

10 | Religious Pluralism in the Roman Empire

Did Judaism Test the Limits of Roman Tolerance?*

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1

Paganism, one would imagine, promoted pluralism by its very nature. It contained multiple gods, with a host of major and minor deities and divine offshoots. The smorgasbord of divinities should have fostered forbearance for a wide spectrum of supernatural beings, a motley crew whose authority and responsibilities may have overlapped confusingly but whose collective presence suggests a broad-mindedness by pagans that monotheistic religions did not possess. In principle at least, pluralism ought to have issued in toleration.

Roman expansionism, however, complicated matters in various ways. As the empire spread, first in Italy, then in both the western and eastern Mediterranean, it encompassed an ever increasing number of peoples, cultures, traditions – and gods. How far would tolerance extend when Romans encountered peoples who worshipped snakes and a wide variety of other animals, whose gods had eunuch priests adept at ecstatic dancing accompanied by clashing cymbals, whose mystery cults involved initiation rites with a bull slaying ceremony, whose celebrants indulged in nocturnal and orgiastic rituals, or who worshipped a single divinity but scorned all images or representations of him?¹

With so many diverse practices brought under the umbrella of the Roman Empire, how far does one stretch the notion of tolerance for religious pluralism? Some scholars indeed have expressed skepticism about the vaunted open-mindedness of the Romans. A famous fictional speech put by the historian Cassius Dio into the mouth of Maecenas, the close friend and adviser of Augustus, should cause some concern on that score. Maecenas purportedly counseled Augustus on the most effective ways to entrench his monarchy. Among them was the enforcement of a national religion by

* I offer this essay in honor of my good friend and occasional collaborator, Ben Isaac, from whose works and conversations I have learned much and profited greatly. He and I have occasionally had serious scholarly disagreements, but the differences have never disturbed our mutual respect and warm friendship.

¹ For the variety of religions and cults in the Roman Empire, see the surveys of Ferguson 1970; Turcan 1996. See also Rüpke 2001, 2012; Rives 2007.

compelling others to honor it and punishing those who introduce foreign rites, because new divinities turn people away from traditional practices and promote conspiracies, cabals, and upheavals.² That suggests troubling limits to tolerance. How tolerant, in fact, were the Romans?

Our own categories create obstacles. Tolerance or intolerance may not be the best designation of alternatives. The terms are modern rather than ancient. There is no Greek or Latin word for tolerance. Nor did any Greek or Roman writer articulate a policy of toleration, let alone formulate a philosophy advocating freedom of religion. Romans, so some have claimed, engaged in imperialism, not magnanimity. As one scholar put it, “Roman-style polytheism was disposed to expand and to absorb or at least to neutralize other gods, not to tolerate them.”³

The idea of toleration as policy would have been unintelligible to Romans. And even on the most charitable estimate, tolerance presumes superiority, the greater power’s willingness to tolerate the eccentricities of the lesser – a willingness that could at any time be withdrawn. Motives of benevolence and generosity, if they existed at all, are beside the point.

2

A different fact needs emphasis here: Romans could and did import external cults at the public level, making them part of the state apparatus, and welcomed them on the private level, as significant numbers of Romans became adherents of foreign rituals. That experience provides critical insight into the Roman disposition.

The importation of cults from elsewhere to Rome began already in its earliest history. So, at least, the traditions preserved by later literary sources attest. The worship of Herakles came from Greece, according to legend, through the Arcadian king Evander who brought it to the site of Rome in time for Romulus himself to sacrifice at the Ara Maxima.⁴ The celebrated summoning of Juno Regina from the great Etruscan city of Veii in 396 BCE turned the tide of the supposed ten-year war between Rome and Veii. The goddess, by moving from Veii to Rome, decided that contest for supremacy between the two powers. The ceremony of this summoning, the *evocatio*, meant that Juno Regina would now have her worship in Rome, on the Aventine Hill, where a temple would be constructed for her, and her cult

² Dio, 52.36.2. ³ Garnsey 1984: 8. Similarly, Beard et al. 1998: I, 212–14; North 2000: 63.

⁴ Livy, 1.7; Dion. Hal. 1.33.

would forever be a reminder of divine favor for Romans against their foes.⁵ *Evocatio*, however, it should be noted, has a character quite different from sheer imperialist expropriation. Juno Regina's transfer to Rome was not abduction or a coerced seizure. As the tale has it, a Roman soldier asked Juno whether she wished to move to Rome, and the statue of the goddess duly nodded. Juno thus shifted her allegiance voluntarily, bringing an Etruscan divine presence to the side of Rome where she would be ministered to by Roman priests and worshipped thereafter as part of the state religious structure.⁶ The historicity of that and similar events matters little. The attitude indicates a readiness to embrace principal foreign deities and make them part of Roman public ritual. In a parallel development, Etruscan priests, the *haruspices*, took their place at some point in the fourth or early third century as a priestly college, steeped in Etruscan lore, on whom Rome relied for purposes of divination, particularly the expiation of prodigies.⁷ The adoption of alien religious elements was, in short, an integral part of Roman history almost from its beginning.

The process accelerated in the third and second centuries, as Rome drew on cults and traditions from further afield. The worship of Asklepios arrived from Epidaurus in 293 BCE; the healing deity was brought to Rome to counteract a dreadful pestilence – and stayed to enjoy a shrine built for him on the Tiber Island. It is not irrelevant that the reaching out to Asklepios came as a consequence of a recommendation found by priests in the Sibylline Books – scrolls that themselves were of Hellenic origin composed in Greek hexameter verse.⁸ Sibylline advice also prompted the introduction of the worship of Venus Erycina in 217, a goddess of mixed Greco-Phoenician character in western Sicily.⁹ Legend had it that the site of her temple in Sicily was also the place where Aeneas had dedicated a shrine to his mother.¹⁰ Venus Erycina, who trailed echoes of the Trojan legend, would thus enhance Roman morale at a critical time in the Hannibalic war. But her arrival was no mere temporary visit. Venus Erycina received a temple on the Capitoline itself, a place of conspicuous honor. The goddess could thus not only serve as reminder of the national heritage; she also represented yet another foreign deity brought into the very center of Roman public life.¹¹

⁵ Livy, 5.21–3.

⁶ On *evocatio*, see the recent discussions of Gustafsson 2000: 42–82; Ando 2008: 128–38, and Orlin 2010: 36–41, 92–3.

⁷ MacBain 1982: 43–59; Orlin 2010: 88–100. In general, Haack 2003.

⁸ Val. Max. 1.8.2; Livy, 10.47; *Per.* 11; *Vir. Ill.* 22.1–3. On the Sibylline Books and their consultation in Rome, see Diels 1890; Orlin 1997: 76–115.

⁹ Livy, 22.9.7–10, 22.10.10, 23.30.13–14, 23.31.9. ¹⁰ Diod. 4.83.4–7; Vergil, *Aen.* 5.759–60.

¹¹ Schilling 1954: 248–54; Galinsky 1969: 169–90; Gruen 1992: 46–7; Erskine 2001: 198–205; Orlin 2010: 71–6; Battistoni 2010: 124–7.

A still more dramatic instance of this occurred in 205 BCE, during the final years of the Hannibalic war. Unusual prodigies in that year caused Romans to consult the Sibylline Books once more. The priests produced a prophecy that predicted Hannibal's defeat if the Romans should bring Magna Mater, the Great Mother goddess from Asia Minor, to Rome. The goddess was duly conveyed, in the form of a sacred stone, and was received, as directed by the oracle at Delphi, in solemn ceremony by select representatives of the senate, and installed on the Palatine.¹² The significance of this event for Roman politics, diplomacy, and cultural aspirations has been much discussed.¹³ What stands out on any interpretation, however, is an elaborate negotiation to transfer to Rome the cult of this powerful Anatolian deity, serviced by eunuch priests in glaringly colorful garb, with ecstatic gyrations, accompanied by tambourines, flutes, and cymbals.¹⁴ The senate determined that the unseemly character of the celebrations prohibited Romans themselves from serving as participants in the ceremonies.¹⁵ That at least preserved some decorum. But the fact remains that this foreign cult was welcomed upon arrival by eminent Romans and was established on no less a location than the Palatine hill. The *ludi Megalenses* were inaugurated there in honor of the goddess and would be held annually as one of the major festivals on the Roman sacred calendar.

We know of just one notable exception to this welcome parade of pluralistic immigrant cults. It occurred in 186 BCE. At that time Roman authorities notoriously cracked down with punishing harshness on the worship of Dionysus, the so-called Bacchanalian conspiracy. For many, the event serves to define the limits of Roman tolerance for alien religion: Bacchic revels crossed the line of Roman endurance; the senate resorted to persecution of practices inimical to their traditions and threatening state supervision of worship.¹⁶ But that analysis fails to tell the whole story. Indeed the tale of a sudden and threatening arrival of the Bacchic cult,

¹² Most important testimony in Livy, 29.10.4–29.11.8, 29.14.5–14; Ovid, *Fasti*, 4.247–348.

¹³ See Gruen 1990: 5–33, with much of the older bibliography. More recently, see Burton 1996: 36–63; Orlin 1997: 109–11; Roller 1999: 263–85; Erskine 2001: 205–24; Orlin 2010: 76–82; Battistoni 2010: 87–9.

¹⁴ Lucr. 2.610–28; Catull., 63; Ovid, *Fasti*, 4.193–244; Juv. 6.511–16; Mart. 3.81.

¹⁵ Dion. Hal. 2.19.

¹⁶ The evidence appears in Livy, 39.8–19; ILS, 18. It would be pointless to register the gargantuan bibliography here. See the extensive survey of earlier literature by Pailler 1988: 61–122, supplemented by Pailler 1998: 67–86. Cf. the selection of relevant works in Gruen 1990: 37–8, 49–52, 62–3. Among more recent contributions, mention should be made of Cancik-Lindemaier 1996: 77–96; Beard et al. 1998: 91–6; Takács 2000: 301–10; Flower 2000: 23–35; Pagan 2005: 50–67; Orlin 2010: 165–8, 174–5.

discovered in the nick of time, is vitiated by the fact that Dionysiac worship had been widespread in Italy for a long time before – without engendering any repression.¹⁷ Further, the measures actually taken by the senate in 186 are telling. They aimed to assure control of the cult, not to eradicate it. Secret ceremonies were banned; men were prohibited from holding priest-hoods, and neither men nor women could serve as administrative overseers; common funds were prohibited; and initiates could not exchange oaths or vows. At the same time, however, the new regulations allowed for retention of altars and images that had a long history; individual worshippers could maintain their connection to the cult if they made their case to the urban praetor and received permission from the senate, and they could continue to participate in the ritual, so long as no more than five persons were involved. All of this indicates a drive to regulate the activities of the cult and to keep them under senatorial control rather than to eliminate Bacchic worship. The curbing of Dionysiac ritual, in other words, represented social and political management – not an attack on alien imports on grounds of their foreignness. In that essential regard, the crackdown on the “Bacchanalian conspiracy” constitutes no real exception to the rule.

The importation of cults that lacked Roman roots proceeded apace. No need to detail them here. In addition to those actually summoned by the state, others entered the scene through private embrace or individual adherence. The worship of Isis serves as a conspicuous example of widespread popularity. An Egyptian deity in origin but expanded and transformed in the Hellenistic era, she subsequently meandered in the Roman Empire to various points in the west, including, quite prominently, Rome itself. The cult or cults of Mithras enjoyed a comparable following. Mithraic roots may have been Persian, but adherents of Mithras spread successfully to Italy and, largely though not exclusively, through the army, to frontier regions, particularly along the Rhine and Danube, as well as elsewhere in the west. A range of other divinities from abroad found their way to Rome or to Romans elsewhere.¹⁸ Juvenal might sneer about the Orontes pouring its refuse into the Tiber. But worshippers in Rome and Italy, whether foreigners or indigenous, practiced a miscellaneous variety of rituals, with little or no repression or persecution.¹⁹

¹⁷ Bruhl 1953: 58–81; Pailler 1988: 275–324.

¹⁸ For Isis, see Malaise 1972; Sonnabend 1986: 128–42; Takács 1995. For Mithras, see Beck 1984: 2002–115; Clauss 1990; Arcella 2002.

¹⁹ To be sure, the senate more than once took action against the cult of Isis for reasons usually obscure and unexpressed. Most of the actions were bunched within a short period of the late Republic and of no lasting effect. The senate prohibited worship of Isis on the Capitol in 59 BCE and destroyed the altars that had been set up – only to have them restored after a popular

None of this involves tolerance. The term is inapplicable. The state lacked a religious establishment or a centralized apparatus to demand uniformity, even if anyone wished to do so. And the thoroughly pluralistic religious society of the Roman Empire discouraged it. Hence, the very notion of extending or withdrawing tolerance is simply irrelevant. Even the characterization of Romans as broad-minded or liberal may be off the mark. Acceptance and embrace of alien cults was simply a long-standing ingredient of Roman identity.

3

How does Judaism fit into this picture? On the face of it, the community ill suits the profile of the other sects discussed earlier. Jews carried the reputation of an exclusivist, separatist group, rigorously monotheistic, disdainful of other gods, and hostile to their worshippers as misguided idolaters. The attitude, of course, goes back to the Hebrew Bible. The distinctiveness of Israel constitutes a central motif, as in the classic text of Leviticus 18:3 that enjoins the Israelites to set themselves definitively apart from the ways of Egyptians and Canaanites alike.²⁰ A core value of the nation rests in its self-perception as the Chosen People, with an obligation to follow the Law and resist those who revere false gods and

protest; Varro, *apud* Tertullian, *Ad Nat.* 1.10. A further step took place in 53 when the senate voted to destroy temples to Isis that had been erected by private parties. Here too, however, a reversal of sorts set in, for the worship of Isis and Serapis prevailed, so long as the rites took place outside the *pomerium*; Dio, 40.47.3–4. Valerius Maximus records yet another episode, probably in 50, when the senate ordered the demolition of the shrines of Isis and Serapis but the workmen refused to cooperate, causing the consul Aemilius Paulus to take an axe himself against the doors of the building; Val. Max. 1.3.4; cf. Wardle 1998: 151–2. One more such episode occurred in 48 when, in response to a troubling omen, the augurs recommended that the shrines of Isis and Serapis be rooted out; Dio, 42.26.1–2. The relatively rapid sequence of official actions against the cult, confined within a circumscribed period of time, implies that circumstances rather than hostility to the cult took precedence. And plainly none of the actions had enduring effect. Symbolic moves to reassert senatorial authority in a time of upheaval, with a designated scapegoat, seems a more appropriate interpretation. The fact that a shrine to Isis had been installed on the Capitol in the first place is itself noteworthy. So is the resistance of the populace to senatorial efforts to diminish the cult. The authorities clearly took no action to eradicate it. Five years later, in 43, the triumvirs themselves ordered the erection of a temple to Isis and Serapis; Dio, 48.15.4. See the balanced discussion of Orlin 2010: 204–5. Augustus later decreed that Egyptian rites be practiced outside the *pomerium*, but kept the temples in good repair; Dio, 53.2.4. And Agrippa subsequently directed that the rituals be held still further from the city; Dio, 54.6.6. Obviously they continued to thrive.

²⁰ See now the analysis of Berkowitz 2012: 24–40.

lead the devout astray.²¹ Postbiblical texts reinforced the image of Jewish exclusiveness. The *Book of Jubilees*, for instance, supplies a deathbed speech for Abraham to his children and grandchildren, exhorting them to steer clear of all Gentiles, and to scorn any association with their ways, their food, and, especially, their daughters.²² And a celebrated passage in the *Letter of Aristaeus*, the fictional tale of the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, makes the point unequivocally. It has the Jewish High Priest ridicule Greek idolatry and insist that the laws of Moses erect iron walls and inviolable fences to keep the Jews safely isolated from Gentile taint.²³

The impression of Jewish separatism prevailed also among Greek and Latin writers of the Roman period who took any notice of them. Diodorus of Sicily maintained that of all people the Jews alone would associate themselves with no other nation and reckoned them all as enemies.²⁴ Tacitus famously accused the Jews of a malignant hatred toward all people but themselves, refusing to eat or sleep with others, and, although most prone to lust, abstaining from all intercourse with non-Jews.²⁵ And Juvenal caustically quips that Jews in Rome lead no inquirers to a desired destination unless they are circumcised.²⁶ It is hardly surprising that scholars regularly cite these and other passages to exhibit pagan denunciation of Jews for their exclusivist ways and their displeasure with Gentiles.²⁷ All this would seem to make it quite unlikely that the practice of Jewish rites would be readily welcomed under the umbrella of the Roman Empire.

4

Yet the facts on the ground offer a very different picture from literary representations, whether by Jews who stressed their exclusivity or by Romans who focused on Jewish idiosyncrasies. Did Rome marginalize the Jews? Documentary testimony points in other directions. The Jewish historian Josephus preserves a dossier of documents recording pronouncements by Roman leaders and officials that protect the rights and privileges of Jews, mostly in Greek communities of the Roman province of Asia. This

²¹ E.g., Gen. 12:1–3; Exod. 6:7, 23:24, 33:16; Lev. 20:26; Num. 23:7–10; Deut. 7:6, 10:15, 12:2–4, 12:31, 14:2. Cf. Cohn 1994: 74–90; Schwartz 1997, 120–42; Lieu 2004: 108–26; Wills 2008: 1–12, 29–34.

²² *Jub.* 20.4, 22.16–20. ²³ *LetArist.* 131–39. ²⁴ *Diod.* 34/5.1; 1–4. ²⁵ *Tac. Hist.* 5.5.1–2.

²⁶ *Juv.* 14.103–4.

²⁷ See, e.g., Sevenster 1975: 89–96; Feldman 1993: 125–31; Schäfer 1997: 167–79; Berthelot 2003: 80–171.

collection of senatorial decrees, letters by magistrates, municipal declarations, and imperial edicts appears to imply a policy of Roman guardianship of practices and prerogatives belonging to Jews against efforts to restrict or abolish them.²⁸

To be sure, one needs to exercise caution here. Josephus' dossier does not add up to a general policy that holds everywhere and throughout. Most of the items he records belong to a relatively brief period at the end of the Roman Republic and the principate of Augustus and refer to events in the circumscribed area of western Asia Minor. The pronouncements by representatives of the government arose in the ad hoc circumstances of the Roman civil war, beginning in 49 BCE between Caesar and Pompey, proceeding through the conflicts that followed the assassination of Caesar between the triumvirs and the "liberators," and the unsettled political and economic circumstances of Asia Minor as the Augustan principate established itself. They do not attest to a sweeping attitude of "toleration" or an active engagement by Rome in support of Jewish priorities. For example, exemption of Jews from military service in the Roman legions by backers of the Pompeian cause aimed at shoring up support against the Caesarians. Similarly, Caesar's own declarations that strengthened the hand of the Jewish High Priest sought to enhance his position in the eastern part of the empire where Pompeian sentiment had previously prevailed. Comparable assertions issued from Augustus and Agrippa, reiterating confirmation for Jewish commitment to matters like observance of the Sabbath and annual contributions to the Temple in Jerusalem. These repeated Roman declarations of backing for Jewish privileges (with little evidence of actual implementation by Roman officials) were episodic, infrequent, and prompted by the conditions of civil conflict in the empire – not a matter of Roman stewardship of Jews.²⁹

But there is a broader import here. The very issuance and reissuance of these pronouncements, however conventional they may have become, carry real significance. They indicate that, far from marginalizing Jews as a separatist sect, Roman officialdom found reasons for reasserting their place within the confines of the empire.

²⁸ Such has always been the standard interpretation. The fullest and best study by far, enshrining this viewpoint, is Ben Zeev 1998, with a substantial bibliography.

²⁹ Detailed arguments in defense of this position can be found in Gruen 2002b: 84–104.

5

The idea of Jewish exclusivity also needs reconsideration. How separatist, in fact, were the Jews? Despite the impression delivered by some sources, Jews welcomed and gained converts in notable numbers in the age of the Roman Empire. Specific figures, of course, elude us. And just what constituted “conversion” in this period is beyond our grasp – if indeed there was any specific formula. The degree of adherence to Jewish laws, customs, and traditions by proselytes doubtless varied by situation, period, and location.³⁰ Even circumcision need not have been obligatory. Philo maintains that proselytes could forgo physical circumcision, so long as they could circumcise their desires, pleasures, and other passions.³¹ In the Jewish novel *Joseph and Aseneth*, Aseneth’s conversion required only repentance and a smashing of her idols.³² The Roman historian Cassius Dio observed that those of alien race who do no more than emulate the customs of the Jews could still be reckoned as *Ioudaioi*.³³ The Jewish openness to conversion, in any case, is undeniable. Both Philo and Josephus boasted that Jewish customs like the Sabbath, dietary laws, and fasts have won adherents from all over the world.³⁴ Pagan writers also noticed the appeal of Judaism to non-Jews and the burgeoning numbers of those who joined the faith – although the writers were not particularly happy about it.³⁵ Converts to Jewish ways of life and institutions and those who became, in some fashion, members of Jewish communities were conspicuous in the Roman world. The Jews did not discourage, let alone exclude, them.

Nor was conversion of any sort necessary to become part of a broader Jewish society. The term “godfearers” has become convenient to describe those who belonged to this larger circle. It appears in both literary and epigraphic sources.³⁶ That it had some recognizable significance is clear from the great donor inscriptions from Aphrodisias that list benefactors with distinguishing labels as Jews, proselytes, or *theosebeis*, as well as a whole separate category of *theosebeis*.³⁷ The term evidently designates a group of Gentiles closely associated with Jews and operating in a shared society. Their existence further demonstrates the willingness of Jews to

³⁰ Birnbaum 1996: 193–219; Cohen 1999: 129–30, 140–74; Goodman 2007: 160–8.

³¹ Philo, *QE*, 2.2. ³² *Jos. As.* 9–10. ³³ Dio, 37.16.4–17.1.

³⁴ Philo, *Mos.* 2.17–27; *Jos. CA* 2.282–3. ³⁵ Tac. *Hist.* 5.5.1–2; *Juv.* 14.96–106.

³⁶ E.g., Acts, 10.1–2, 13.16, 16.14, 17.17, 18.4; *Jos. Ant.* 14.110; *IJO*, II, #27, 49; Siegert 1973: 109–64; Wander 1998: 65–73.

³⁷ *IJO*, II, #14.

bring within their broader compass a range of interested and sympathetic Gentiles. This seriously undermines the idea of deliberate Jewish segregation.

One can go further along these lines. Jews themselves reached out to the wider pagan religious world. Even the worship of Yahweh, fundamental and binding though it was for all Jews, was not altogether restrictive or singular. A famous line in the *Letter of Aristeas*, put in the mouth of a Greek aristocrat but composed by a Hellenistic Jew, states that “the god whom Jews worship, the overseer and creator of all, is the same one worshipped by all people, including us Greeks, only we call him Zeus.”³⁸ This is not a merging or blending of interchangeable deities, as it is often interpreted. Rather, it expresses a Jewish sense that their monotheistic faith can be ascribed without strain to Gentiles as well.

Epigraphic testimony from the Roman Empire bears out the crossovers and intertwining most persuasively. One might cite as illustrations two funerary epitaphs from different parts of the Roman world, one from Pannonia on the Danube, one from Cirta in North Africa, probably sometime in the second or third century CE. In each case, the deceased, a woman, carries the identifying marker of *Iudea*, but the gravestone is headed by *D.M.* (i.e., *dis manibus*), a standard formula in pagan epitaphs, alluding to the divine spirits of the dead.³⁹ Not that *dis manibus* occurs all that frequently in Jewish inscriptions. But plainly no prohibition prevented Jews from adopting a Gentile formula alluding to spirits of the dead and interpreting them in their own fashion.

A different sort of illustration with comparable significance deserves mention. Manumission declarations from the Black Sea region show that some Jews at least were conversant with forms and procedures in pagan documents. The emancipations themselves took place in Jewish synagogues, but the proceedings regularly followed Gentile models. In one inscription from Gorgippia in the Bosporean kingdom, dated to 41 CE, the manumitter invokes *theos hypsistos*, “highest god,” a phrase commonly employed in Jewish inscriptions, and frees his slave in the synagogue. But he accompanies this with a vow that the liberated slave be under the protection of “Zeus, Earth, and Sun.”⁴⁰ Evidently the dedicator found no strain or tension between appealing to the Jewish god and simultaneously calling upon the protection of divine powers as framed by Gentiles.

Finally, a recently published document also from Hierapolis, dating to the mid second century CE, illuminates still another corner of this process.

³⁸ *LetArist*, 16. ³⁹ *IJO* I Pan 4 (Pannonia); Le Bohec 71 (Cirta). ⁴⁰ *IJO*, I BS 20 (Gorgippia).

It belongs to the sarcophagus of a certain Hikesios, “also named Judah,” whose accomplishments deserved record. The inscription calls him “most famous victor in sacred contests.” Indeed it refers to him as “multiple victor.”⁴¹ Whether his triumphs came in athletic or musical contests is unspecified. But the fact that a man who carried the name Judah could enter – and win – numerous “sacred contests” (i.e., those consecrated to pagan deities), holds real significance. The text demonstrates not only that gymnasial games were open to Jews but that Jews advertised their participation proudly in these quintessentially pagan competitions.

The evidence as we have it challenges any notion of impenetrable borders between paganism and Judaism. Jews did not retreat into isolationism or separatism. Nor was the distinctive identity of the Jews compromised by participation in the wider religious pluralism of the Roman Empire.

6

Judaism, like other religious communities under the aegis of the imperial power, enjoyed the indifference of the authorities. Jews in the diaspora dwelled all over the Mediterranean. Their synagogues were ubiquitous. Attestations, whether literary or archaeological, place these houses of prayer, in multiple numbers, in Syria, Egypt, Cyrenaica, Cyprus, Anatolia, the Black Sea, Greece, Macedonia, the Aegean islands, and Italy.⁴² The institutions had their own officialdom, untrammled by Roman interference, and provided a setting not only for religious services but also for education, communal dining, celebration of festivals, judicial decisions, gathering of assemblies, and manumission of slaves. Jewish communal life thrived. And it was not cut off from the larger society. Evidence exists from various quarters for Jewish access to the cultural and educational institutions, even the civic institutions, of cities in the empire. Nor should one omit to mention that many Jews in the diaspora possessed Roman citizenship. Paul of Tarsus is only the most celebrated example. However rare the practical exercise of that privilege may have been, it represented a key mark of status.⁴³

Jews in fact had a strong representation in the city of Rome itself. If issues arose that involved their interests or those of Jews in general, they

⁴¹ *IJO* II, #189 (Hierapolis). ⁴² Levine 2000.

⁴³ On all this, see the discussion of Gruen 2002b, 105–32, with references to sources and scholarship.

could turn out in force. So, for instance, when Roman policy in the east threatened to affect contributions to the Temple in Jerusalem in 59 BCE, the Jews of Rome organized vociferous demonstrations. Indeed, it was not uncommon for them to make their presence felt in Roman *contiones*, gatherings for discussion of public issues, when the matter was of concern to them – and they carried weight.⁴⁴ When King Herod, ruler of Judaea under Roman hegemony, died in 4 BCE, and Jewish embassies arrived in Rome to express diverse views over the future of the land, Roman Jews, up to eight thousand of them according to Josephus, gathered to put pressure on the emperor Augustus to grant Judaea independence from the Herodian family.⁴⁵ Philo claimed quite plausibly that Augustus interfered not at all with Jewish traditional customs, including their meetings in synagogues and their contribution of tithes to Jerusalem. Moreover, Augustus saw to it that if allocations of grain were scheduled on the Sabbath when Jews could not be present, their portion would be held in reserve, to be distributed on the following day.⁴⁶ That form of consideration offers insight into the successful integration of Jews into the social and economic life of the city. Pronouncements by Roman officials and by Roman emperors regularly reiterated affirmation of Jewish prerogatives and the protection of Jewish adherence to the traditions of their ancestors.

There were, to be sure, some bumps in the road. On three separate occasions, so we are told, Jews were expelled from the city of Rome. But those occasions were widely spaced, in 139 BCE, 19 CE, and 49 CE; special circumstances prevailed in each case; the expulsions (as in the case of Isis worshippers) were more symbolic than effective, expressions of the government's need to reassert its commitment to traditional religion; and had no long-term impact upon the Jewish experience in Rome.⁴⁷ Sejanus, the ambitious and sinister praetorian prefect of the emperor Tiberius, allegedly plotted (for reasons unknown) against the Jews, slandering those in Rome, and encouraging attacks against others in the provinces. Whatever the truth of those claims, to be found only in Philo, Tiberius himself canceled the efforts after Sejanus' death, denounced the accusations, and instructed

⁴⁴ Cic. *Pro Flacco*, 66–8.

⁴⁵ Jos. *BJ*, 2.14–25, 2.37–8, 2.80–1; *Ant.* 17.219–29, 17.248–9, 17.299–301.

⁴⁶ Philo, *Legat.* 155–8.

⁴⁷ 139 BCE: Val. Max. 1.3.3; 19 CE: Jos. *Ant.* 18.65–84; Tac. *Ann.* 2.85; Suet. *Tib.* 36; Dio, 57.18.5a; 49 CE: Suet. *Claud.* 25.4. This is not the place for a detailed dissection of these texts and their implications. The conclusion expressed here receives fuller defense in Gruen (2002b), 15–41. For other views, see, e.g. Smallwood (1981), 128–30, 203–16; Feldman (1993), 300–4; Botermann (1996), 50–102; Slingerland (1997), 39–46, 50–62, 67–9, and *passim*; Williams (2010), 79–102.

all provincial governors to reassure Jews in their jurisdictions that only those few who were guilty of infractions would be punished, and the nation as a whole should be regarded as a trust under Roman protection.⁴⁸ Caligula notoriously sought to install a statue in the Temple, an effort that caused frightful consternation among Jews, thwarted only by Caligula's assassination. But, despite Philo's representation of Caligula's lunatic anti-Semitism, the emperor may have had other purposes in mind than an assault on Jews. And he dropped the effort anyway when the intensity of Jewish objections became clear.⁴⁹ Caligula's successors made no comparable attempts. The emperor Claudius indeed, in his famous letter to the Alexandrians, asserted, as had Augustus and Tiberius before him, that the Jews of Alexandria should be permitted to follow their own customs and honor their own god.⁵⁰

The bumps in the road have attracted much of the scholarly attention. But it needs to be emphasized that they were brief, temporary, exceptional, and by no means representative of imperial policy or Jewish experience. Pronouncements by Roman officials and by Roman emperors regularly reiterated affirmation of Jewish prerogatives and the protection of Jewish adherence to the traditions of their ancestors.

7

Rome comfortably incorporated Jews, indeed explicitly safeguarded their privileges, within its pluralistic religious universe. The behavior provides a telling indicator of Roman attitudes toward that universe. But there is a fundamental question that still needs to be confronted. Did the Jews, in

the eyes of Rome, fall under the heading of a religious sect at all? Did the Romans not regard Jews as a nation (i.e., an ethnic entity) rather than a religion? In other words, did the empire not treat Jews as part of its collection of nations instead of its assemblage of multiple religions? In that case, attitude to the Jews was a social and political matter, and had nothing to do with worship, ritual, or belief.

The language of our texts does not afford an easy answer. Ancient authors frequently refer to Jews as *ethnos* or *genos* in Greek, *natio* or *gens* in Latin, which would seem to designate ethnicity rather than religion. If so,

⁴⁸ Philo, *Legat.* 159–61. ⁴⁹ See Gruen (2012), 135–47.

⁵⁰ *CPJ*, II, #153, 85–8; *Jos. Ant.* 19.283, 19.285, 19.290

relevance to the subject of religious pluralism would be marginal. Jews could be categorized with Syrians or Phoenicians, with Gauls or Spaniards, rather than with worshippers of Isis or Mithras, the reference being to their origins, their location, or their ethnic association, not to beliefs or rituals. The term *Ioudaioi* in Greek or *Iudei* in Latin might apply simply to inhabitants of the land of Judaea, to members of the Jewish state, or to those in the diaspora whose families stemmed from that land. Religious connotations, in principle at least, need not be part of that identity.⁵¹

But is that how Romans understood the Jews? The question needs to be addressed, and the evidence for Roman perception of Jews deserves closer scrutiny. Key texts for this purpose have for the most part been surprisingly overlooked in the discussion: the letters, senatorial decrees, and edicts by Roman officials, noted earlier, that reaffirmed Jewish privileges. To be sure, we do not have the documents themselves, only Josephus' reproduction of them. But the historian's collection closely parallels the phraseology, content, and formulas to be found in Roman pronouncements on stone, bronze, or papyrus in other contexts. Josephus could certainly have obtained copies of the texts from Jews in diaspora cities. And one can have confidence in the general reliability of his dossier.⁵²

What emerges most strikingly is the consistent reference to Jews in terms of their sacred rites, rituals, practices, ceremonies, and observances – in short, their religion. For example, the Roman consul of 49 BCE declared in a letter to Ephesus that Jews who are Roman citizens should be exempt from military service on grounds of their religion, so that they can practice their sacred rites.⁵³ A subsequent letter from the governor of Asia to Laodicea and other cities sharpened the principle somewhat by stating that Jews have a right to observe the Sabbath and the rest of their sacred

⁵¹ See Mason 2007: 457–512. The influential discussion of Cohen 1999: 69–139, argues that *Ioudaios* initially had a strictly geographic or ethnic meaning, but subsequently, in the second or first century BCE, took on a cultural and religious significance. That is a provocative, but altogether too schematic, reconstruction. No sharp change occurred at an identifiable moment – if ever. Buell 2005: 35–49, rightly finds fluidity rather than dichotomy, but goes too far in largely dissolving the differences. She does not differentiate religious identity from ethnic or racial identity but sees religion as a “swing category” within definitions of ethnicity and race and as the engine for ethno-racial transformation. This is not the place to discuss the fraught issue of whether *Ioudaioi* should be translated as “Jews” or “Judeans.” The bibliography on this subject continues to grow. See the extensive annotated bibliographies by Miller 2010: 98–126; 2012: 293–311; 2014: 216–65. Add also Schwartz 2014.

⁵² Ben Zeev 1998: 16–21, 357–68, 382–7; Gruen 2002b: 84–6.

⁵³ *Jos. Ant.* 14.228: ἱερὰ Ἰουδαϊκὰ . . . δεῖσιδαίμωνιος ἕνεκα; 14.232, 14.234, 14.237, 14.240. Cohen (1999), 95, oddly sees this as indicating that Romans reckoned Jews as a strictly ethnic-geographic community.

rituals in accord with their traditional laws.⁵⁴ Yet another missive expanded on the exemption from military service by specifying that Jews do not bear arms on the Sabbath and that military service would interfere with their dietary restrictions, their ability to assemble in accordance with ancestral customs, and their offerings for sacrifices.⁵⁵ Other comparable pronouncements, with similar phraseology, can also be cited.⁵⁶ In all of these documents, Jews come under the Roman aegis almost exclusively as a religious group.⁵⁷

The comments of Roman writers and intellectuals, whatever their particular outlook, also repeatedly refer to Jewish ritual, practices, and beliefs, not to ethnicity. So, for example, Cicero, although he recognized that Jews could be an effective pressure group in Rome, sums them up as a *barbara superstitio* and makes reference to the *religio Iudaeorum*.⁵⁸ Varro does employ the term *gens Iudaea* but he does so in the context of Jewish worship of the divine without images.⁵⁹ Seneca expressed criticism of Jews for their sacred institutions (*sacramenta*), most especially for their observance of the Sabbath, which he reckoned as a colossal waste of time.⁶⁰ Petronius sardonically labels Jewish abstinence from pork as worship of a pig-god, and proceeds to heap scorn on the Sabbath and on circumcision.⁶¹ Pliny the Elder refers to the *Iudaea gens* but denotes it as remarkable for contempt of the divine powers.⁶² Plutarch's references to Jews concern their opinions on the gods, their adherence to the Sabbath, and their abstinence from pork.⁶³ Tacitus characterizes the Mosaic laws as

⁵⁴ Jos. *Ant.* 14.241–2. ⁵⁵ Jos. *Ant.* 14.223, 14.226.

⁵⁶ Jos. *Ant.* 14.245–6, 14.260–1, 14.263–4.

⁵⁷ It does not follow, of course, that the Romans regarded Jews as merely a religious sect. When the term *ethnos* is applied to Jews, even in these documents, it can have a wider connotation, meaning something like the “Jewish people,” as Josephus often uses it; e.g. Jos. *Ant.* 14.320, 14.323. See Gruen (2020), 172–180. And the Roman letters directed to the Jewish leader Hyrcanus recognized that his official position (sanctioned by Caesar) was both High Priest and Ethnarch, implying that Jews constituted more than just a religious body: Jos. *Ant.* 14.191, 14.194, 14.196, 14.199. Cf. also Jos. *Ant.* 14.212: Ὑρκανῶ καὶ ἔθνεϊ τῶν Ἰουδαίων. Romans had, after all, had a treaty relationship with the Judean state that dated back to the Hasmonean era. Nonetheless, the religious aspects of Judaism predominated in the eyes of gentiles: Jews did not worship the same gods as they did; Jos. *Ant.* 12.125–6; *CAp.* 2.65, 2.79.

⁵⁸ Cic. *Pro Flacco*, 67–8. It is worth noting that Cicero here uses both *religio* and *superstitio* with reference to the Jews, employing the terms essentially as equivalents. Although scholars have commonly seen a positive connotation for the one and a negative one for the other, that is by no means always the case. The designation *superstitio* or *deisidaimonia* is frequently used in a neutral fashion, meaning merely “worship” or “religion.” On the complex meanings of *religio*, see the analysis of Barton 2016, 15–52.

⁵⁹ Varro, *apud* Aug. *Civ. Dei*, 4.31. ⁶⁰ Seneca, *apud* Aug. *Civ. Dei*, 6.11.

⁶¹ Petronius, fr. 37. ⁶² Pliny, *NH*, 13.46.

⁶³ Plut. *De Superst.* 3, 8; *De Stoic. Rep.* 38; *Quaest. Conv.* 4–6.

creating new religious prescriptions different from those of all other mortals, and, among other Jewish traits, he stresses their contributions to the Temple, their beliefs about the underworld, their monotheism, aniconism, and their religious festivals.⁶⁴ Juvenal's scorn fastens upon laws handed down in a secret volume by Moses and the Jews' supposed refusal to accommodate anyone who did not share their sacred beliefs.⁶⁵ And Apuleius' one reference to the people calls them "superstitious Jews."⁶⁶

It is essential to stress that this collection of offhand remarks that run the gamut from admiration to disapproval to indifference constituted neither racism nor "proto-racism."⁶⁷ Romans avoided reference to Jewish ethnic traits, inherited or genetic characteristics, descent, geographic influence, appearance, speech, or any qualities associated with racial origins. Religion almost alone sprang to mind when Romans paid any attention to Jews.⁶⁸ The Jews' peculiar practices called forth some caustic comments, puzzlement, and amusement from Roman literary figures. But those comments had no racial overtones.

The laissez-faire attitude that prevailed in the pluralistic world of the Roman Empire comfortably included Judaism within its compass. With only very rare exceptions, Jewish practices and beliefs went unhindered, synagogues flourished, advocacy for Jewish causes was successful, and Jews maintained a network of connections among themselves between Jerusalem and the diaspora all over the Mediterranean.

The very fact that Romans regarded Jews essentially as practitioners of a religion carries significance. Ethnicity was irrelevant. Romans did not speak of Jews in terms of origins, bloodlines, descent, or ethnic attributes that might suggest an alien presence in their midst.⁶⁹ Jewish religious

⁶⁴ Tac. *Hist.* 4.1, 5.1–5. ⁶⁵ Juv. 14.100–4. ⁶⁶ Apul. *Florida*, 6.

⁶⁷ Contra: Sherwin-White 1967: 86–101; Isaac 2004: 440–91.

⁶⁸ A rare exception is the obscure historian Ptolemy who wrote a book on Herod, only a single passage of which survives, quoted by the grammarian Ammonius. Ptolemy distinguishes Jews and Idumaeans on the grounds that Jews are such by origin and nature, whereas Idumaeans were originally Phoenicians and Syrians, only subsequently subjugated and amalgamated by Jews; Ptolemy, *FGH*, II, B199, F1 = Stern 1974: 355–6. The historian does appear to set Jews in an ethnic rather than a religious category. But it is noteworthy that, in Ptolemy's view, what made the Idumaeans part of the Jewish *ethnos* was compulsory circumcision – a religious prescription. The influential article of Goodman 1989: 40–4, claiming that only after 96 CE were Jews defined by their religion alone rather than by their birth, flies in the face of most of the evidence discussed here. See the criticisms of Goodman, on other grounds, by Schwartz 2001: 187–8.

⁶⁹ To be sure, theories about Jewish origins did circulate in the Greco-Roman world, tracing their beginnings to Crete, Assyria, Egypt, Libya, or Asia Minor; Tac. *Hist.* 5.2. But none of these makes any allusions to ethnic traits, and most are rather flattering to the Jews. Cf. Feldman 1991:

customs, however strange and unusual they might seem, were no more alien than those of the numerous cults and modes of worship that Romans had incorporated into their society almost from the beginnings of their history. The commitment to religious pluralism accommodated Jews without difficulty. Jewish experience in the Roman Empire for the vast proportion of the time, at least until the great war of 66–70 CE, was smooth and untroubled.⁷⁰ Jews thrived in the Mediterranean diaspora, even in Rome itself. The Roman government extended favor and support abroad, and found ample space for Jews at home. Increasing numbers of Jews indeed enjoyed Roman citizenship, which was perfectly compatible with Jewish traditions – especially as those traditions became increasingly open to the outside world. It should be underscored that this was not a matter of “tolerance” on the Roman part but an integral part of the Roman mindset. Rome’s own legends and history show a receptivity to foreign cults and alien sects of a bewildering variety of types. A receptivity to adherents of Judaism, by comparison, was simply business as usual. It fit a consistent pattern of Roman indifference, religious pluralism – and supreme self-confidence.

331–60. Dio Cassius, writing in the early third century CE, does link the name *Ioudaioi* with the land called *Ioudaia*. That would appear to associate Judaism with a geographic or an ethnic concept. But he swiftly abandons that line by pointing out that the term now applies even to those who live in Rome and to all other people who, though of a different *ethnos*, emulate Jewish customs. Dio then goes further. He elaborates on his understanding of Jews and sets it unequivocally in religious terms: They honor none of the gods worshipped by others but only their own divinity; they allow no statues or images of him; yet they built an extravagantly large and beautiful temple to him; their customs distinguish them from the rest of mankind; Dio, 37.17.1–3. Dio’s understanding thus coheres with the rest of our testimony.

⁷⁰ Limits of time and space prevent taking this story beyond 70 CE. The destruction of the Temple certainly created a very different situation for Jews in Palestine. How much difference it made for Jews elsewhere is a more difficult question. It is worth stressing, however, that the war of 66–70 did not arise out of religious – let alone ethnic – discontent. And Latin authors like Tacitus and Juvenal who wrote after the war refer to Jews in much the same terms as Seneca and Petronius, who wrote before it. One might also observe the quite striking tale in Tacitus and Josephus that, during the Roman siege of Jerusalem, the doors of the Temple suddenly flew open and a voice was heard exclaiming that the gods were exiting the shrine, thus evidently moving to the side of Rome; Tac. *Hist.* 5.13.1; Jos. *BJ*, 6.300. This is plainly an echo of the ancient Roman practice of *evocatio*, dating to the very early Republic, in which the gods of the enemy were summoned to depart and take up residence in Rome. See earlier. Not that Yahweh became part of the Roman pantheon. But the story accurately reflects Roman expectation that even the divine protectors of their foes could be embraced by the wider religious culture of imperial Rome.