The Accusations of Misanthropy against the Jews in Antiquity

Many scholars have questioned the application of the term “antisemitism” to attitudes to Jews in Antiquity, mostly on grounds that it is anachronistic and wrongly suggests that the ancient and modern phenomena are identical. Particularly, modern antisemitism is associated with the notion of race, which some scholars argue is a category that would have made no sense in Antiquity. Yet Benjamin Isaac has called into question the common notion that Greeks and Romans did not have a conception of “race” and thus could not have developed racist modes of thinking; he argues that we must distinguish ethnic prejudices from forms of proto-racism, which did in fact exist in Antiquity. In the case of the Jews, however, Isaac concludes that the ancient sources attest to no such proto-racism, and that Jews were rather confronted with ethnic prejudices and xenophobia, as some other ethnic groups also were. On the other hand, historians who have used the term “antisemitism” to discuss ancient texts and events do not necessarily argue that Greeks and Romans saw the Jews as a “race” afflicted by irreversible flaws. Ultimately, I deem it possible to use “antisemitism” in relation to the ancient evidence if we agree to define the term merely as “hostility toward Jews” (*Judenfeindschaft*) or “Jew-hatred” (*Judenhass*). We will have to keep in mind, though, that in connection with Antiquity, it does not entail a racial or racist connotation and that what comes most often under attack are the customs and the way of life of the Jews. Moreover, when addressing a non-academic audience, it seems preferable to avoid “antisemitism” in connection with Antiquity and to speak of hostility or hatred toward Jews, in order to emphasize the importance of historical contexts and historical evolutions.

Scholarly works dealing with Antiquity frequently use other words than “antisemitism,” such as “anti-Judaism.” It has the advantage of being devoid of anachronistic racial connotations and of pointing to the customs and way of life of the Jews as the target of their detractors’ attacks—an aspect that lay at the core of the accusations of Jewish misanthropy, as we shall see below. Yet is it possible to distinguish criticism of the Jewish laws and lifestyle and criticism of the Jews as an ethnic group? From the perspective of ancient ethnographers and historians, an *ethnos* was characterized, *inter alia*, by its customs. In most ancient sources, derogatory comments on Jewish laws involve generalizing and derogatory comments on the members of the *ethnos*. Another point that needs to be taken into account is the scholarly view that “anti-Judaism” should be restricted to Christian hostility toward Jews, which is seen as rooted in religious and theological disagreement. Yet I consider it possible to use “anti-Judaism” in connection with the ancient “pagan” evidence too when it specifically targets Jewish beliefs and customs.

Peter Schäfer has suggested employing the word “Judeophobia,” but only in connection with the Roman loathing of Jews and Judaism, which he understands to entail a dimension of fear resulting from the spread of Judaism within Roman society and the perception of this phenomenon as a threat. As far as the Greek and Egyptian hatred of Jews is concerned, Schäfer prefers the term antisemitism. It would be wrong, however, to infer from Schäfer’s analysis that he contrasts Greek antisemitism with Roman Judeophobia in general. He would certainly agree that we must look at each author to determine the nature of the latter’s attitude vis-à-vis the Jews. The problem with “Judeophobia” remains that even though some texts convey the notion that Jews and their customs constituted a threat to Roman *mores*, it is doubtful that we can ascribe fear to any Roman author.

As Schäfer emphasizes, the discussion pertains not only to the terms that we should use but also to the question of whether there is something unique about the hostility directed at Jews in Antiquity compared to that directed at other ethnic groups. Schäfer states that there is, in fact, something unique about it and claims that the accusation that the Jews are misanthropic is “the core of anti­Semitism.” For him, this accusation is why it is legitimate for scholars to speak of antisemitism in Antiquity rather than of anti-Judaism. To quote Schäfer again, “the Greco-Egyptian and Greek authors […] turned Jewish separateness into a monstrous conspiracy against humankind and the values shared by all civilized human beings, and it is therefore their attitude which determines anti-Semitism.”

I concur with Schäfer’s identification of misanthropy as the most specific charge leveled against the Jews in Antiquity. It must be emphasized from the outset that Jews were the only people in Antiquity to be accused of behaving in a misanthropic way—later on, Christians were occasionally labeled as misanthropes too, but much more rarely. We shall see below what this characterization may have entailed. I doubt, however, that the description of the Jewish way of life as misanthropic is systematically antisemitic. Passages such as Diodorus’s *Historical Library* 40.3 or Pompeius Trogus’s *Philippic Histories* 36.2.15, for example, hardly deserve the label “antisemitic.” Insofar as these texts display no clear hostility toward the Jews, they should rather be viewed as cases of ethnic prejudice. Again, we must examine every text for its own sake.

In order to properly assess the significance of the accusations of misanthropy directed at the Jews in Antiquity, we must also keep in mind that some Jewish authors—most prominently Philo of Alexandria and Flavius Josephus—were aware of these accusations and explicitly tried to refute them. Not every prejudice against the Jews received such an explicit and detailed treatment in Philo’s and Josephus’s works.

This paper will focus on antisemitic *discourses*. We shall first look at what may be the oldest text characterizing the Jewish way of life as misanthropic, in Diodorus’s *Historical Library*. Then we will examine to what extent particular historical circumstances involving political conflicts may have played a role in the development of the accusation of misanthropy, and whether we can identify a common ideological background to the authors who depicted the Jews in such a light. The third part of the paper will look at the combination of the themes of misanthropy and conversion to Judaism in the writings of Tacitus and Juvenal.

1. Jewish Law and the Jewish Way of Life as Misanthropic: a Greek Perception of Jews

1.1 A Debated Origin

The oldest attestation of the accusation of misanthropy is generally considered to be a passage from Diodorus Siculus’ *Historical Library* (1st century BCE) that supposedly goes back to Hecataeus of Abdera (end of the 4th century or beginning of the 3rd century BCE). In the context of his retelling of Pompey’s siege of Jerusalem in 63 BCE, Diodorus provides an ethnographical excursus on the origins of the Jews. He states that in ancient times, there were foreigners in Egypt who were expelled from the country because the Egyptians were stricken by pestilence and saw the presence of foreign cults in Egypt as the reason for the gods’ wrath against them. Some of the foreigners, described as “the most outstanding and active among them” (40.3.2), subsequently settled in Greece under the leadership of Danaus and Cadmus (associated in Greek traditions with Argos and Thebes respectively), whereas the majority of the expelled foreigners followed Moses, a man “outstanding both for his wisdom and for his courage” (40.3.3), into Judea. After settling in that country, which at that time was not inhabited, they built Jerusalem and other cities, and then Moses “instituted their forms of worship and ritual, drew up their laws and ordered their political institutions” (40.3.3). Diodorus stresses that “The sacrifices that he established differ from those of other nations, as does their way of living, for as a result of their own expulsion from Egypt (Moses) introduced a somewhat misanthropic [or: unsocial] and inhospitable mode of life (*apanthrōpon tina kai misoxenon bion*)” (40.3.4). The text also mentions that he appointed priests to lead the people, judge their disputes, and guarantee the observance of the laws; as a consequence, the Jews were ruled by a high priest and not by a king (40.3.5). As to the military, “Their lawgiver was careful also to make provision for warfare, and required the young men to cultivate manliness, steadfastness, and, generally, the endurance of every hardship” (40.3.6). Moses is said to have led military expeditions and conquered additional lands, and to have allocated them to the “common citizens” and the priests, forbidding them to sell their individual plots of land (40.3.7). When it comes to marriage and the burial of the dead, “he saw to it that their customs should differ widely from those of other men” (40.3.8). The text concludes with a remark that, after the Jews were subjected to Persian and Macedonian rule, many of their customs were altered, and that “Such is the account of Hecataeus of Miletus in regard to the Jews.”

Our source for this passage from Diodorus’ *Historical Library* is the Christian patriarch Photius (9th century CE), who quotes it and subsequently expresses his anger at Diodorus for having described the origins of Israel inaccurately and for having named “Hecataeus of Miletus” as his source to impress the reader. The identification of Hecataeus with the author from Miletus is generally considered a mistake. Diodorus mentions elsewhere both Hecataeus of Abdera and Hecataeus of Miletus as sources, and it is possible that he was referring to Hecataeus of Miletus here, but the latter, writing at the end of the 6th century BCE is unlikely to have written such a text on the Jews. It is more likely that Diodorus’s source was the Hecataeus from Abdera. It is possible that Diodorus got confused; alternately, if Diodorus’s 40th book reached Photius as a compilation of extracts, the mistake may go back to the compilator. In any case, most editions of Diodorus’s work alter the text and have “Hecataeus of Abdera.”

Developments in the study of Diodorus’s work have now cast doubts also about the attribution of this excerpt to Hecataeus of Abdera. According to the conventional scholarly perception of Diodorus, he was a mere compiler; as a consequence, his work was treated as a mine from which fragments of ancient authors (whose works were often lost) could be extracted and retrieved. Recently, several scholars have questioned this view; they argue that Diodorus should be seen as an author in his own right who freely reworked his sources and modified their wording. In this light, several scholars have recently argued that it is impossible to determine what Diodorus’s sources were for the excursus on the Jews in 40.3 and whether the language goes back to Diodorus’s source or reflects his own formulation.

This conclusion has important consequences for the history of the accusation of misanthropy against the Jews. Whereas scholars commonly saw this accusation as originating in the beginning of the Hellenistic period, its chronological development now appears far less clear. It must be emphasized that it is not possible to reject outright the attribution of Diodorus 40.3 to Hecataeus of Abdera. That Diodorus’s source was Hecataeus cannot be considered a certitude any longer, but it remains a possibility. This possibility is bolstered by the fact that two works titled *On Abraham* and *On the Jews* circulated in Antiquity and were attributed to Hecataeus of Abdera, indicating that he was considered to have had an interest in the Jews. These writings were probably pseudepigraphic works composed by Jews, but they nevertheless indicate that some people must have perceived Hecataeus as an authority who was favorably disposed toward Jews, and there presumably was a reason for this view. This does not prove that Hecataeus was Diodorus’s source, but the depiction of the Jews found in 40.3, which strikingly differs in tone from the more hostile accounts to which we will turn below, fits the perception of Hecataeus as an author who had written positively on the Jews.

Some scholars suggest that Diodorus’s excursus had or may have had an Egyptian origin, arguing that Diodorus or his source was influenced by the work of Manetho, a 3rd century BCE Egyptian priest known for a major history of Egypt in Greek, the *Aigyptiaca*. Only fragments of this work survive, and according to the traditional scholarly consensus, some of them are found in Josephus’s *Against Apion*, written at the end of the first century CE. The text Josephus drew upon may have already been transformed; moreover, he was no servile copyist either, and it is difficult to assess to what extent Josephus himself manipulated and edited Manetho’s writings. Apart from these difficult questions, the major differences between what Josephus ascribes to Manetho and Diodorus 40.3 raise serious challenges for the view that the accusation of misanthropy goes back to the Egyptian priest. First, the story of the origin of the Jews ascribed to Manetho refers to Egyptian lepers who were cast out of Egypt while according to Diodorus 40.3, they were foreigners expelled in response to a plague. Second, Manetho’s narrative emphasizes the lepers’ impious behavior toward the Egyptian gods, a motif that is lacking in Diodorus 40.3. Third, in Manetho’s account, the description of the Mosaic laws and lifestyle as misanthropic is missing. Josephus only refers to an oath sworn by those who followed the leader of the revolt, called Osarsephos, against their Egyptian compatriots:

He first laid down for them a law that they should neither worship the gods nor abstain from any of those animals that are particularly designated by sacred decree in Egypt as holy, but should kill and consume them all; and that they should attach themselves to no one other than their fellow conspirators.

The Jews in this account were originally Egyptians who conspired together and the story is primarily the description of an inner division within Egyptian society that becomes a civil war, leading the rebel group to prohibit Egyptian laws and traditional cults. The oath sworn by the “conspirators” is directed primarily at Egyptians. This background differs substantially from the story told in Diodorus 40.3.

1.2 A Greek Interpretative Framework

Other considerations indicate a Greek rather than an Egyptian origin of the accusation of Jewish misanthropy. As several scholars have noted, Diodorus 40.3 is thoroughly Greek and even Greco-centered—the characterization of Danaus, Cadmus, and their followers as “the most outstanding and active among [the foreigners]” (§2) is telling in this respect, as well as the image of Egypt as an inhospitable country, which is common in Greek ethnography. All the elements of the excursus can be associated with Greek traditions combined with some Jewish elements (Moses, Jerusalem, etc.). In other words, it is possible to read the passage without resorting to the Egyptian traditions associated with Manetho or later authors. For example, the notion of *xenēlasia* (“expulsion of foreigners,” §§2 and 4) recalls the Spartans. So do the references to cultivating the ability to endure every hardship (§6), the allotment of *klēroi* (“lots,” *i.e.* pieces of land) that are not to be sold (§7), and the danger of *oligandria* (“lack of men,” §7). Diodorus’s source (whatever it was) clearly sought to depict the Jews as somehow “Spartan.” Interestingly, in Book I, Diodorus includes both Lycurgus, Sparta’s famous lawgiver, and Moses in the list of lawgivers who claimed to have received their laws from the gods (1.94.1–2), which points to yet another shared feature between the Jews and Spartans.

Most significantly, the motif of misanthropy (*apanthrōpia* or *misanthrōpia*) is thoroughly Greek. At least from the fifth century BCE, the misanthrope is a well-known character in Greek plays, as the examples of Timon and Knemon illustrate. Plato explains misanthropy in the following way:

(…) misanthropy arises from trusting someone implicitly without sufficient knowledge. You think the man is perfectly true and sound and trustworthy, and afterwards you find him base and false. Then you have the same experience with another person. By the time this has happened to a man a good many times, especially if it happens among those whom he might regard as his nearest and dearest friends, he ends by being in continual quarrels and by hating everybody and thinking there is nothing sound in anyone at all.

This psychological explanation recurs in many Greek works. For example, in Menander’s *Dyskolos*, the fifth scene in act 4 reveals that Knemon was not born a misanthrope, but became one because of his disappointment with fellow human beings. Similarly, Plutarch and Lucian explain Timon’s misanthropy as the result of having been wronged by his friends, to the point that he could not trust human beings any longer.

All the misanthropic characters mentioned in Greek literature are Greek citizens, not fierce barbarians. The characterization of the Jewish (or Mosaic) way of life as somewhat misanthropic in Diodorus 40.3 must therefore be understood as an analogy that is not devoid of humor. It is meant to be rhetorical, for the depiction of a whole people behaving like the misanthropes of the comedies is peculiar—hence the use of *tis* (“somewhat”) to draw attention to the slightly unsuitable use of the word. In any case, the characterization of the Jews as misanthropic only makes sense in a Greek cultural context.

1.3 The meaning of “a somewhat misanthropic and inhospitable way of life” in Diodorus 40.3

In the whole corpus of Greek literature, the Jews are the only people ever accused of having a misanthropic (*apanthrōpos*) and inhospitable (*misoxenos*) way of life. *Apanthrōpos* and *misanthrōpos* are not used in connection with another people, and apart from two Jewish texts, the word *misoxenos* is found only twice in Greek literature, in both cases in Diodorus’s work (34/35.1.3; 40.3.4) and in connection to the Jews. That Diodorus was responsible for such a formulation cannot therefore be excluded. The association of *misoxenos* with *apanthrōpos* suggests that its meaning in Diodorus 40.3 is that of “inhospitable” rather than “hostile to foreigners,” for *philanthrōpia* (benevolence, love of humankind) was often associated with hospitality.

Diodorus’s text explains that the somewhat misanthropic and inhospitable character of the Jewish way of life is a consequence of the negative experience that the people who followed Moses had in Egypt: it is “as a result of their own expulsion from Egypt” that Moses “introduced a somewhat misanthropic and inhospitable mode of life” (§4). In light of the traditional explanation of misanthropy found in Greek literature, this sentence probably means that because Moses and the other foreigners had endured bad treatment from the nation that had hosted them, they lost their trust in other nations and decided to no longer interact with foreigners. Their way of life thus became unwelcoming to strangers—in other terms, “inhospitable.” While misanthropy and inhospitality are clearly vices from a Greek perspective, they are not completely irrational.

These behaviors are also not necessarily characteristics of barbarians. As mentioned above, the misanthropes in Greek literature are Greek citizens, not wild savages. The analogy between Jews and misanthropes in Diodorus’s text suggests that the author (Diodorus, Hecataeus, or someone else) perceived Jews as somehow close to the Greeks. This conclusion is consistent with his admiration for Moses and the general tone of this passage, which does not reflect a deep hostility toward the Jews (we shall examine a very different case in the next section).

2. Accusations of misanthropy, political conflicts, and universalist ideology

Let us now look at some factors that might shed light on the development of the accusation of misanthropy in the Hellenistic and early Roman periods.

2.1 An accusation that arises in contexts of political conflicts

1. The Judeo-Seleucid conflicts

In contrast to the mild and perhaps humorous tone of Diodorus 40.3, other texts that associate the Jews, their laws, and their way of life with misanthropic behavior are clearly antisemitic, in the sense that they convey hatred of the Jews. The first example comes from Diodorus’s *Historical Library* again, this time from the fragments of Books 34/35. This passage deals with the siege of Jerusalem by Antiochus VII Sidetes, which probably occurred in 132 BCE.

1 When King Antiochus, says Diodorus, was laying siege to Jerusalem, the Jews held out for a time, but when all their supplies were exhausted they found themselves compelled to make overtures for a cessation of hostilities. Now the majority of his friends advised the king to take the city by storm and to wipe out completely the race (*genos*) of the Jews, since they alone of all nations avoided dealings with any other people and looked upon all men as enemies. They pointed out, too, that the ancestors of the Jews had been driven out of all Egypt as men who were impious and detested by the gods. 2 For by way of purging the country all persons who had white or leprous marks on their bodies had been assembled and driven across the border, as being under a curse; the refugees had occupied the territory round about Jerusalem, and having organized the nation of the Jews had made their hatred of humankind (*to misos to pros tous anthrōpous*) into a tradition, and on this account had introduced utterly outlandish laws: not to break bread (lit.: share table) with any other people, nor to show them any good will at all. 3 His friends reminded Antiochus also of the enmity that in times past his ancestors had felt for this people. Antiochus, called Epiphanes, on defeating the Jews had entered the innermost sanctuary of the god’s temple, where it was lawful for the priest alone to enter. Finding there a marble statue of a heavily bearded man seated on an ass, with a book in his hands, he supposed it to be an image of Moses, the founder of Jerusalem and organizer of the nation, the man, moreover, who had ordained for the Jews their misanthropic (*misanthrōpa*) and lawless (*paranoma*) customs. And since Epiphanes was shocked by such misanthropy (*misanthrōpia*) directed against all peoples, he had set himself to break down their traditional practices. 4 Accordingly, he sacrificed before the image of the founder and the open-air altar of the god a great sow, and poured its blood over them. Then, having prepared its flesh, he ordered that their holy books, containing the xenophobic (or: inhospitable) laws (*misoxena nomima*), should be sprinkled with the broth of the meat; that the lamp, which they call undying and which burns continually in the temple, should be extinguished; and that the high priest and the rest of the Jews should be compelled to partake of the meat.

5. Rehearsing all these events, his friends strongly urged Antiochus to make an end of the people completely, or, failing that, to abolish their laws and force them to change their ways. But the king, being a magnanimous (*megalopsychos*) and mild-mannered (*to ēthos* *hēmeros*) person, took hostages but dismissed the charges against the Jews, once he had exacted the tribute that was due and had dismantled the walls of Jerusalem.

The antisemitic views expressed by the friends of the king were not necessarily shared by Diodorus or his source. The conclusion in §5 unambiguously states that Antiochus VII found their position excessive and ill-founded, and the text praises his attitude. The characterization of the king’s reaction as the expression of his magnanimity nevertheless suggests that the counselors’ accusations against the Jews were not completely unfounded. Had they been so, his response would have been just, not magnanimous. As far as Diodorus himself is concerned, the fact that he refers to the Jews’ misanthropic way of life also in 40.3 inclines one to think that he at least partly shared this appraisal of the Jewish laws. Yet in light of the repeated exhortations to moderation, clemency, and magnanimity in Diodorus’s work as a whole, we can be reasonably certain that he would never have endorsed the recommendations of the king’s friends. Neither would have the Stoic philosopher Posidonius, whose *Histories* are generally identified as Diodorus’s source for this excerpt, for he too valued clemency and humaneness.

Despite Diodorus’s or Posidonius’s possible reservations, this passage contains what is probably the most hostile anti-Jewish discourse found in Greek and Roman literature—maybe together with some of Apion’s slanders, to be examined below. The presentation of the Jews as impious Egyptians and lepers expelled from Egypt echoes Manetho’s story of the Jews’ origin and suggests an Egyptian context. On the other hand, the motif of misanthropy and the interpretation of the Jews’ refusal to share meals as a sign of hostility toward non-Jews probably points to a Greek context. The fact that some Jews at least refused to partake in the banquets that were a central feature of Greek social and political life, may have triggered the perception of Jews as misanthropes who were part of the city yet rejected every form of *koinōnia* (fellowship and participation in the social life of the city).

Whatever the exact origin of this anti-Jewish discourse, the context of the story told in this excerpt is Seleucid. The counselors’ violent antisemitism is rooted in the memory of the conflict between Antiochus IV and the Jews (the Maccabean revolt). It comes to light in the framework of yet another Judeo-Seleucid conflict, which occurred during the reign of Antiochus VII and is documented not only by Diodorus but also in 1 Maccabees 15 and Josephus’s *Jewish* *Antiquities* (*A.J.* 13.225–227, 236–250). Diodorus’s account (or that of Posidonius) must have relied on the work of a pro-Seleucid chronicler, such as Timochares, a historian who wrote a book on Antiochus VII. The counselors’ speech in Diodorus 34/35.1 probably echoed real antisemitic discourse at the Seleucid court, which included motifs originating in Ptolemaic Egypt.

1. The Judeo-Alexandrian conflict

According to Josephus, the Alexandrian rhetor Apion (ca. 20 BCE–48 CE) also accused the Jews of hatred of humankind, or more precisely, the Greeks—and even claimed that Jews sacrificed a Greek man once a year and ate him (*C. Ap.* 2.89–96):

(the Jews) take him out to a certain wood and kill the man and sacrifice his body in accordance with their rites, and eat from his innards and, whilst sacrificing this Greek, would swear that they would nurture hostility toward Greeks; then they would throw the dead man’s remains into a pit (§95).

Apion’s accusation of ritual murder remained marginal: in the whole corpus of Greco-Roman literature, there is only one additional text that accuses the Jews of human sacrifice, from an unidentified author named Damocritus.

Josephus returns to Apion’s claim that Jews are hostile to non-Jews at 2.121: “There is a further lie concerning an oath, that we swear by the God who made heaven and earth and sea to show good will to no foreigner, and especially not to Greeks.” This statement recalls the passage from Diodorus that we examined above, according to which Jewish laws require them “not to break bread with any other people, nor to show them any good will at all” (34/35.1.2). Yet Apion differs from Diodorus in his insistence on the Jews’ particular hostility toward the Greeks.

Josephus claims that Apion was an Egyptian, but by the time of the antisemitic riots in Alexandria in 38 CE he was an Alexandrian citizen, as his participation in the Alexandrian embassy makes clear. Whatever his family origins were, he was thoroughly Greek from a cultural and political point of view. Apion was a famous grammarian and specialist in Homer; he was well-known in Rome for his eloquence and his eclectic knowledge, but also for his vanity. According to the Suda (a 10th-century Byzantine encyclopedia), he taught in Rome during the reigns of Tiberius and Claudius. As John Barclay emphasizes, “of all the authors Josephus counters in this treatise [*Against Apion*], Apion had left, perhaps, the most insidious legacy in Rome through his portrayal of the cultural and political deficiencies of the Judean people.” It must be emphasized that Apion’s charge of human sacrifice is completely absent from Roman texts dealing with the Jews. This qualification notwithstanding, Apion’s legacy explains why Josephus, a Jew living in Rome at the end of the first century, felt obliged to dedicate a great part of his apologetic treatise to the refutation of Apion’s slanders.

Apion’s antisemitic discourse developed in Alexandria, not in Rome, and cannot be separated from the political conflict between the Greeks and the Jews in that city around the issue of Alexandrian citizenship and the Jews’ right to organize themselves as an autonomous community. Even though Philo does not refer to Apion in his account of the antisemitic riots of 38 CE (in his treatise *Against Flaccus*) or in his *Embassy to Gaius*, Josephus informs us that Apion was one of the members of the Alexandrian delegation to Rome after these violent events and he depicts him as defaming the Jews in front of Caligula. The antisemitic character of Apion’s writings thus lies beyond doubt; not only do they express hatred of the Jews, but they were also written in a context in which Jews were deliberately killed.

c) The First Jewish Revolt against Rome and its aftermath

The accusation of misanthropy is virtually absent from Roman literature prior to the First Jewish Revolt against Rome (66–73 CE). However, some Roman authors writing later, such as Tacitus and Juvenal, depict the Jews and their laws as misanthropic. In this context too, the development of this accusation may be partly related to the conflict between the Jews of Judea and Rome and the enduring political use of this Roman victory in Flavian “propaganda” and beyond. When Tacitus wrote his *Histories* (between ca. 100 and 110 CE), the effects of this policy could still be felt in Roman society.

Leaving these authors aside for the time being (we will return to them in the next section), I would like to focus here on a source that has received less attention, namely Philostratus’s *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, written in the third century CE.[[1]](#footnote-1) Philostratus writes that Apollonius met Vespasian in Alexandria after the latter’s victory against the Jews. Other philosophers attended the meeting, including the Stoic Euphrates, whom Philostratus depicts as Apollonius’s opponent and casts in a negative light. In the passage describing this encounter, Vespasian asks the philosophers how he can restore respect for the throne among the Romans. Euphrates answers that he should set the Roman people free, meaning that Vespasian ought to reestablish the Republic. At a later stage in his speech, he criticizes Vespasian for having wasted his energy and army in the war against the Jews, arguing:

The Jews cut themselves off long ago, not only from the Romans, but from all mankind, since people who have devised an unsociable way of life, with no meals, libations, prayers, or sacrifices in common with other men, have moved further away from us than Susa, Bactria, and the Indians beyond that. There was no point in punishing them as rebels, when they would have been better left unconquered.

In this passage, the accusation of misanthropy is connected with the Jews’ refusal to partake in foreign religious rituals (“libations, prayers, or sacrifices”) and to share meals with non-Jews. Philostratus does not use the word *misanthrōpia* but speaks of a *bios amiktos*, an “unsociable way of life.” The emphasis on separateness is identical in both cases but the phrase *bios amiktos* does not connote the notion of hatred toward non-Jews or is at least less explicit. Moreover, in contrast to the counselors of Antiochus VII in Diodorus 34/35.1, Euphrates does not advise Vespasian to destroy the Jews but simply would rather he invested his energies elsewhere.

Euphrates’s hostility toward the Jews should probably be understood in light of his Syrian origins—he was born in Tyre or Epiphaneia. His vision of the Jews as a misanthropic people may have been rooted in the writings of previous authors from this region such as Timochares and Posidonius; an additional factor may have played a role as well, namely local conflicts between Jews and Greco-Syrians (some of which may have originated in the Hasmonean period), as documented by Josephus both before and after the Great Jewish Revolt.

2.2 A particular ideological background?

We have seen so far that in several cases, accusations of misanthropy were directed against the Jews in a context that coincided with a political conflict between the Jews and another group— more specifically, Greeks in Syria or Egypt. We will now examine whether ideological factors may have played a role as well; i.e., whether there is any correlation between the authors who chose to stress the misanthropy motif and a given ideology. I shall argue that several authors who accused the Jews of misanthropy or echoed such accusations belonged to the Stoic school or were influenced by Stoicism, or at least by a universalist worldview related to Stoicism.

As mentioned above, numerous scholars attribute the text in Diodorus 34/35.1 to the Stoic philosopher Posidonius. Again, this attribution does not mean that Posidonius shared the antisemitic views expressed by king Antiochus VII’s counselors. The text expresses agreement with and admiration for the king’s rejection of the counselors’ advice to wipe out the Jews, and this point of view was certainly shared by Posidonius (and Diodorus). However, we cannot infer from this rejection of the counselors’ advice that the conception of the Jews as misanthropes who were hostile to others was rejected as well. Another text attributed to Posidonius, an excursus on the Jews in Strabo’s *Geography*, praises Moses and Mosaic Judaism but describes Judaism in the Hasmonean period as degenerated and superstitious (pointing in particular at the dietary laws and circumcision), and the Jews in Judea as hostile to others and warlike. Posidonius apparently perceived the Jewish *mores* of his time in a negative light.

In addition, most studies of Posidonius’s ethical thinking emphasize the centrality of *philanthrōpia* in his thought. *Philanthrōpia* is one of the ethical principles that is meant to guide the relationship between the victor and the vanquished, the governor and the governed, and the masters and their slaves. It is also a virtue of individuals and groups who behave in a friendly and hospitable manner toward others. Another passage from Diodorus generally attributed to Posidonius describes the *philanthrōpia* of the Celtiberians, which shows that even exceptional barbarians could also possess this virtue and that it was strongly connected to hospitality. Stoic philosophy viewed all human beings as kin in that they possess reason; it valued sociability and benevolence toward fellow humans in general. When confronted with Jewish “particularism,” this worldview could have served as the background to the accusation that the Jews were antisocial and inhospitable.

If the attribution of Diodorus 34/35.1 to Posidonius is considered too hypothetical to serve as evidence of a Stoic background to the characterization of the Jewish laws as misanthropic, the fact remains that two important texts that convey this view were included in Diodorus’s *Historical Library*, a work that otherwise emphasizes the importance of *philanthrōpia* again and again. This emphasis reflects the perspective of Diodorus himself. As Kenneth Sacks writes, “though not a Stoic thinker, Diodorus chose material that embodied many such sentiments, and his frequently employed standard of judgment – whether someone or something benefited humanity – is well founded in Stoicism.” The opening section of the *Historical Library*, which in the past was often attributed to Posidonius as well but is now recognized as reflecting general ethical principles that were widespread in the first century BCE, argues that people ought to be thankful to historians who have written universal histories, because:

It has been the aspiration of these writers to marshal all men, who, although united one to another by their kinship (*syngeneia*), are yet separated by space and time, into one and the same orderly body. And such historians have therein shown themselves to be, as it were, ministers of Divine Providence.

This passage is full of Stoic concepts, such as the notion of a general kinship (*syngeneia*) between all human beings or of divine providence at work in uniting humankind. This universalist perspective may have led to a negative perception of Jewish singularity on Diodorus’s part, and ultimately to the depiction of the Jews as a people who stood apart from others out of hostility toward non-Jews.

Josephus mentions Posidonius as a source that Apion himself claimed to have used in his anti-Jewish account (*C. Ap.* 2.79). This information may not be reliable, and it is very difficult to identify elements in Apion’s discourse that may go back to Posidonius’ writings, but this passage suggests that it was not absurd from Apion’s perspective to claim the authority of Posidonius in such a context.

Apion’s reference to Posidonius is meaningful in yet another way. A close reading of Josephus’s *Against Apion* shows that Apion himself claimed to be affiliated with the Stoic school. Josephus reacts to the derogatory statement that Jews had not contributed to civilization and writes:

(Apion states that) we have not produced remarkable men, such as inventors in the arts or exceptional intellectuals. And he enumerates Socrates, Zeno, Cleanthes, and the like. Then—the most amazing thing—he adds himself to those he has listed and congratulates Alexandria on having such a citizen! (C. Ap. 2.135).

Zeno was the founder of the Stoa, and Cleanthes was his successor. As to Socrates, the Stoics tended to view him as part of a chain of transmission that connected him to Zeno through the Cynics. By “adding himself” to the list, Apion clearly showed that he considered himself to be part of the Stoic tradition.

In the case of Euphrates, his identification as a Stoic philosopher is undisputed. Significantly, his discourse represents the only passage in *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* in which the accusation of misanthropy comes to the fore. No other character expresses such a view in the rest of the work. While the historicity of the passage remains questionable, it is coherent with the other evidence that we have.

On the whole, it is thus possible to identify a Stoic philosophical or ideological background for some of the Greek authors who conveyed the view that Jews were fundamentally hostile to non-Jews. Obviously, this does not mean that all the Stoic philosophers who mentioned the Jews shared this perception; Epictetus, for example, did not associate the Jews with misanthropic behavior.

3. The Roman context and the issue of conversion to Judaism

In the Roman context, Tacitus and Juvenal are the two main examples of authors who vilify the Jews as misanthropes. In both cases, this slander is associated with references to converts. Tacitus distinguishes between two categories of Jewish rites:

5.1 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 elements (among other peoples), rejecting their ancestral religions, always kept sending tribute and contributions to Jerusalem, thereby increasing the wealth of the Jews; again, the Jews are extremely loyal toward one another, and always ready to show compassion, but toward every other people they feel only hostility and hatred. 2 They sit apart at meals, and they sleep apart, and although as a people, they are prone to lust, they abstain from intercourse with foreign women; yet among themselves, nothing is unlawful. They instituted circumcision to recognize (each other) by this difference. Those who are converted to their ways follow the same practice, and the earliest lesson they receive is to despise the gods, to renounce their country, and to regard their parents, children, and brothers as of little account.

Tacitus describes Jews as loyal to one another but deeply hostile to non-Jews. This alleged hatred of foreigners is correlated to their refusal to partake in common meals or to have sex with (or maybe marry) non-Jews, and to the practice of circumcision as a way to distinguish themselves from non-Jews. The association of the dietary laws with misanthropy is found in authors who preceded Tacitus, as we saw above, but the reference to sexual or marital relations and circumcision as marks of misanthropy is new. Tacitus’s account contains another new dimension. The Jews’ separateness becomes all the more reprehensible in Tacitus’s eyes because some non-Jews (especially Romans) convert to Judaism. Despising the gods, renouncing one’s country, and disregarding one’s parents or family are attitudes that conflict with the most fundamental Roman values, such as *pietas* (piety) and *fides* (trust, faithfulness). The sharp condemnation of Jewish proselytes in Tacitus’s reference to the alleged misanthropy of the Jews is a new element in the accusation.

Juvenal’s *Satires* (dated to the very end of the first century CE or the beginning of the second) evoke the motif of Jewish misanthropy in a similar way. He criticizes Judaizing behaviors, which may lead to a full conversion (associated with circumcision for men):

Some happen to have been dealt a father who respects the sabbath. They worship nothing except the clouds and spirit of the sky. They think there is no difference between pork, which their fathers abstained from, and human flesh. In time, they get rid of their foreskins. And with their habit of despising the laws of Rome, they study, observe, and revere the Judaic code, as handed down by Moses in his mystic scroll, which tells them not to show the way to anyone except a fellow worshipper and if asked, to take only the circumcised to the fountain.

Juvenal asserts that the Mosaic law forbids solidarity with and benevolence toward non-Jews, which represents another way to characterize Jewish laws as misanthropic. More specifically, he refers to two ethical principles known in the Greek world as the precepts of Bouzyges, showing the way to the traveler and sharing water from a fountain or a spring, which were considered basic human duties toward fellow human beings. By mentioning these principles, Juvenal suggests that the Jews have cut themselves off from the rest of humankind. The misanthropy motif arises particularly in connection to the issue of Roman proselytes, i.e. people who choose to forsake the laws of Rome and adopt the Jewish way of life.

The connection between misanthropy and conversion to Judaism is absent from the Greek texts that accuse the Jews of misanthropy, and raises the question: how could Jews be vilified as hostile to non-Jews and at the same time recognized as welcoming converts? Philo and Josephus defend the Mosaic laws with precisely this argument (among others), namely, that Jewish acceptance of proselytes demonstrates the laws’ generous and welcoming character (their *philanthrōpia*). How, then, is the juxtaposition of the themes of misanthropy and conversion to be explained? At the time, there was a significant Jewish population in Rome and some Romans were attracted to Judaism. That people who were born Romans embraced Judaism was threatening to at least some members of the Roman elite as it implied the rejection of Roman laws and *mores*. This perhaps was part of the background to the accusation that Judaism was a “misanthropic way of life.”

Conclusion

This article has argued that the origin of the accusation of misanthropy is most likely Greek—not Egyptian, as other scholars have thought—and that it reflects a Greek interpretative framework. The depiction of the Jewish way of life as misanthropic may go back to Hecataeus of Abdera, at the very beginning of the Hellenistic era, or it may have developed later, in the context of Ptolemaic Egypt, but also of the Judeo-Seleucid conflict of the second century BCE. It is strongly attested to in Diodorus’ *Historical Library* from the first century BCE, where we encounter it twice. The two references to Jewish misanthropy in Diodorus differ: the passage at 40.3 expresses incomprehension rather than hostility, whereas, in 34/35.1, the discourse held by Antiochus VII’s counselors is blatantly antisemitic, to the point of urging the king to wipe out the Jews or at least eradicate their ancestral laws (i.e., Judaism). I have shown that accusations of misanthropy that reflect hostility toward Jews are often found in connection with historical conflicts between Jews and Greeks—be it in the Seleucid kingdom, in Alexandria at the beginning of the first century CE, or in Syria during the first century. Moreover, several authors who depict the Jews as misanthropes share a Stoic or at least universalist ideological background. Finally, in a Roman context, the accusation of misanthropy found in the works of Tacitus and Juvenal became associated with aversion to the phenomenon of conversion to Judaism and the perception of proselytes as betraying Roman values.

From the middle of the second century CE onward, the accusation of misanthropy tends to vanish from Greek and Roman sources. This disappearance may be related to two distinct phenomena. On the one hand, the Jewish revolts against Rome came to an end after the failure of the Bar Kochba revolt in 136 CE, and we do not hear of any more serious political conflicts between Jews and Greeks (whether they had disappeared is doubtful; it may just be a consequence of the fact that the Jews had become much weaker politically). On the other hand, Stoic philosophy started to lose its preeminence during this period, and Medio- or Neoplatonism was on the rise (as the *Anonymous Commentary to Plato’s Theaetetus* [first century CE], the work of Numenius of Apamea [second century CE], and the case of Celsus in Origen’s *Against Celsus*, show). In contrast to Stoicism, Neoplatonism valued people’s faithfulness to their ancestral customs and considered their distinctive characteristics legitimate, even when it came to dietary regulations that prevented participation in common meals. Neoplatonic philosophers never describe the Jewish way of life as misanthropic, and even occasionally view Judaism positively, as when Numenius writes “For what is Plato, but Moses speaking in Attic?,” or when Porphyry states that Pythagoras had been a disciple of the Jews (*Life of Pythagoras* 11).

Christian writings do not contain the accusation of misanthropy against the Jews as such. Originally, Christians were also seen as behaving in misanthropic ways, even though the accusations of ritual murder and cannibalism directed at them point in a different direction and indicate that Christianity was perceived as a kind of mystery cult. In contrast to “pagan” Greeks or Romans, Christians did not blame the Jews for rejecting polytheist cults with their sacrifices and prayers to foreign gods, and for refusing to eat forbidden foods. On the contrary, Christian writings praise the Maccabean martyrs who preferred to die rather than eat pork. Moreover, the notion of a holy people separated from the rest of humankind was not foreign to Christian theology. The early Christians did not share the “pagan” conception of the Jews as misanthropic but had their own anti-Jewish accusations. In 1 Thessalonians 2:15–16, Paul alludes to the Jews’ opposition to the apostles in Judea and writes that the Jews

killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose (or: behave as enemies of) all human beings by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God’s wrath has overtaken them at last” (NRSV, slightly modified).

It is not clear whether Paul is referring to the Jews in general or only to a specific group of Jews from Judea. In any case, his depiction of these Jews as people who “oppose all human beings” differs from the accusation of misanthropy found in Greco-Roman texts. Here the Jews are not accused of keeping apart and of not eating with non-Jews, but of persecuting Paul and the other apostles and preventing them to share the gospel with humanity at large. So ultimately, even though the accusation of misanthropy was not part of early Christian anti-Jewish discourse, the latter nevertheless generated a depiction of the Jews as enemies of humankind.

The accusations of misanthropy formulated by Greek and Roman authors did not vanish forever. In the context of the Enlightenment and its universalistic ethos, the accusation of misanthropy resurfaced in public discourse in connection to the question of the Jews’ access to citizenship and civic rights. This is particularly clear in the case of France. On the eve of the French Revolution, several authors who were hostile to the Jews used the anti-Jewish statements found in Cicero, Tacitus, and other authors of Antiquity to argue for denying the Jews the right to receive the status of citizens. Pro-Jewish figures like Abbé Grégoire and Jewish apologetes like Zalkind Hourwitz defended the Jews by referring to some of the arguments once formulated by Philo and Josephus. In the end, the Jews of France became French citizens in 1791. Nevertheless, the perception of the Jews as a group that remains separate and distinct from the rest of the nation endures in some circles up to the present.

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)