

JUDEOPHOBIA

Attitudes
toward
the Jews
in the
Ancient
World



Peter
Schäfer

Judeophobia

Attitudes toward the Jews

in the Ancient World

Peter Schäfer

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For Barbara

Acknowledgments

The first stages of this study go back to a seminar which I conducted at the Institute of Jewish Studies of the Freie Universität Berlin. It is with pleasure and gratitude that I thank my students for their criticism and stimulating contributions.

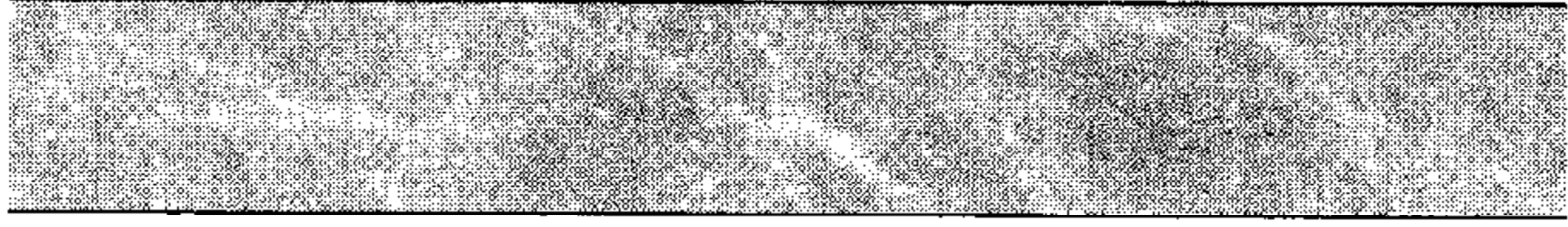
I began writing the book in the fall of 1992 during my tenure as the Horace W. Goldsmith Visiting Professor at Yale University. A preliminary version of Chapter 1 was published as “The Exodus Tradition in Pagan Greco-Roman Literature” in *The Jews in the Hellenistic-Roman World: Studies in Memory of Menahem Stern*, edited by Isaiah M. Gafni, Aharon Oppenheimer, and Daniel R. Schwartz (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1996). The great bulk of the book was written during my tenure in 1993 as a visiting member and from 1994 to 1996 as the Visiting Mellon Professor at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. I am most grateful to the faculty of the School of Historical Studies and the Mellon Foundation for giving me the opportunity to participate in the invigorating and challenging scholarly life at the Institute.

This is the first book I have ever dared to write completely in English, no doubt provoked and encouraged by my surroundings in Princeton. I found immense pleasure in writing in English and experiencing how much we are influenced in our thinking by the language in which we write. Had I written in German, a different book would surely have emerged. However, there would hardly have been any book at all without the generous support of my secretaries at the Institute, Suki Lewin, Dorothy David, and, above all, Terrie Bramley. They not only typed the various versions of the manuscript but also provided invaluable help in correcting and improving my English.

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The book is dedicated to my wife, Barbara, as a small and insufficient token of my gratitude. I owe her much more than just writing a book.



Judeophobia

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Introduction

“*A*NTI-SEMITISM” HAS A LONG and endless history. A recent, quite telling offshoot of it appeared in the German spell-check on my computer (an American product). The spell-check stumbled over the word “judenfreundlich” (friendly toward the Jews), which I had used in an article written in German, and suggested replacing it with “judenfeindlich” (hostile toward the Jews). At first I was convinced I had spotted a little anti-Semite inside my computer who had ventured a nasty joke, but, of course, the reality is less dramatic and yet highly significant for our subject. The German dictionary implanted into the computer simply doesn’t include the word “judenfreundlich” and therefore suggests a substitute which in the arrangement of its characters comes closest to it: “judenfeindlich.” Hence it turns out that the composer of the spell-check had ventured, not a bad joke, but a sophisticated judgment about the German language and the attitude toward the Jews expressed by it: the word “judenfreundlich” does not exist because Germans never have been, and never are, friendly toward the Jews. Nothing could illuminate better the terrain on which a German author writing on anti-Semitism, even if only on the “remote” history of ancient anti-Semitism, must tread.

“Hatred of Jews and Jew-baiting (*Judenhetzen*) are as old as the Diaspora itself”—with this sentence in volume 5 of his *Römische Geschichte* Theodor Mommsen inaugurated the modern study of what is usually termed “ancient anti-Semitism.” Mommsen began the chapter “Judea and the Jews” early in 1884,¹ only a few years after his public argument with Heinrich von Treitschke, a colleague at the University of Berlin, in the so-called Berlin Anti-Semitism Dispute (*Berliner Antisemitismusstreit*). This connection is no mere accident. Research on ancient anti-Semitism had begun in the late

1870s and early 1880s, concurrent with the rise of anti-Semitic sentiment which had shortly followed the successful founding of the new German Reich; that is, it was contemporaneous with the emergence of modern anti-Semitism. As Christhard Hoffmann has shown in an excellent study, much can be said for the idea that “the similarity between ancient and modern forms of anti-Jewish hostility (in contrast, e.g., to the phenomenon in medieval times) was the main reason for the increase in scientific interest in ancient ‘anti-Semites’, e.g. Apion, and that the new term [anti-Semitism] was soon applied to the situation in antiquity.”²

Mommsen’s rather casual statement was certainly not intended to provide a theory of anti-Semitism, nor was it in any way aimed at justifying its contemporary variety; on the contrary, in the Anti-Semitism Dispute he had spoken out as a committed opponent of the new form of anti-Semitism. Most German historians, however, reacted quite differently. For the most part, they were openly preoccupied with extracting from antiquity not only information about, but vindication of current sentiment. Thus, for example, Arthur G. Sperling wanted “to retrieve the honor” of the Alexandrian Apion, the “greatest agitator against the Jews in antiquity” and champion of a movement “in which the classical education of Hellenism, in union with the passion of Orientals, wages war once more upon the wild growth of Judaism,” and who for this very reason, according to Sperling, was entitled to demand attention in the present day.³ Similarly, Konrad Zacher found in ancient anti-Semitism “the most interesting parallels to manifestations of our own time.”⁴ Like the “Historians’ Debate” (*Historikerstreit*) of the late 1980s, this more ideological than scientific controversy was characteristically conducted not only in professional journals but frequently, and quite deliberately, in public. A striking example is Hugo Willrich, who had his “Die Entstehung des Antisemitismus” published in the anti-Semitic monthly *Deutschlands Erneuerung*.⁵

The majority of studies of ancient anti-Semitism, from the nineteenth century to the present, start with the methodological premise that the unique religious, cultural, and social characteristics of Judaism itself are the causes of what later becomes known as “anti-Semitism.” Hoffmann has aptly named this approach “substantialist” or “essentialist.” It is a model of interpretation which presupposes that anti-Semitism is, so to speak, a “natural” phenomenon within every society, needing no further explanation, a model that operates with categories such as “the essence of Judaism” or “the antagonism between Judaism and Hellenism,” which can, of course, be interpreted in a number of ways.⁶ This methodical approach is by no means

limited to outspokenly anti-Semitic authors, but also applies to a wide variety of ideological viewpoints—including determinedly Christian as well as Jewish positions. Under this category we find both Mommsen and Zacher, who, without even mentioning Mommsen, lent his dictum a significant turn: “anti-Semitism . . . is as old as *Judaism itself* and the Jewish Diaspora,” and argued as follows: “As one can see, it [anti-Semitism] is the simple result of the barrier which Jewry itself increasingly erected against the world in whose midst it lived.”⁷ In the end no less a figure than the great historian Eduard Meyer omitted the “Diaspora” completely by simply declaring: “It [hatred of the Jews] is thus just as old as Judaism itself.” For him the reason lies in Judaism’s “numerous bizarre attitudes and superstitious rites and customs,” its “arrogant presumptuousness and . . . spiteful aloofness toward all those of other creeds,” its “energetic bustling in commercial life, which viewed the ruthless exploitation of the infidels as the good, God-given right of the Jews”—all of these being peculiarities which had “by necessity to provoke” hatred of the Jews.⁸ In the same year (1921) Hugo Willrich⁹ voiced similar sentiments with clearly anti-Semitic overtones, and both Meyer and Willrich had been preceded earlier in the century by Fritz Staehelin with his gross statement: “The essence of Judaism which now prevailed—rigid, exclusive, and malevolent toward all those of other creeds—could only have met with repulsion by the naturally tolerant Greeks.”¹⁰

The distinctiveness of the Jews, which is the result of the special nature of their religion, and in particular their separation from other social groups, has become the standard reasoning offered by the “substantialist” interpretation of anti-Semitism. The opening sentence of Benno Jacob’s entry “Anti-Semitism: I. In Antiquity” in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, an obvious allusion to the later variations of Mommsen’s dictum, reads as follows: “If one understands anti-Semitism to be the hostile attitude toward Judaism, then it is as old as the Jewish people, for every nation (*Volk*) with particular characteristics, which might be unpleasant to others, and every community which claims to represent distinctive values, is treated with hostility, and Judaism entered history with this claim from the very beginning.”¹¹ In his famous study *Verus Israel* Marcel Simon formulated the almost classic statement: “The basic cause of Greco-Roman anti-Semitism lay in Jewish separatism. This means, in the last analysis, that it lay in their religion, since the religion produced the separatism.”¹² Victor Tcherikover, who expressly acknowledged himself to be an advocate of the “substantialist” school of interpretation, argued in a similar vein, albeit with unmistakably Zionist overtones:

The main danger that lies in wait for him [the historian] is a confusion between the inner quality of anti-Semitism, which is always and everywhere the same, and its various manifestations, which alter according to place and circumstance. The inner quality of anti-Semitism arises from the very existence of the Jewish people as an alien body among the nations. The alien character of the Jews is the central cause of the origin of anti-Semitism, and this alien character has two aspects: The Jews are alien to other peoples because they are foreigners derived from another land, and they are alien because of their foreign customs which are strange and outlandish in the eyes of the local inhabitants.¹³

The same is true of the most comprehensive monograph to date on "pagan Anti-Semitism" by J. N. Sevenster, who emphasizes the distinctiveness of the pagan type of anti-Semitism as compared with the later Christian one. According to Sevenster, "pagan anti-Semitism in the ancient world is fundamentally of a religious character" and its "most fundamental reason . . . almost always proves to lie in the strangeness of the Jews midst ancient society . . . The Jews were never quite like the others; they were always inclined to isolate themselves . . . There was always something exceptional about the religion of the Jews, and this made them difficult in social intercourse, ill-adapted to the pattern of ancient society."¹⁴

The counterthesis to the "substantialist" interpretive school, aptly termed the "functionalist" model by Hoffmann,¹⁵ was developed by Isaak Heinemann in his essay "Ursprung und Wesen des Antisemitismus im Altertum"¹⁶ and in his entry on "Antisemitismus" in *Paulys Realencyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*,¹⁷ which was much more extensive and exerted greater influence than the earlier article. According to Heinemann, ancient anti-Semitism was not based on the "essence" of Judaism, however defined, but rather on very concrete *political* conflicts. He elaborated three such "foci of conflict" (*Konfliktsherde*, as he called them), namely, the Syrian-Palestinian, the Egyptian, and the Roman. In all of these foci, ideological hostility toward the Jews was not the cause but the consequence of the political power struggle:

Nowhere is ideological hatred of the Jews (*der geistige Judenhaß*) a sufficient reason for political entanglements. However, power struggles which are for the most part motivated by purely political or national interests have provided the breeding ground for unfavorable judgments on the essence of the Jewish religion. Thus the ideological

struggle (*der geistige Kampf*) should be viewed here also primarily as a reflex of the political one, in the same sense—and with the same reservations—as in the present.¹⁸

Insofar as Heinemann accorded a preeminent role to the Syrian-Palestinian focus of conflict, both chronologically as well as in its significance for later developments,¹⁹ his functionalist model also has wide-reaching implications for the question of the origin of ancient anti-Semitism. According to Heinemann, anti-Semitism arose out of a concrete historical situation in Syria-Palestine, not in the Diaspora (he thus expressly rejected Mommsen's dictum): it is "not the root, but rather the necessary fruit of the Hellenization policies of Epiphanes and those who pursued his principles."²⁰ Heinemann's approach was developed further by the other great historian of ancient Judaism, Elias Bickerman, and in more recent literature also by Martin Hengel, Christian Habicht, and Klaus Bringmann, among others.²¹ All of these authors follow the "functionalist" model of interpretation (though admittedly with "substantialist" elements) and agree that the decisive role in promoting the rise of ancient anti-Semitism was played by the Maccabean revolt and the successful expansionist policies of the Hasmoneans in the second century B.C.E. which followed the violent Hellenization instigated by Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

The most recent version of the functionalist model stems from the work of Adalberto Giovannini.²² He, too, views ancient "anti-Semitism" solely as an outcome of the political conflicts of the second century B.C.E., but one resulting not so much from the Hasmonean conquests as from the emergence of Rome on the political stage of the Near East. Linked to this, he argues, was not only an improvement in the situation of the Jews in the Diaspora but also a "reversal of the hierarchy" between Jews and Greeks in favor of the Jews: "From the moment when the Jews chose to place themselves under the protection of Rome, the hostile reaction of the Greeks became inevitable."²³ Although this may be an appropriate description of the political state of affairs at the time, it fails to explain the connection to "anti-Judaism" (Giovannini's preferred term). By simply claiming that this, and this alone, was the cause of Greek "anti-Judaism," he is dodging the question at hand.²⁴

In opposition to the "substantialist" interpretative model and receptive to Heinemann's functionalist model, a further approach developed following World War II. Its proponents see a fundamental difference between pagan hostility toward Jews and Christian anti-Semitism; that is, they want

to restrict the term “anti-Semitism,” in its original, narrower meaning, to the Christian variant of this phenomenon. Accordingly, Christian anti-Semitism is something new and unique, and in no way comparable to the occasional outbursts of pagan antipathy toward the Jews. Advocates of this view include Jules Isaac,²⁵ Marcel Simon,²⁶ Léon Poliakov,²⁷ and most particularly Rosemary Ruether.²⁸ John Gager can also be considered one of its proponents. Although he admits that “there is evidence to suggest” that the political conflicts of the second century B.C.E. in Syria-Palestine “mark the beginnings of pagan anti-Semitism,”²⁹ he nevertheless dates the heyday of ancient anti-Semitism clearly in the first century C.E., especially in Alexandria. (His treatment of the Greco-Roman Exodus tradition serves, incidentally, as a good example of those studies aiming to attribute a later date to all the available evidence and thus to exonerate, if possible, pre-Alexandrian Hellenism of anti-Semitic tendencies.) Altogether, he cautions against overvaluing pagan anti-Semitism and against underestimating the sympathies that Greeks and Romans felt toward Jews.³⁰ The emphasis upon both sympathy for Jews and their achievements in the Greco-Roman world is also the declared purpose of *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World* by Louis Feldman, which being overly apologetic, however, grossly overshoots its mark. Only once is the term “anti-Semitism” mentioned, and then—as the index expressly points out—only to document its “inappropriateness.”³¹ No further examination of the phenomenon, regardless of what one might call it, is offered.

The present book is an attempt to look at an old subject not with new evidence, as there is none, but with a fresh approach to all the available sources illuminating the history of hostility toward the Jews in the Greco-Roman world, so-called pagan or ancient anti-Semitism. It starts from the presupposition that there did exist in antiquity a phenomenon which may be called “hatred of Jews,” “hostility toward Jews,” “anti-Semitism,” “anti-Judaism,” or whatever label one chooses to describe it. Although it is true, as Gager, Feldman, and others maintain, that we also encounter a remarkable degree of sympathy for Judaism in the ancient world, the patterns of animosity are undeniable. What precisely it means, however, to talk about “hostility,” “hatred,” and “anti-Semitism” in antiquity will be shown in the course of the book through detailed analyses of the sources.

Even though I employ several terms to describe the phenomenon we are in search of, I have no reservations about using the term “anti-

Semitism,” despite its obvious anachronism (the more reluctant reader may add imaginary quotation marks). The term is used throughout the book in the broader sense of hostility toward the Jews on the part of Greeks and Romans. Whether or not we may use it in the particular sense of describing a unique kind of hatred and hostility reserved solely for the Jews is discussed in the final chapter. The only term I avoid is “anti-Judaism,” thus following those scholars who restrict it to early Christian expressions of hostility toward the Jews.³²

I have no ambition to invent a new term, unless the word “Judeophobia” is regarded as an invention for which, however, I cannot claim the credit. When writing this book I used it in the belief that I had created it—only to be disappointed to find, when Zvi Yavetz published his article, that my creation was not as original as I had thought.³³

I have no reservations either about employing the term “pagan,” although I have kept its use to a minimum, preferring the adjective “Greco-Roman.” When used, “pagan” is meant to designate Greek and Roman as opposed to Jewish (and Christian) customs and beliefs, with no ideological background whatsoever.

The scope of my study is confined to the pagan Greco-Roman world and does not include Christianity. I do not deal with the phenomenon of early Christian anti-Judaism, important as it is for the later development of anti-Semitism, nor do I discuss how Christian hostility toward the Jews was molded by pagan anti-Semitism.³⁴ My study is, moreover, primarily concerned with *hostile* attitudes toward the Jews, and I do not pretend to have dealt with, let alone to have done justice to, all aspects and facets of the encounter between Jews and Gentiles in the ancient world.³⁵

Finally, with regard to the methodological implications, I maintain that neither the substantialist model of interpretation nor its functionalist counterpart is adequate to explain Greco-Roman anti-Semitism (as a matter of fact, they hardly exist in their pure form, as in most cases scholars adopt a blend of both, with different emphases on either side). An exclusively functionalist approach runs the risk of dissolving the phenomenon it describes, anti-Semitism, into ever-changing political and social relations with nothing concrete behind these functions—and in the end of explaining it away. (It is no accident that the proponents of the functionalist approach talk so much about politics and so little about religion.) On the other hand, an exclusively substantialist approach, based on the idea of a monolithic, always self-identical anti-Semitism arising out of the very essence of Judaism itself, runs the certainly more dangerous risk of

confusing cause with pretext and in the end finding the Jews themselves guilty of what happened to them.³⁶ Since “function” never exists without, and therefore can never be isolated from, “essence,” I would opt for a harnessing of both approaches—substantialist and functionalist—in research on ancient anti-Semitism. As I argue in more detail in the final chapter, one always needs both components to “create” anti-Semitism: the anti-Semite and the Jew or Judaism, concrete Jewish peculiarities and the intention of the anti-Semite to distort and to pervert these peculiarities. Anti-Semitism always happens in the mind of the anti-Semite, but it needs its object, the Jew or Judaism. The fact that anti-Semitism is sometimes found even in the absence of Jews, as modern history has taught us, is no argument against this, precisely because it is the distorted imagination of the anti-Semite, nourished by real Jews as well as by his fantasies about Jews, which creates anti-Semitism.

The book is composed of three parts. Part I analyzes the major topics and motifs referring to Jews and Judaism in the Greco-Roman literature, Part II surveys the historical evidence, Part III binds the two together, and the final chapter examines the specific meaning of “anti-Semitism” in antiquity.

Ancient Greek and Roman literature is full of references to and remarks on the Jews, some longer and some shorter, some friendly and many hostile. The Jews were a people with a well-recognized, distinctive, and ancient past. Their history and their way of life aroused curiosity. The picture of the Jews as mirrored in Greek and Roman literature is sometimes informed by an intimate knowledge of their customs; sometimes—and more often—it is the product of the transmission and continuous reshaping of ethnographic traditions, echoing a remote past as well as age-old prejudices.

Any attempt to reconstruct this picture requires scrutinizing an enormous amount of literature, a project made much easier since the publication of Menachem Stern’s monumental three-volume *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*.³⁷ As useful as this collection of all the bits and pieces of information on the Jews arranged according to authors is, it cannot replace a survey of the topics and motifs which were of concern to the Greeks and Romans, and which reveal their assessment of the Jews and their customs. I agree with Amos Funkenstein and Zvi Yavetz that “anti-Jewish propaganda or hatred of the Jews or antisemitism . . . should not be studied as a literary genre. This would be *Ideengeschichte* at its worst.”³⁸ Indeed, to reduce “anti-Semitism,” even in antiquity, to a literary genre re-

veals a minimalist approach which disregards its historical force. However, this insight and Stern's volumes do not excuse us from reviewing the literary traditions in order to determine their importance within the respective historical constellations. Yavetz is certainly correct in arguing that it is not enough to ask "why" or "how" a given phenomenon started, that one also has to explain "how, and especially by whom, a latent animosity was triggered off by special developments, . . . how words were sometimes converted into deeds";³⁹ but these historical questions cannot be answered without taking the literary evidence into consideration. The literary topics did not evolve in a vacuum, and what is even more important, they were exploited by those "whodunnit." It is therefore not at all negligible, for example, whether Manetho, early in the third century B.C.E. and relying on older material, expresses his own anti-Jewish feelings, or whether these feelings are expressed by a much later anonymous Pseudo-Manetho who is part of the well-known anti-Semitic climate of Greek Alexandria.

The Greeks and Romans were mostly preoccupied with the monotheism of the Jews, their customs and rituals such as abstinence from pork, Sabbath, and circumcision, and their success: proselytism. These topics are analyzed in Part I, each in its own right and not only with regard to its contribution to the subject of anti-Semitism. In addition, the legendary tradition of the expulsion of the Jews from Egypt because of a fatal disease plays an important role in the discussions of the Greek and Roman authors; since it differs from the other topics in that it is not, at least originally, connected with the "real" Exodus and since it is the starting point for many of the Greco-Roman deliberations on the Jews, it opens this first part of the book. With the exception of Chapters 3, 4, and 5, each chapter follows a chronological sequence in order to present the historical development of the given topic.

Part II examines historical events associated with fierce outbursts of hostility toward the Jews. Here I attempt to determine precisely what characterizes these events, what motivated them, how the interaction between politics and the different cultural-religious features of the various ethnic groups worked, what fueled the hostility, and whether there is anything conspicuous about it that allows us to label it anti-Semitic.

The two events examined are the disturbances of the year 410 B.C.E. in the Egyptian military settlement on the island of Elephantine, which led to the destruction of the Jewish Temple there, and the riots of the year 38 C.E. in the Greek city of Alexandria, which for many historians serve as the prime example of ancient anti-Semitism. These two events—relatively