they offer help only to the compatriots, and, although they are extremely prurient, they do not indulge in having sex with the representatives of other nations. They are rewarded for that by not having any limitations in their own circle. The converts to their faith scorn their own gods, their fatherland and their families²⁶. Furthermore, Tacitus describes the Jewish cult, but he does not seem to be bothered about the incoherence of his information. It can be easily noticed that the concept of one deity does not agree with the former mentions of ass worshipping. Adding to the incongruity of the text, the author accentuates the law forbidding creating images of the God, and reminds the differences between the Egyptian and Jewish cult. He also stresses the fact that the Jews are unwilling to worship caesars, but they venerate Liber – the divine conqueror of the East²⁷.

The subsequent image of Israel is similar to the horrifying pictures of the barbarian countries projected by the Roman writers of the former times. The River Jordan's estuary, as pictured by Tacitus, is an enormous lake that exudes a terrible stench and presents a threat to health of the inhabitants of the area. The lake is bare of fish and birds. The resources of asphalt are the only advantage of the place, but, while giving the information on the subject, Tacitus cannot help but spreads sensational stories replete with ideological detestation. He affirms that solid asphalt is too hard to be cut with brass or iron tools, but it gives in when in contact with menstrual blood²⁸. The territories surrounding the Jordan consist entirely of poisoned deserts²⁹. In writing these passages Tacitus aims to present an image of a barbarian country, typical of the Roman literature. To achieve the goal, he did not even have to com-

²⁴ Ibid., 5. 4.

²⁵ Ibid., 5. 5.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 5. 6.

²⁹ Ibid., 5. 7.

plete a journey to the valley of the Jordan. General erudition in Roman authors and a mixture of preconceived notions summed up to an illuminating literary work.

Recapitulating, it should be said that the Roman hostility towards the Jews started when the representatives of the two races met for the first time. The main reason of detestation was the religious differences, and, on Jewish part, the refraining from a full assimilation³⁰. The Jewish isolationism gave rise to suspicions and hostile stereotypes spread by the Roman writers among the reading elite. The tensions resulted in violence: there were noted savage attacks on Jews in Alexandria (37 A.D., 41 A.D., 66 A.D.) and pogroms in many other cities in Syria, Asia Minor and Greece³¹.

³⁰ Cf. M. Sartre: *Wschód rzymski...*, pp. 440–441.

³¹ Cf. J.P. Balsdon: *Romans and Aliens*. London 1979, p. 67.

Tomasz Sapota

Rzymskie uprzedzenia wobec Żydów

Streszczenie

Autor zajmuje się badaniem przejawów rzymskiego antysemityzmu. Śledzi uprzedzenia wobec ludności żydowskiej w dziełach literackich od okresu republiki (Cyceron) przez epokę augustowską (Horacy), aż po dojrzałe cesarstwo (Juwenalis, Tacyt). Analiza tekstów dowodzi, że niechęć do Żydów w różnych epokach historii Rzymu miała cechy wspólne i różniła się od innych przejawów rzymskiej ksenofobii użyciem argumentacji religijnej. Skutkami uprzedzeń były pogromy Żydów, zwłaszcza we wschodniej części imperium.

Tomasz Sapota

Römische Vorurteile gegen die Juden

Zusammenfassung

Der Verfasser befasst sich mit Forschungen über Anzeichen der römischen Antisemitismus. Diese Anzeichen untersucht er anhand der literarischen Werke von der Zeit der Republik (Cicero), über die Augustiner Epoche (Horatio) bis zum reifen Kaiserreich (Juvenal, Tacit). Die Analyse der Texte beweist, dass die Abneigung gegen Juden in verschiedenen Epochen der römischen Geschichte viele gemeinsame Eigenschaften aufweist und sie unterscheidet sich von anderen Anzeichen der römischen Fremdenfeindlichkeit durch angewandte religiöse Argumentation. Diese Vorurteile hatten Pogrome gegen die Juden zur Folge, besonders im östlichen Teil des Römischen Imperiums.