

Ancient Anti-Semitism

A. Events

1. Purim

There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them. (*Esther 3:8*)

2. 410BCE in Elephantine, Egypt

3. 168BCE under Antiochus IV

4. 38CE under Flaccus and Caligula – Pogrom in Alexandria

B. Reasons

Tacitus, Roman Historian lived from 56 to 118CE, *Historiae* V:3-5

[3] Most authorities, however, agree on the following account. The whole of Egypt was once plagued by a wasting disease which caused bodily disfigurement. So Pharaoh Bocchoris (718-712BCE) went to the oracle of Hammon (Egyptian god) to ask for a cure, and was told to purify his kingdom by expelling the victims to other lands, as they lay under a divine curse. Thus a multitude of sufferers was rounded up, herded together, and abandoned in the wilderness. Here the exiles tearfully resigned themselves to their fate. But one of them, who was called Moses, urged his companions not to wait passively for help from god or man, for both had deserted them: they should trust to their own initiative and to whatever guidance first helped them to extricate themselves from their present plight. They agreed, and started off at random into the unknown. But exhaustion set in, chiefly through lack of water, and the level plain was already strewn with the bodies of those who had collapsed and were at their last gasp when a herd of wild asses left their pasture and made for the shade of a wooded crag. Moses followed them and was able to bring to light a number of abundant channels of water whose presence he had deduced from a grassy patch of ground. This relieved their thirst. They traveled on for six days without a break, and on the seventh they expelled the previous inhabitants of Canaan, took over their lands and in them built a holy city and temple.

[4] In order to secure the allegiance of his people in the future, Moses prescribed for them a novel religion quite different from those of the rest of mankind. Among the Jews all things are profane that we hold sacred; on the other hand they regard as permissible what seems to us immoral. In the innermost part of the Temple, they consecrated an image of the animal which had delivered them from their wandering and thirst, choosing a ram as beast of sacrifice to demonstrate, so it seems, their contempt for Hammon (represented by a ram's head). The bull is also offered up, because the Egyptians worship it as Apis. They avoid eating pork in memory of their tribulations, as they themselves were once infected with the disease to which this creature is subject (leprosy). They still fast frequently as an admission of the hunger they once endured so long, and to symbolize their hurried meal the bread eaten by the Jews is unleavened. We are told that the seventh day was set aside for rest because this marked the end of their toils. In course of time the seductions of idleness made them devote every seventh year to indolence as well. Others say that this is a mark of respect to Saturn, either because they owe the basic principles of their religion to the Idaei, who, we are told, were expelled in the company of Saturn and became the

founders of the Jewish race, or because, among the seven stars that rule mankind, the one that describes the highest orbit and exerts the greatest influence is Saturn. A further argument is that most of the heavenly bodies complete their path and revolutions in multiples of seven.

[5] Whatever their origin, these observances are sanctioned by their antiquity. The other practices of the Jews are sinister and revolting, and have entrenched themselves by their very wickedness. Wretches of the most abandoned kind who had no use for the religion of their fathers took to contributing dues and free-will offerings to swell the Jewish exchequer; and other reasons for their increasing wealth may be found in their stubborn loyalty and ready benevolence towards brother Jews. But the rest of the world they confront with the hatred reserved for enemies. They will not feed or intermarry with gentiles. Though a most lascivious people, the Jews avoid sexual intercourse with women of alien race. Among themselves nothing is barred. They have introduced the practice of circumcision to show that they are different from others. Proselytes to Jewry adopt the same practices, and the very first lesson they learn is to despise the gods, shed all feelings of patriotism, and consider parents, children and brothers as readily expendable. However, the Jews see to it that their numbers increase. It is a deadly sin to kill an unwanted child, and they think that eternal life is granted to those who die in battle or execution - hence their eagerness to have children, and their contempt for death. Rather than cremate their dead, they prefer to bury them in imitation of the Egyptian fashion, and they have the same concern and beliefs about the world below. But their conception of heavenly things is quite different. The Egyptians worship a variety of animals and half-human, half-bestial forms, whereas the Jewish religion is a purely spiritual monotheism. They hold it to be impious to make idols of perishable materials in the likeness of man: for them, the Most High and Eternal cannot be portrayed by human hands and will never pass away. For this reason they erect no images in their cities, still less in their temples. Their kings are not so flattered, the Roman emperors not so honored. However, their priests used to perform their chants to the flute and drums, crowned with ivy, and a golden vine was discovered in the Temple; and this has led some to imagine that the god thus worshipped was Prince Liber (Dionysus), the conqueror of the East. But the two cults are diametrically opposed. Liber founded a festive and happy cult: the Jewish belief is paradoxical and degraded.

I. Edict of Augustus on Jewish Rights, 1 BCE

Caesar Augustus, pontifex maximus, holding the tribunician power, proclaims: Since the nation of the Jews and Hyrcanus, their high priest, have been found grateful to the people of the Romans, not only in the present but also in the past, and particularly in the time of my father, Caesar, emperor, it seems good to me and to my advisory council, according to the oaths, by the will of the people of the Romans, that the Jews shall use their own customs in accordance with their ancestral law, just as they used to use them in the time of Hyrcanus, the high priest of their highest god; and that their sacred offerings shall be inviolable and shall be sent to Jerusalem and shall be paid to the financial officials of Jerusalem; and that they shall not give sureties for appearance in court on the Sabbath or on the day of preparation before it after the ninth hour. But if anyone is detected stealing their sacred books or their sacred monies, either from a synagogue or from a mans' apartment, he shall be considered sacrilegious and his property shall be brought into the public treasury of the Romans.

II. Strabo, *The Geography*, Book XVI.ii.34-38, 40, 46, c. 22 CE

These districts (of Jerusalem and Joppa) lie towards the north; they are inhabited generally, and each place in particular, by mixed tribes of Egyptians, Arabians, and Phoenicians. Of this description are the inhabitants of Galilee, of the plain of Jericho, and of the territories of Philadelphia and Samaria, surnamed Sebaste by Herod; but though there is such a mixture of inhabitants, the report most credited, among many things believed respecting the temple and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, is that the Egyptians were the ancestors of the present Jews. An Egyptian priest named Moses, who possessed a portion of the country called Lower Egypt, being dissatisfied with the established institutions there, left it and came to Judea with a large body of people who worshiped the Divinity. He declared and taught that the Egyptians and Africans entertained erroneous sentiments, in representing, the Divinity under the likeness of wild beasts and cattle of the field; that the Greeks also were error in making images of their gods after the human form. For God, said he, may be this one thing which encompasses us all, land and sea, which we call heaven, or the universe, or the nature of things. Who, then, of any understanding would venture to form an image of this Deity, resembling anything with which we are conversant? On the contrary, we ought not to carve any images, but to set apart some sacred ground as a shrine worthy of the Deity, and to worship Him without any similitude. He taught that those who made fortunate dreams were to be permitted to sleep in the temple, where they might dream both for themselves and others; that those who practiced temperance and justice, and none else, might expect good, or some gift or sign from the God, from time to time.

By such doctrine Moses persuaded a large body of right-minded persons to accompany him to the place where Jerusalem now stands. He easily obtained possession of it as the spot was not such as to excite jealousy, nor for which there could be any fierce contention; for it is rocky, and, although well supplied with water, it is surrounded by a barren and waterless territory. The space within the city is 60 stadia in circumference, with rock underneath the surface. Instead of arms, he taught that their defense was in their sacred things and the Divinity, for whom he was desirous of finding a settled place, promising to the people to deliver such a kind of worship and religion as should not burden those who adopted it with great expense, nor molest them with so-called divine possessions, nor other absurd practices. Moses thus obtained their good opinion, and established no ordinary kind of government. All the nations around willingly united themselves to him, allured by his discourses and promises.

His successors continued for some time to observe the same conduct, doing justly, and worshipping God with sincerity. Afterwards superstitious persons were appointed to the priesthood, and then tyrants. From superstition arose abstinence from flesh, from the eating of which it is now the custom to refrain, circumcision, cliterodectomy, and other practices which the people observe. The tyrannical government produced robbery; for the rebels plundered both their own and the neighboring countries. Those also who shared in the government seized upon the property of others, and ravaged a large part of Syria and of Phoenicia. Respect, however, was paid to the Acropolis [Zion, or the Temple Mount in Jerusalem]; it was not abhorred as the seat of tyranny, but honoured and venerated as a temple. . . .Such was Moses and his successors; their beginning was good, but they degenerated.

When Judaea openly became subject to a tyrannic government, the first person who exchanged the title of priest for that of king was Alexander [Alexander Jannaeus]. His sons were Hyrcanus and Aristobulus. While they were disputing the succession to the kingdom, Pompey came upon them by surprise, deprived them of their power, and destroyed their fortress first taking Jerusalem itself by storm [63 B.C.]. It was a stronghold situated on a rock, well-fortified and well-supplied with water within, but externally entirely parched with drought. A ditch was cut in the rock, 60 feet in depth, and in width 250 feet. On the wall of the temple were built towers, constructed of the materials procured when the ditch was excavated. The city was taken, it is said, by waiting for the day of fast, on which the Jews were in the habit of abstaining from all work. Pompey, availing himself of this, filled up the ditch, and threw bridges over it. He gave orders to raze all the walls, and he destroyed, as far as was in his power, the haunts of the robbers and the treasure-holds of the tyrants. Two of these forts, Thrax and Taurus, were situated in the passes leading to Jericho. Others were Alexandrium, Hyrcanium, Machaerus, Lysias, and those about Philadelphia, and Scythopolis near Galilee.

Pompey curtailed the territory which had been forcibly appropriated by the Jews, and assigned to Hyrcanus the priesthood. Some time afterwards, Herod, of the same family, and a native of the country, having surreptitiously obtained the priesthood, distinguished himself so much above his predecessors, particularly in his intercourse, both civil and political, with the Romans, that he received the title and authority of king, first from Antony, and afterwards from Augustus Caesar. He put to death some of his sons, on the pretext of their having conspired against him; other sons he left at his death [in 4 B.C.] to succeed him, and assigned to each portions of his kingdom. Caesar bestowed upon the sons also of Herod marks of honor, as also upon their sister Salome, and on her daughter Berenice too. The sons were unfortunate, and were publicly accused. One of them [Archelaus] died in exile among the Galatae Allobroges, whose country [Vienne, south of Lyons in France] was assigned for his abode. The others, by great interest and solicitation, but with difficulty, obtained leave to return to their own country, each with his tetrarchy restored to him.

III. Edict of Claudius on Jewish Rights, 41 CE

Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, pontifex maximus, holding the tribunician power, proclaims: . . .Therefore it is right that also the Jews, who are in all the world under us, shall maintain their ancestral customs without hindrance and to them I now also command to use this my kindness rather reasonably and not to despise the religious rites of the other nations, but to observe their own laws.