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## **Ancient Antisemitism Reconsidered**

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My charge today is to discuss Antisemitism in both its ancient and modern settings, but being an ancient historian myself, my chief concern will primarily be to consider whether an enquiry into the Jewish predicament in Classical Antiquity may have any significant contribution to make to our current understanding of Antisemitism more generally. Assuming, tentatively, that Antisemitism is a term applicable at all to pre-modern times, I believe the question may indeed be worth raising because two major factors central to any theory of Antisemitism in more recent times were patently absent in Greco-Roman antiquity, namely, the imputed collective guilt of the Jews for deicide, the crucifixion of Christ, that is, and the pseudo-scientific racism associated with Nazism, to which may now be added the more recent Antisemitic stance of radical Islam. If, as I shall be arguing, Antisemitism may indeed be shown to have existed in some form or another in the period I'm concerned with, then the factors just mentioned, need perhaps be reevaluated, and some other, conceivably deeper lying factors need be sought out.

Before anything else, however – a disclosure: In 2009, in my book *Not Reckoned Among Nations: the Origins of the So-Called Jewish Question in Roman Antiquity*, I wrote, somewhat dismissively, of Antisemitism as an object of research, as follows:

I do not wish to overrate the significance of hostile statements of this kind to the subject under consideration. Quite the contrary. "Hatred," as noted by Funkenstein, "has no history: hatred of individuals and of groups is part of man's most basic emotional endowment," and, in itself, makes a somewhat tedious subject of historical enquiry.

Obviously, I now feel this statement stands in need of some qualification, or I wouldn't be giving this talk today on this particular topic; so, by way of introduction, let me explain why I now feel that there is a sense in which Antisemitism may indeed be a fascinating topic for enquiry after all.

Antisemitism has been around for so long, and has assumed so many different aspects throughout its long history, small wonder some of the greatest minds have expended their utmost talents to recover its causes. Its essential nature, on the other hand, as distinct from its multifarious manifestations, has attracted somewhat less scholarly attention, presumably because of its most obvious

realization in plain hatred of Jews – in a sentiment, that is. But Antisemitism, I should argue, is better construed not as that sentiment itself but as the account given it, for the purpose of its rationalization and legitimization; and more often than not this account has presented itself to its intended audiences in narrative form, as a story if you like, or as libellous propaganda. As such it may well be world's oldest urban legend on record.

The sentiment, needless to say, is real enough, as are its consequences in the real world, but as such it is not unique to the Jewish predicament. Hatred, indeed, has no history but the evolution of Antisemitism as narrative makes for a most clearly delineated subject of historical enquiry.

This shift of focus that I'm proposing, I should further argue, from the sentiment to the account given it in form of narrative, is an essential step for a better understanding of Antisemitism, for it may serve to account for some of its more enigmatic aspects, such as its tenacity in radically changed circumstances, as when Jews are no longer there so as to elicit an unmediated emotional response of any kind, or where it shows up in places where there has never been any substantial presence of Jews, such as current day Japan, China or the Indian subcontinent. As a story, Antisemitism can travel. It may be perpetuated by so many links in the transmission chain who have never themselves encountered a Jew. Why, I may be perpetuating it as I speak...! As narrative, in other words, Antisemitism may take on a life of its own quite disjunct from whatever adverse societal interaction may have led to its first appearance.

The idea is neither entirely new or original. It forms one strand in David Nirenberg's recent *Anti-Judaism: the Western Tradition* (2013). I think there is a downside, however, to imposing too neat an order on the sprawling diversity of the Antisemitic narrative, as he attempts to do, because this diversity is of its very nature. Countless tributaries feed the vast stream of the main narrative, which in turn branches off in a myriad of distributaries. What does the main story consist of? To begin with, there is the notion of the Jew as the ultimate, and perpetual, outsider. They are not from here; they have no business being here. Then there is their difference in every imaginable respect, or, as an interesting variation on the same theme, their deceptive superficial resemblance to us. They keep themselves to themselves out of inborn unsociability. They threaten the moral fibre of their host society, that is, of us, but not just us since their innate hostility to all other than their own kind makes them the sworn enemies of all alike.

Now, I'm just back from a conference in Wroclaw, Poland, in which a wide range of topics related to the ancient world were discussed through the theoretical prism of the concept of popular culture, from barber-shop-talk to nicknames, through jokes, parables, material culture, popular morality, eating habits and what not. Much of the debate both during and in between sessions

centred on the theoretical grounding of the papers presented, and I found my conception of my own subject, which happened to be Roman comedy, profoundly impacted, challenged, and, I should hope, enhanced in complexity. As a consequence, what I would like to present to you today – more as a working hypothesis than as my own finalized thoughts on the matter – is the notion of Antisemitism, or rather of this ever ramifying Antisemitic narrative, as an item of popular culture.

popular culture is a very difficult concept to pin down, as is culture itself. Perhaps we don't need a precise definition for our present purposes and may content ourselves with noting that its study involves delving into the messier side of society's expressive forms, into the beliefs, habits of thought, collective notions of the shared past as embedded in folk tales, in short, the mental universe of ordinary men and women. Time will not allow me to explore here the many contesting theoretical approaches to popular culture currently debated by historians and theoreticians of culture. Instead here is my own understanding of one of its features most relevant to our theme: the qualifying attribute 'popular' points to its single most pertinent aspect, its relation to the non-popular, that is, the elite, or hegemonic culture with which it is associated. This relationship need not be confrontational, hierarchical or otherwise oppositional, but for popular culture to be discernible at all from mass culture or folk culture or, by the same token, from the hegemonic culture itself, it must be distinguishable from it as a party to a two-way exchange, a dialogue, in which it does not shy away from talking back, from asserting itself by means of a voice of its own.

Now, theorists of popular culture rightly emphasize the polyphonic nature of this *vox populi*, due to the diffuse constituency of its producers, which greatly complicates the task of locating it within any given society. Its engagement with the hegemonic culture is, moreover, no less polyphonic, with items of both subsets appropriated from one another while being transmogrified in the process by the respective parties to the ongoing process of cultural usage and exchange.

This precisely is where the perspective of popular culture may hold its greatest promise to our task of understanding Antisemitism. More specifically, it is the theory of political anthropologist James Scott, of Public vs. Hidden Transcripts, which I found most helpful in reducing the bewildering polyphony of multiple cultural exchanges to a manageable object of observation. As a reasonable price to be paid for this advantage, this, for one, is a theory that **does** postulate an oppositional relationship between groupings within society, namely, the dominant and the subordinate classes. Public Transcript, then, is a concept which denotes a view of society synthesized from the voices of both the dominant and the subordinate, **and, most importantly, underwritten by both**, but which by definition communicates the dominants' view of the system of which they are the main beneficiaries.

Few if any members of society wholly identify with the contents of the Public transcript, which is a compromise of sorts. Hence, the theory postulates 'Hidden Transcripts' as well – both dominant and subordinate have their own views of the social order, and of their respective places within it, views which they'd rather keep to themselves. Now, these hidden transcripts may occasionally interleave themselves into public forms of communication and find their way into the public sphere otherwise dominated by the public transcript; but this will always be in a subdued, concealed way which will allow disavowal by the speaker and retreat to safety; for challenging the Public Transcript is dangerously politically incorrect.

It is crucially important to avoid mistaking articles of public performance, communication, art or entertainment with the Public transcript. While the Public Transcript will, as a rule, dominate the public sphere, it will always be affected, to a greater or lesser degree, by one or more of the hidden transcripts circulating within society. There is, largely speaking, but one public transcript to any given society, but as many hidden ones as there are durable societal relationships within both the dominant and the subordinate classes. Somewhat ironically, the Public Transcript, which looms so large in the public sphere, is but a generalized construct with no corresponding social agent in the real world wholly actualizing it, somewhat like the concept of the average man; whereas the Hidden Transcript, once securely identified, may give us the voices of real, flesh and blood, historical men and women.

Impressing one's vision of society on the Public Transcript is the unattainable goal of all Hidden Transcripts engaged in the ceaseless effusion of expressive forms which is culture. It is easy to see how this ongoing exchange, suffused as it is with inter-subjective beliefs, anxieties, aspirations and interests, between the one Public- and the many Hidden Transcripts forms the seedbed of folk myths, urban legends, aetiological stories, popular historiography, conspiracy theories, and all manner of disjointed, largely orally transmitted products of the unceasing efforts of generations of men and women to make sense of their social universe, transmuted, moreover, along the intricate, convoluted, process of the hammering out of a Public Transcript. Antisemitism, I submit, is just one such, albeit exceptionally resilient and virulent item of one Hidden Transcript, and as such I shall be seeking to identify it in the following samples from the extant sources bearing on the relations between Jews and gentiles in the Roman Empire. I shall be focusing on Ptolemaic and Roman Alexandria, but only because it offers some of the finest pieces of evidence available. Much of what I hope to extract from these samples will be applicable to the conditions of Diaspora communities elsewhere in the Empire as well as to later periods.

Let me begin, then, with an excerpt from a particularly informative source which provides us at once with both the Public transcript, from no less authoritative a spokesman than the emperor himself, and traces of a Hidden Transcript

interspersing his discourse almost imperceptibly. This is a letter, sent by Claudius to the city of Alexandria following serious inter-ethnic riots which occurred during the reign of his predecessor Gaius Caligula and spilled over to his own. In the first round, in 38 CE, the Jews were the victims of the aggression instigated by a group of hostile Hellenized Egyptians. This was in fact the first pogrom in recorded history and it resulted in the confinement of the Jews to a Ghetto; in the second round, following the assassination of Caligula and Claudius' accession to the throne in January 41, the Jews were the aggressors. (item no. 1)

**With regard to the responsibility for the disturbances and rioting, or rather, to speak the truth, the war, against the Jews,** although your ambassadors, particularly Dionysios the son of Theon, argued vigorously and at length in the disputation, **I have not wished to make an exact inquiry, but I harbour within me a store of immutable indignation against those who renewed the conflict.** I merely say that unless you stop this destructive and obstinate mutual enmity, I shall be forced to show what a benevolent ruler can be when he is turned to righteous indignation. Even now, therefore, **I conjure the Alexandrians to behave gently and kindly towards the Jews who have inhabited the same city for many years, and not to dishonour any of their customs in their worship of their god,** but to allow them to keep their own ways, as they did in the time of the god Augustus and as I too, having heard both sides, have confirmed. **The Jews, on the other hand, I order not to aim at more than they have previously had** and not in future to send two embassies as if they lived in two cities, a thing which has never been done before, **and not to intrude themselves into the games presided over by the *gymnasiarchoi* and the *kosmetai*, since they enjoy what is their own, and in a city which is not their own they possess an abundance of all good things. Nor are they to bring in or invite Jews coming from Syria or Egypt, or I shall be forced to conceive graver suspicions. If they disobey, I shall proceed against them in every way as fomenting a common plague for the whole world.** If you both give up your present ways and are willing to live in gentleness and kindness with one another, I for my part will care for the city as much as I can, as one which has long been closely connected with us.

Time compels me to pass without comment over quite a few pertinent issues addressed by Claudius in this highly condensed and fundamentally important text, which fixed the civic status of the Jews of Alexandria, and by extension of those of the rest of the Diaspora, for as long as they were to live under Roman rule. In passing, let me just draw your attention to the fact that both the civic status and the religious freedoms of the Jews, as well as the issue of their

suspected double loyalty, are all alluded to here. What I wish to focus on instead is one highly evocative phrase contained within it: "a common plague for the whole world (*koine nosos* in the Greek of the document, or *communis pestis* in Claudius' original Latin)." Whence this peculiar notion? Grave as the threat to the peace their recent actions may have posed, it is not at all clear why this was to be generalized by the emperor as to potentially affect the whole *oikoumene*, or civilized world. By *pestis*, plague, he is obviously appealing here to some common imagery which he fears might be vindicated by their future actions. Let me further venture into his mind and suggest that he is reluctant to act upon notions common with the *vulgus*, the common mob, notions he would be inclined to dissociate himself from as the groundless fantasies of the uncouth, credulous, volatile rabble. Almost patronizingly he seems to be holding the Jews to account for playing into the hands of their enemies by confirming with their actions the very libellous stories being spread about them by their detractors. Where could he have come across these stories? Where do they stem from? Well, all points to Alexandria, but not of the age of Claudius, but to that of the three previous centuries, if not further back to Persian times and deeper into the Egyptian countryside.

The closest we may reasonably hope to obtain of the actual voices of these ancient precursors of modern-day Antisemites, going back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and beyond, is contained in a Jewish apologetic tract from the pen of the renowned author of *The Jewish War* and *Jewish Antiquities*, the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE high priest, sometime rebel commander and historian Flavius Josephus. Known by later generations of readers as his *Contra Apionem*, it addresses the calumnies of a host of Greek writers, from Manetho, a Hellenized native-Egyptian priest of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE, to Apion, likewise a Hellenized Egyptian, head of the library of Alexandria, who arrived in Rome at the head of an Alexandrian deputation to argue the anti-Jewish cause before the emperor Gaius Caligula in 40 CE, following the assault just mentioned on the Jewish community two years previously. Here, then, is Josephus' testimony of one such account, that of Lysimachus a Hellenized Egyptian writer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, concerning the Jews' provenance, chosen by me for being a condensed collation of most of the views shared by him with the other authors cited by Josephus elsewhere in his treatise: **(item no. 2)**

**In the reign of Bocchoris, king of Egypt, the Jewish people, who were afflicted with leprosy, scurvy, and other maladies, took refuge in the temples and lived a mendicant existence. The victims of disease being very numerous, a dearth ensued throughout Egypt. King Bocchoris thereupon sent to consult the oracle of Ammon about the failure of the crops. The god told him to purge the temples of impure and impious persons, to drive them out of these sanctuaries into the wilderness, to drown those afflicted with**

**leprosy and scurvy, as the sun was indignant that such persons should live, and to purify the temples; then the land would yield her increase.** [There follow some details which need not detain us on how those unclean persons were collected and selected, some for immediate extermination, others for exposure in the desert..., and then] **a certain Moses advised them to take their courage in their hands and make a straight track until they reached inhabited country, instructing them to show goodwill to no man, to offer not the best but the worst advice, and to overthrow any temples and altars of the gods which they found. The rest assenting, they proceeded to put these decisions into practice. They traversed the desert, and after great hardships reached inhabited country: there they maltreated the population, and plundered and set fire to the temples, until they came to the country now called Judaea, where they built a city in which they settled. This town was called Hierosyla (that is the town of temple robbers) because of their sacrilegious propensities.** At a later date when they had risen to power, they altered the name, to avoid the disgraceful imputation, and called the city Hierosolyma and themselves Hierosolymites.

What is of interest to us in all this is, of course, the all too familiar motifs so readily translatable into the language of more recent Antisemitic narratives: The Jews afflicted with contagious diseases, parasitical on their host society and thus responsible for its impoverishment, their scorn for all commonly cherished values, their deceitful un-sociability, inborn hatred and ineradicable enmity towards the rest of humanity, all leading to the inevitable genocidal conclusion, which, however, is easier stated than put into effect because of the Jews' pest-like resilience to extermination.

Blood libel too, interestingly enough, is apparently no invention of the Christian Middle-Ages, and in the *Contra Apionem* it is associated with no less an intellectual authority than Apion himself. It relates to the looting of the Jerusalem temple by Antiochus Epiphanes in 169 BCE, two years before, that is, his second assault on Jerusalem in 167 at the height of his well-known program of religious persecution; I shall cite from it more selectively since you've already had the opportunity to take in some of the flavour of this discourse: **(item no. 3)**

**Antiochus found in the temple a couch, on which a man was reclining, [... ...] with sighs and tears, the man, in a pitiful tone, told the tale of his distress. He said that he was a Greek and that, while travelling about the province for his livelihood, he was suddenly kidnapped by men of a foreign race and conveyed to the temple; there he was shut up and seen by nobody, but was fattened on feasts of the most lavish description.** [What could the meaning of this be, we'd like to know...] **he heard of the unutterable law of the Jews, for**

**the sake of which he was being fed. The practice was repeated annually at a fixed season. They would kidnap a Greek foreigner, fatten him up for a year, and then convey him to a wood, where they slew him, sacrificed his body with their customary ritual, partook of his flesh, and while immolating the Greek, swore an oath of hostility to the Greeks. The remains of their victim were then thrown into a pit. The man, Apion continues, stated that he had now but a few days left to live, and implored the king, out of respect for the gods of Greece, to defeat this Jewish plot upon his life-blood and to deliver him from his miserable predicament.**

That such popular canards should be picked up by Hellenized Egyptian scholars need cause us no surprise. They were of use to them for the same purpose as that of Josephus in refuting them, that is, in ethnic polemic. Of more interest to us is their afterlife in Roman historiography, for which we need now turn to Tacitus. His is a particularly illuminating case, because it exhibits, within the writings of one and the same author, the easy cohabitation of the great and the little traditions, the public and the hidden transcripts, critical historiography and the recycling of folk tales. Note first, that writing in the first decade of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, he gets the facts of the first arrival of Roman arms to Judaea in 63 BCE largely right. **(item no. 4)**

**The first Roman to subdue the Jews and set foot in their temple by right of conquest was Gnaeus Pompey: thereafter it was a matter of common knowledge that there were no representations of the gods within, but that the place was empty and the secret shrine contained nothing.** (Tacitus, *Hist.* V.9.1)

This does not stop him, however, from preceding this lucid statement with a long introduction in the best ethnographic tradition, which contains no less than six differing accounts, one more fantastic than the other, of the Jews' origins and customs, the last, longest and most embellished of which stands in stark contradiction to this, his own later statement we've just read. **(item no. 5)**

**However, as I am about to describe the last days of a famous city, it seems proper for me to give some account of its origin. It is said that the Jews were originally exiles from the island of Crete... Some hold that in the reign of Isis the superfluous population of Egypt, under the leadership of Hierosolymus and Iuda, discharged itself on the neighbouring lands... [And so it goes on..., until we reach the last version:] Most authors agree that once during a plague in Egypt, which caused bodily disfigurement, King Bocchoris... [Now, we're already familiar with this one from Lysimachos' account preserved in Josephus' *Contra Apionem*, but here comes a new element, which goes a long way to explain some of the Jews' more singular features:] **one only****

**of the exiles, Moses by name, warned them not to hope for help from gods or men; for they were deserted by both; but to trust to themselves, regarding as a guide sent from heaven the one whose assistance should first give them escape from their present distress... Nothing caused them so much distress as scarcity of water, and in fact they had already fallen exhausted over the plain nigh unto death, when a herd of wild asses moved from their pasturage to a rock that was shaded by a grove of trees... [That's, of course, how that Moses of theirs was able to pull his water-spouting-rock trick... So, once safely arrived at that country whose population they maltreated, in which they built their city of temple-robbers, etc., ] They dedicated, in a shrine, a statue of that creature whose guidance enabled them to put an end to their wandering and thirst... (Tacitus, *Hist.* V.2.1-5.1)**

Plainly enough, Tacitus was well aware that the story of ass-worship at the Temple was an old maids tale. Why does he repeat it? Quite simply, because the long-standing practice of appending ethnographic material of this sort to one's historiographical writing has by his time hardened into a convention of the genre. Note that he cites six different versions, not all of which are damaging to the Jews' image. One is even quite flattering, tracing their origin to the fabled Solymi of the Homeric epic, and so must derive from a different hidden transcript within the same hodgepodge of ideas and stories which makes up popular culture. And immediately following the ethnographic excursus, when he resumes his historical narrative, he does indeed aim at factual accuracy, even if not always entirely *sine ira et studio*, without partisanship of whatever tinge, that is. Thus, for example, besides the aniconic nature of the Temple ritual just mentioned, it is corruption on the part of Roman governors that is suggested by him as the cause for the outbreak of revolt in Judaea, rather than any inborn depravity of the Jews, and their fighting is depicted as outstandingly courageous... Still, the important thing to note is that these tales are there at all, that they have completed the long journey of transmission from the Egyptian hinterland, in the course of over four centuries of Jewish-Gentile interaction, by no means all of which was turbulent or marked by mutual enmity, retaining throughout, clearly recognizable, their basic storylines and thematic thrust, traversing several different cultural zones, crossing language and genre barriers, only to resurface in the works of the literati of the imperial centre as the stuff of respectable historiographical writing. The story has indeed assumed a life of its own.

Jews, of course were alive to the dangers inherent in the story, and they countered with stories of their own. Here too we meet with a rich popular tradition, glimpses of which we may catch only when it impinges on the hegemonic discourse. Tales of past glory, of miracles, martyrdoms, vindictive fantasies, messianic hopes... we even have fragments of a Greek tragedy in the

best Euripidean style featuring Moses as the protagonist... By comparing the hidden transcript of Diaspora Judaism revealed by these literary products with the public one of Roman Imperial society much can be gleaned of common Jews' differing attitudes and strategies in accommodating themselves to life in the multi-ethnic society of Roman-ruled Egypt, and elsewhere throughout the Diaspora. Of more immediate interest to us, however, is their constant engagement with the Antisemitic strands of the hidden transcript of their enemies. For centuries the struggle between these two contending discourses was kept alive by the fact that neither one could completely silence out the other or impress itself durably on the public transcript. It is only in the long run that we can conclude with hindsight that the Antisemitic discourse had far outstripped that of the Jewish side in reaching out to ever widening audiences. Over two millennia after being first launched in the backwaters of the Egyptian countryside the same old story is nowadays circulated by jewwatch.com and its likes on the World-Wide-Net to an ever increasing interested public around the globe, with no signs of the tide abating.

Now, this foray into the field of popular culture, and stressing the narrative aspect of Antisemitism was by no means meant to minimize the significance of other factors related to the recurrent eruptions of hostility aimed at Jews throughout history. The hidden transcript, while providing us with an entry point into the mental universe of provincial men and women in the midst of whom Jews conducted their daily lives for centuries, does not, in itself explain why these same neighbours, business associates, customers, should occasionally turn at them in a murderous frenzy. We still need to seek out the reasons for the particular manifestations in action of such feelings as revealed by the Hidden Transcript, the concrete forms they assumed, their timing and their specific localities. Above all we should like to know why the Jews of all people are to be found at their receiving end, repeatedly and persistently. Isolating the narrative component from the composite whole is but a necessary preliminary. Necessary because, clearly, it is but a necessary condition for the periodic assaults on Jews to take on their particular characteristics; by no means a sufficient one! And in seeking the complementary conditions conducive to the outbreaks of hostility we likewise need to recover the **generic** causes rather than the ones specific to any particular incident, preferably the **structural** ones rather than the incidental. This is called for by the very universality of the phenomenon, for clearly, Antisemitic persecution belongs, unfortunately, to the realm the *longue durée*.

The single most significant factor, I submit, is Jewish social marginality, but not, I should hasten to emphasize, as an inherently Jewish trait, whether culturally acquired or genetically – this would be falling into the essentialist-fallacy trap – but as a structural property of their social location. Marginality is the condition of those social actors, whether individuals or groups, who are both part of society and yet not fully integrated into it. It is, in other words, the lack of

participation of individuals and groups in those spheres of communal life in which, according to socially determined criteria, they might be expected to participate. It is essentially social integration gone amiss, and the causes of Jewish marginality would accordingly be best understood when set against a model of social integration. Let me conclude, then, by presenting a brief summary of the results of my own research on the marginalization of the Jews set against just such a model of social integration, in this case of Roman imperial society, as a test case whose conclusions may hopefully assist students of the more recent phases of the evolution of Antisemitism over time.

Integration is the condition of a society whose parts – notably its centre and periphery – are linked to each other in a complementary, mutually satisfying, relationship. There is, however, no uniform pattern across historically known societies. The currently predominant explanatory model of social integration, inspired by the paradigm of the modern nation-state, attaches great weight to factors conducive to cultural cohesion: acquisition of the national language, familiarity with the national history, etc. Applied to the Roman Empire this approach privileges Romanization (or Hellenization in the East), but it is, in fact, of dubious validity to most of antiquity. The multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society of the Empire was characterized, by definition, by a low degree of cultural cohesion, as well as great distance between centre and periphery. It was nevertheless integrated, albeit by an indirect mode of integration, to a degree sufficient for it to be considered a society – in relation to which the Jews, let me reiterate, were marginal.

For society-members integration is primarily access to the power and decision-making political and economic centers. The distance, viewed in these terms, between centre and periphery may be measured by the degree of probability of the needs of the periphery being articulated and responded to. In the Empire, the distance between centre and periphery was not only great, but institutionalized as well; for centuries following incorporation the periphery was to remain by and large of non-citizen status. Direct accessibility of the political centre to both individual society-members and to communities, even when of citizen-status, was never marked; they were integrated, however, but that not so much by virtue of acquired citizen-status as owing to the existence of two social mechanisms which provided indirect means of participation, namely, the uniquely Roman institution of patronage and the imperial cult, both serving as privileged channels of communication and thus as the main avenues of social integration. The provincial population of the Empire was well alive to the importance of latching on to these twin engines of integration and lost no time adjusting their conduct and institutions to that purpose. The Greeks did better than most and were in fact the initiators of the second of the two mechanisms, the cult of the emperors, to which the Romans were adverse at first.

Now, as a rule, no society is ever fully integrated. There always remains an excluded margin; and it is the same mechanisms which generate integration in any given society that by the same token will marginalize, by their very operation, those elements within it that cannot, for whatever reason, partake in their actualization. This precisely is what happened in the case of the Jews. In both Judaea and the Diaspora social institutions and traditions were too deeply entrenched for either one of these mechanisms to take root. The distinctly Roman institution of patronage had not been adopted anywhere outside the narrow circle of the highly assimilated, cosmopolitan, ruling élite; and the imperial cult too was an integrative force from which the Jews were inevitably excluded for obvious reasons.

This, in a nutshell, grossly simplified, is how the Jews of the Empire came to acquire the marginal social position they were to occupy for centuries to come. Of the many consequences this would have for the lives of both Judean and Diaspora Jews we are, of course, more immediately concerned with its effects bearing on their recurrent persecution. It will not do merely to restate that marginality entails that vulnerability to libel so familiar from the fates of Jewish communities from the Christian Middle-Ages onwards, for it came along with a host of other properties highly conducive to friction with, and alienation from, their host societies, such as their total dependence on privileges for the conduct of their daily lives, or their susceptibility to charges of dual loyalty.

The rest is history. Circumstances had changed considerably from when Manetho, Lysimachos, Apion and the rest of their kind had first committed their venomous tales to writing to the time Josephus had reproduced them in his apologetic tract, or Tacitus in his historiographical oeuvre. The most significant event, affecting Egypt primarily but other provinces as well by extension, was Roman takeover of Egypt in 30 BCE. Under the Ptolemies the Jews, although never granted the much coveted citizenship as a collectivity, were allowed a measure of self-organization in an autonomous *politeuma*, some of whose more prominent members were also awarded the citizenship individually; and so, as a whole the Jews were clearly distinguished from the mass of disenfranchised and grossly exploited Egyptians. They formed a category of their own, and a privileged one at that.

Shortly after Roman takeover Augustus replaced this system with one of his own, which placed Jews and Egyptians on a head-on collision course (**Diagram juxtaposing the two systems on the handout**). Henceforth all inhabitants of Egypt were to be divided into two classes only, *astoi*, that is, citizens, either of Rome or of one of the three Greek cities (Alexandria, Naucratis and Ptolemais), and all the rest, styled Egyptians, regardless of their actual ethnicity. The Egyptians were to pay the poll tax, which was both humiliating and a financial burden, and the Jews were to belong to this category. But it doesn't end there, for a further distinction was introduced, within the broad category of

Egyptians, for fiscal purposes: citizens in the *metropoleis*, the capital cities of the districts into which Egypt was divided (*nomes*), were considered a special class, designated *Hellenes*, and they were liable to the poll tax at a reduced rate. The difference may not have been great financially, but its implications for status and social mobility were sufficient to drive both Jews and ethnic Egyptians into a scramble for Hellenic status. Openings being few and closely guarded, this was inevitably a zero-sum-game, forming the single most significant structural factor affecting inter-ethnic relations in Roman Egypt.

We've already had occasion to note some of the devastating results, in the form of the riots of 38-41 CE. These were to be followed by at least one more serious eruption of ethnic fighting, precipitated by the outbreak of revolt in Judaea in 66 CE. The violence unleashed by both sides called for a severe response on the part of the Roman governor, in this case, by an ironic quirk of history, an assimilated Jew, Tiberius Julius Alexander, who happened to be the nephew of Philo. The pacifying action of his legionaries resulted, according to Josephus, in the loss of as many as 50,000 Jewish lives.

The Jerusalem Temple, moreover, was no longer standing by the time Josephus was writing, having been destroyed by the conquering Romans at the conclusion of the failed Jewish so-called Great Revolt in 70 CE. This was almost certainly a deliberate act on the part of Titus, although Josephus goes to great lengths in his attempt to dissociate his patron from his obvious responsibility for it; and with the temple, the cult was to be eradicated as well, along with its priests.

The calculated hostility of Rome towards the erstwhile permitted, indeed protected and privileged, religion was further manifested in the triumphal procession of Titus at Rome, where the symbols of the Jewish religion were publicly humiliated. The unique privilege of the Jews to raise a half Shekel contribution from all Jews wheresoever resident for the temple in Jerusalem was not merely withdrawn, but replaced with an equally unparalleled tax to be paid by them to Capitoline Jupiter (*B.J.* 7.218); and to these measures may be added the minting of coin types alluding to the humiliation of the rebellious province by depicting Jews in gestures of mourning and supplication before a triumphant emperor.

All this was meant to send a clear message throughout the Roman domain: Jewish superstition had been rooted out at its very source, and the peace of the gods, the *pax deorum*, restored; no longer would the adherents of the pernicious cult enjoy the peaceful existence accorded to the followers of all civilized religions of the empire.

Closely identified with the Temple-centred cult were the "high priests", that is, members of the high-priestly families who, as a distinct group, had constituted the backbone of the ruling class of Judaea. The obliteration of this class signalled the end of Roman recognition of the Jewish nation as a distinct

political entity. Jews, whether as individuals or as isolated local communities, were now encouraged to melt into the general population. There was no further need for a mediating agency between them as a collectivity and the Roman state.

The Jews, in other words, as a collective entity, were to be excluded henceforth from participation in precisely those spheres of Roman public life – the political, the cultural, and the religious – in which they might have been expected to continue to participate judging by their own previous experience, as well as by the standard of other conquered peoples.

All this amounts to the ultimate case of marginalization in antiquity, the state sponsored marginalization of an entire nation. It also provided added substance to the current Antisemitic narrative, charging it with a fresh sense of historical vindication. The thing to note here, for its potential value for the study of later forms of Antisemitism, is the interrelatedness of these two factors whose conjunction provided the conditions which allowed for the periodic eruption of Antisemitic violence in Classical antiquity: endemic social marginality and a compellingly intriguing, all-explaining, hip popular story.

Who knows, the future may yet hold better prospects for the integration of Diaspora Jews in their host societies. In many parts of the developed world Jewish social marginality is a thing of the past, for now; and the good news is this is a factor over which we have some control; but Antisemitism, as a durable item of popular culture, perpetuated, like any other item of popular culture precisely by its vital role within it, that is, by factors that may be quite unrelated to events extrinsic to the internal dynamics of cultural production and consumption, is most likely here to stay. Have you ever heard the one about an ethnic joke, an urban legend and a piece of malicious gossip put to rest simply because they were found not to conform to reality? No you haven't! I doubt you'll be hearing it any time soon...

## Sources

### 1. Claudius' letter to the Alexandrians, Tcherikover & Fuks, *CPJ* no. 153

With regard to the responsibility for the disturbances and rioting, or rather, to speak the truth, the war, against the Jews, although your ambassadors, particularly Dionysios the son of Theon, argued vigorously and at length in the disputation, **I have not wished to make an exact inquiry, but I harbour within me a store of immutable indignation against those who renewed the conflict.** I merely say that unless you stop this destructive and obstinate mutual enmity, I shall be forced to show what a benevolent ruler can be when he is turned to righteous indignation. Even now, therefore, **I conjure the Alexandrians to behave gently and kindly towards the Jews who have inhabited the same city for many years, and not to dishonour any of their customs in their worship of their god,** but to allow them to keep their own ways, as they did in the time of the god Augustus and as I too, having heard both sides, have confirmed. **The Jews, on the other hand, I order not to aim at more than they have previously had** and not in future to send two embassies as if they lived in two cities, a thing which has never been done before, **and not to intrude themselves into the games presided over by the *gymnasiarchoi* and the *kosmetai*, since they enjoy what is their own, and in a city which is not their own they possess an abundance of all good things.** Nor are they to bring in or invite Jews coming from Syria or Egypt, or I shall be forced to conceive graver suspicions. **If they disobey, I shall proceed against them in every way as fomenting a common plague for the whole world.** If you both give up your present ways and are willing to live in gentleness and kindness with one another, I for my part will care for the city as much as I can, as one which has long been closely connected with us.

### 2. Josephus, *Contra Apionem* I 305-11

In the reign of Bocchoris, king of Egypt, the Jewish people, who were afflicted with leprosy, scurvy, and other maladies, took refuge in the temples and lived a mendicant existence. The victims of disease being very numerous, a dearth ensued throughout Egypt. King Bocchoris thereupon sent to consult the oracle of Ammon about the failure of the crops. The god told him to purge the temples of impure and impious persons, to drive them out of these sanctuaries into the wilderness, to drown those afflicted with leprosy and scurvy, as the sun was indignant that such persons should live, and to purify the temples; then the land would yield her increase. On receiving these oracular instructions, Bocchoris summoned the priests and servitors at the altars, and ordered them to draw up a list of the unclean persons and to deliver them into military charge to be conducted into the wilderness, and to pack the lepers into sheets of lead and sink them in the ocean. The lepers and victims of scurvy having been drowned, the others were collected and exposed in the desert to perish. There they assembled and deliberated on their situation. At nightfall they lit up a bonfire and torches, and mounted guard, and on the following night kept a fast and implored the gods to save them. On the next day a certain Moses advised them to take their courage in their hands and make a straight track until they reached inhabited country, instructing them to show goodwill to no man, to offer not the best but the worst advice, and to overthrow any temples and altars of the gods which they found. The rest assenting, they proceeded to put these decisions into practice. They traversed the desert, and after great hardships reached inhabited country: there they maltreated the population, and plundered and set fire to the temples, until they came to the country now called Judaea, where they built a city in which they settled. This town was called

**Hierosyla (that is the town of temple robbers) because of their sacrilegious propensities.** At a later date when they had risen to power, they altered the name, to avoid the disgraceful imputation, and called the city Hierosolyma and themselves Hierosolymites.

### **3. Josephus, *Contra Apionem* II 91-6**

**Antiochus found in the temple a couch, on which a man was reclining**, with a table before him laden with a banquet of fish of the sea, beasts of the earth, and birds of the air, at which the poor fellow was gazing in stupefaction. The king's entry was instantly hailed by him with adoration, as about to procure him profound relief; falling at the king's knees, he stretched out his right hand and implored him to set him free. The king reassured him and bade him tell him who he was, why he was living there, what was the meaning of his abundant fare. Thereupon, **with sighs and tears, the man, in a pitiful tone, told the tale of his distress. He said that he was a Greek and that, while travelling about the province for his livelihood, he was suddenly kidnapped by men of a foreign race and conveyed to the temple; there he was shut up and seen by nobody, but was fattened on feasts of the most lavish description.** At first these unlooked for attentions deceived him and caused him pleasure; suspicion followed; then consternation. Finally, on consulting the attendants who waited upon him, **he heard of the unutterable law of the Jews, for the sake of which he was being fed. The practice was repeated annually at a fixed season. They would kidnap a Greek foreigner, fatten him up for a year, and then convey him to a wood, where they slew him, sacrificed his body with their customary ritual, partook of his flesh, and while immolating the Greek, swore an oath of hostility to the Greeks. The remains of their victim were then thrown into a pit. The man, Apion continues, stated that he had now but a few days left to live, and implored the king, out of respect for the gods of Greece, to defeat this Jewish plot upon his life-blood and to deliver him from his miserable predicament.**

### **4. Tacitus, *Hist.* V.9.1**

The first Roman to subdue the Jews and set foot in their temple by right of conquest was Gnaeus Pompey: thereafter it was a matter of common knowledge that there were no representations of the gods within, but that the place was empty and the secret shrine contained nothing.

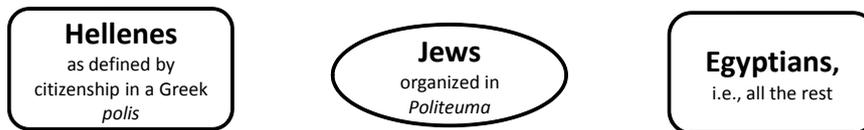
### **5. Tacitus, *Hist.* V.2.1-5.1**

However, as I am about to describe the last days of a famous city, it seems proper for me to give some account of its origin. It is said that the Jews were originally exiles from the island of Crete... Some hold that in the reign of Isis the superfluous population of Egypt, under the leadership of Hierosolymus and Iuda, discharged itself on the neighbouring lands... Still others report that they were Assyrian refugees, a landless people, who first got control of a part of Egypt, then later they had their own cities and lived in the Hebrew territory and the nearer parts of Syria. Still others say that the Jews are of illustrious origin, being the Solymi, a people celebrated in Homer's poems, who founded a city and gave it the name Hierosolyma... **Most authors agree that once during a plague in Egypt, which caused bodily disfigurement, King Bocchoris approached the oracle of Ammon and asked for a remedy whereupon he was told to purge his kingdom and to transport this race into other lands, since it was hateful to the gods... one only of the exiles, Moses by name, warned them not to hope for help from gods or men; for they were deserted by both; but to trust to themselves, regarding as a guide sent from heaven the one whose assistance should first give them escape from their present distress... Nothing caused them so much distress as scarcity of water, and in fact they had already fallen exhausted over the plain nigh unto death, when a herd of wild asses moved from their pasturage to a rock that**

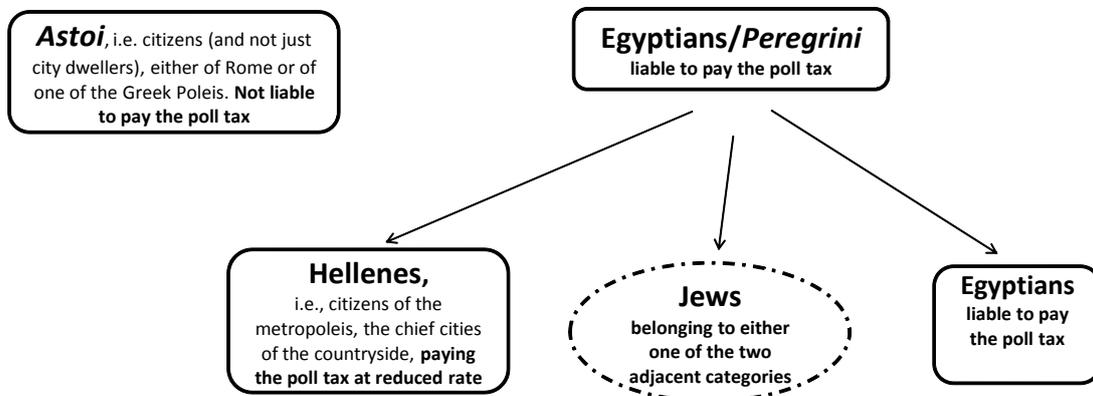
was shaded by a grove of trees... To establish his influence over this people for all time, Moses introduced new religious practices, quite opposed to those of all other religions. The Jews regard as profane all that we hold sacred; on the other hand they permit all that we abhor. **They dedicated, in a shrine, a statue of that creature whose guidance enabled them to put an end to their wandering and thirst...** They say that they first chose to rest on the seventh day because that day ended their toils; but after a time they were led by the charms of indolence to give over the seventh year as well to inactivity... Whatever their origin, these rites are maintained by their antiquity: the other customs of the Jews are base and abominable, and owe their persistence to their depravity: for the worst rascals among other peoples, renouncing their ancestral religions, always kept sending tribute and contributing to Jerusalem, thereby increasing the wealth of the Jews...

### Civic status and Fiscal liabilities In Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt

#### Under Ptolemaic Rule



#### Under Roman Rule



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