

FROM JUDEOPHOBIA TO ANTISEMITISM: THE ANCIENT WORLD AND THE BIRTH OF CULTURAL ANTISEMITISM

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The Tragedy of the Holocaust (the ferocity of persecution, violence, and genocide directed against the Jewish population in Europe) cannot be understood without grasping the historical and cultural background of European antisemitism. This background is where multiple “traditions,” some millennia-old and others more recent, intersect, and their circulation was accelerated by the mass communication means specific to the 20th century (press, printed material accessibility, and an abundance of brochures and pamphlets). It was also facilitated by the literacy of a significant portion of the population. Following the immense socio-political crisis generated by World War I, especially in the defeated countries, this antisemitic background became the fuel that allowed the creation of the explosive mixture represented by the Nazi ideology. The Nazi policy and the chauvinistic nationalism of associated countries were able to thrive successfully in this specific European antisemitic mental framework, which can be historically outlined in several successive historical patterns: cultural antisemitism, religious antisemitism, economic antisemitism, political antisemitism, and racist antisemitism. This work describes and problematizes the “cultural” origins of antisemitism (Judeophobia) in the ancient Greco-Roman world, which laid the roots upon which other justifications for hostility towards Jews and Judaism were constructed.

Keywords: *Holocaust; antisemitism; cultural antisemitism; Judeophobia; xenophobia; Greco-Roman culture.*

Antisemitism, as it is understood today, signifies hostility towards Jews (as a general identity category) expressed through prejudices and stereotypes with varying degrees of negativity. Its long-term effects involve demonizing the Jewish persona and culturally, politically, socially, and economically discriminating against individuals who identify with this identity or, in extreme cases¹, those to whom this identity is attributed. The expressions of antisemitism are, on one hand, cultural, visible in specific elements of the socio-cultural imagination (language, artistic representations, discourse, collective beliefs, etc.), and, on the other hand, in the case of authoritarian or fascist totalitarian states, they are materialized through various forms of public action against the Jewish communities. These can take the form of discursive marginalization and demonization, legalized persecution (through discriminatory laws), expulsion or deportation, pogroms (organized violence by local communities against Jewish neighbors, often with the passive or even complicit involvement of authorities²), or genocidal violence, as occurred during World War II. For the European culture, antisemitism represents a textbook case of a history of demonizing otherness and discrimination, manifested on a broad historical time and legitimized by a conglomerate of socio-cultural interactions.

If, as historical discussions suggest (Poliakov 2007, for instance), the European tradition of antisemitism is a long one, the term “antisemitism” is relatively recent. Many historians of the phenomenon do not agree with its use before the 19th century, considering it an anachronism that can be replaced by other terms, such as “Judeophobia” (e.g., Bein 1990, 593, Schäfer 1997), or in the case of religious Christian antisemitism, “anti-Judaism” (Langmuir, 1996). Although there are nuances between these terms, if we still consider the defining elements of “modern” antisemitism and observe that these are compatible with the patterns of manifestation of “Judeophobia” before (demonization, marginalization, discrimination, and violence), we can say that the term antisemitism can be used without problems for that period. This is reinforced by both the extensive history and relative coherence of the phenomenon and the connection between the different strands of antisemitism, which, emerging at a certain historical moment, communicated with each other, together shaping an antisemitic mental framework of European culture. This framework resulted not only

¹ For example, assimilated Jews or those who converted to Christianity..

² For example, the pogroms in Tsarist Russia (Kishinev 1903), those from Ukraine at the end of World War I, or the Pogrom in Iași (June 1941).

in Hitler's and his accomplices' irrational manifestation of antisemitism but also in the passivity of a significant portion of the Western population during the Holocaust.

Most historians seem to agree that the term "antisemitism" was coined by Wilhelm Marr (1819-1904), a prolific pamphleteer and political adventurer. At the end of 1879, he founded the "Antisemiten-Liga" (Anti-Semitic League), an organization aimed at opposing the emancipation of Jews in Germany and imposing public restrictions on their participation in the civic and economic life. In the same year, Marr published "Der Sieg des Judenthums über das Germanenthum. Vom nicht confessionellen Standpunkt aus betrachtet" (The Victory of Judaism over Germanism. Viewed from a Non-confessional Standpoint), an anti-assimilationist pamphlet that combined elements of economic antisemitism (i.e. 'emancipation gave rise to Jewish control over finance and industry') with elements of cultural antisemitism, underlined racist statements ("differences between the 'German' and 'Semitic' spirits"). As the word "non-confessional" in the subtitle suggests, Marr was not concerned with religion but with the incompatibility between these two "races". The tone is apocalyptic, proclaiming the imminent victory of Judaism, which explains Marr's need for political action through the establishment of the Anti-Semitic League. The following year (1880), he published a new pamphlet, this time a rallying cry, titled "Der Weg zum Siege des Germanenthums über das Judenthum" (The Path to the Victory of Germanism over Judaism). In this instance, he employed the term "antisemitism" for the first time in a political context³. However, it seems that the term was used sporadically as early as the 1860s. Alex Bein (1990, 594-595) provides details about this usage in the European intellectual circles, emphasizing that although the use of the word did not yet have a political character, it already referred to a conglomerate of prejudices against "Jews". Prejudices that, in a new form, continued older ones.

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Modern antisemitism seems to primarily derive its energy from the exaggeration of differences. However, this is a characteristic of all historical

³ "In Germany, anti-Semitic organizations (antisemitische Vereinigungen) are already forming to oppose Jewish progress. The non-Jewish press regains courage and confidence once more, and in this work presented by me, the following practical way of rejecting Semitism through legal means and imposing limits on it is indicated" (Marr, 1880, 3). The word is used only twice, first in the context quoted above, and the second time to proclaim the need for "anti-Semitic propaganda" ("Antisemitischen Propaganda," Marr 1880: 4).

forms of antisemitism. In its early stages, hostility towards Jews is likely a form of xenophobia. The fear of the unknown, the need to strengthen group identity through adversarial relationships with others, competition for resources are just a few of the primary mechanisms of xenophobia. When certain socio-cultural conditions are met, these mechanisms can transform into identity-based (ethnic) hostility, expressed through excessive value-based and attitudinal generalizations that manifest in language conveying negative prejudices and stereotypes. And when the dynamics of this hostility involve a power imbalance between a “majority culture” and a “minority culture,” the effects can be devastating, extending to sporadic or widespread violence.

If we set aside the historical times framing the narrative of the Exodus from the Bible, an example of persecution *avant la lettre* that somehow anticipates the historical fate of the Jewish people can be identified in the socio-cultural conditions of early antisemitism in Ptolemaic Egypt (305 – 30 BCE) and Seleucid Syria (312 – 63 BCE) during the Hellenistic period. Here, during this era, a “dominant” culture – the Greek culture – interacted from a position of power with cultures and communities considered “dominated,” including the Jewish culture. Let us not forget the prestige of the Greek culture, rooted in the achievements of the Classical Era but amplified on a broad territorial scale by the conquests of Alexander the Great⁴. Furthermore, let us not forget the “cultural chauvinism”⁵ of the Greek culture, which, from its beginnings, looked down upon others, labeling them as barbarians (βάρβαρος).

During this time, the first Jewish diaspora emerges, with its main centers being Alexandria in Egypt and Antioch in Syria. In the 1st century CE, Philo of Alexandria estimates the Jewish population in Egypt at one million (*Flaccus*, 43⁶). The Jewish migration, primarily driven by economic opportunities, later spread throughout the entire Mediterranean basin. In these conditions, the frictions between the Greek, to which in Egypt was added the ancient Egyptian community on the path to Hellenization, and Jewish communities became increasingly visible, giving rise to aversions that, at certain moments, led to violent outbursts.

⁴ Moreover, the two state formations - the Ptolemaic Egypt and the Seleucid Empire - are a direct consequence of these conquests.

⁵ The phrase is borrowed from Minabere Ibelema (2021) and represents the characterization of an attitude of cultural superiority towards otherness.

⁶ *The Works of Philo. Complete and Unabridged*, translated by C. D. Yonge, Peabody, Mass Hendrickson Pub., 1993.

It is worth noting that the first instances of anti-Jewish sentiments originate from within the Egyptian tradition, whose political and cultural interactions with the Jews predate the Hellenistic era⁷. Let us remember the story of the Exodus and the negative role attributed to the Egyptians. Let us recall the conflicts prior to the Hellenistic era, in which the Jews, this time, played a negative role. It is not coincidental that this tense history gave rise to an Egyptian “literary” tradition that was anti-Judaic, primarily manifesting as the demonization of Jewish religious practices (Ruether 1974: 24). First and foremost, this tradition produced a counter-myth that parodied the Hebrew identity narrative of the Exodus from the Bible. This was disseminated in the 3rd century BCE by Manetho, a Heliopolitan Egyptian priest who had been Hellenized, reversing roles and adding sordid details about the Jewish religion: the Jews were actually lepers who were expelled by the Egyptians (Poliakov 2007: 19⁸); the Sabbath did not represent a simple day of rest but reflected the fact that during their escape from Egypt, the Jews could only travel for six days due to syphilis (Ruether 1974: 24). Subsequent writings would reiterate these counter-myths in various forms, enriching them. These “Egyptian” anti-Jewish sentiments became ingrained in the Hellenistic perception of the Jewish people. This perception first emerged when the Greek community encountered the religious distinctiveness of the Jewish communities and subsequently expanded to encompass the Jewish culture as a whole, resulting in negative stereotypes.

One of the issues for Judaism was the lack of unity in its attitude toward the Hellenistic culture and its authorities. In the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE, both in Judaea and in the diaspora, there were at least three main factions (cf. Johnson 2015: 121-122): the isolationist religious fundamentalists (such as the Essenes, who withdrew to the desert rather than mingle with the Greek and Hellenized world), the religious Jews (who submitted to authorities in civil matters but aimed to practice their religion without interference), and the reformist Jews (part of the ruling class in Judaea who sought Hellenization and modernization of their religious practices).

⁷ The invasion of the Hyksos population – 16th century BCE), which some Egyptian historians (Manetho, 3rd century BCE) have associated with the Jews, the Persian invasion (5th century BCE), and the collaboration of the Jewish population with them (in Elephantine).

⁸ For complex details on the history of Manetho, see Schäfer 1997: 17 and following. This counter-myth will also be echoed by Latin authors, such as Tacitus (*Histories*, 328 and the following pages).

All of these would prompt the Hellenistic authorities to interfere in the relative autonomy of the Jewish communities, leading to several open conflicts. One of these conflicts was the Maccabean Revolt, sparked by the harsh intervention of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the Jewish religious practices in Jerusalem, most likely at the instigation of the reforming and Hellenizing party. Antiochus temporarily put an end to religious tolerance toward traditional Judaism. Religious persecution seemed to take severe and irrational forms, with almost every ritual element of Judaism being prohibited by decrees: the Temple in Jerusalem was dedicated to a syncretic cult that combined Greek and Jewish elements, the observance of the Sabbath, circumcision, and adherence to Jewish dietary laws were banned.

The revolt, which lasted for seven years (167–160 BCE) and resulted in the Jewish autonomy until the Roman era under the Hasmonean dynasty (142–63 BCE), was a response to this religious and cultural oppression. It strengthened the Jewish identity in the region but simultaneously deepened the Hellenistic cultural aversion towards Jews. As Bezalel Bar-Kochva (2010: 9), the editor of a volume of commentary on the anti-Jewish literature from the Hellenistic period, shows, the Maccabean Revolt and the anti-Hellenistic reaction of the Hasmonean dynasty marked a turning point in the ancient culture regarding the attitudes towards Jews, which became explicitly antisemitic.

“The Hasmonaean destruction of Hellenistic temples and cult centers in the Holy Land, the conquests and destruction in Hellenistic cities, the annexation of territories to the Jewish state, the exiling of residents or their forceful conversion — including circumcision — all exacerbated the antagonism of Greek enlightened authors toward the Jewish people. Later on, the tension between Jewish and Greek as well as Hellenized Oriental populations in the Hellenistic diaspora worsened, especially in Egyptian Alexandria.”

In fact, what Hellenistic society reproaches Jews for is the resistance of Jewish communities to Hellenization, which is evident in this religious exclusivity and the rigidity of associated rituals and customs. The anti-Jewish attitudes of the Greeks

“expressed the popular reaction to the religiously sanctioned exclusivity of the Jews. This reaction was not racial, since it would disappear as soon as a Jew gave up his life under Jewish law. It was the spontaneous reaction to a social group that lived in the midst of Hellenistic cities according to a religious law that set it apart from the cultural manners of others. It was a

reaction specifically to the social consequences of Jewish religion. Since Hellenistic society regarded Greek culture as the standard for humane existence, that such a group of «barbarians» would refuse assimilation into Hellenistic culture on the grounds that its gods were false and its manners «unclean» was a cultural affront of no small proportions” (Ruether 1974: 25).

What did the Greeks reproach to the Jews? First and foremost, monotheism, a peculiarity in the ancient polytheistic world, as well as iconoclasm (the prohibition of representing divinity). The worship of a single “god” (even if a sort of *summus deus* that the Romans would come to equate with Jupiter) led to accusations of impiety (toward the gods and divinities of the Greek world). The absence of any representation of divinity led people to believe that the Jews were atheists, an accusation that was added to that of “misanthropy”. Apollonius Molon (1st century BCE) said that the Jews were those without God and those who hated humanity (“hōs atheous kai misantrōpous”), as did other writers of the time whose ideas have come down to us (cf. Schäfer 1997: 21-23, 41, etc.).

Furthermore, in the Roman imperial era, the strictness of monotheism would put the Jews in the position of being unable to worship the emperor’s cult, and thus the accusation of impiety would transform into one of civil disobedience (cf. Flavius Josephus 2001: 473), reinforcing the overall negative perception of them. During the Roman imperial period, the accusation of religious proselytism (conversion to Judaism) would also arise and continue into the Christian era, leading to legal measures⁹. Another accusation was the veneration of a donkey’s head (the infamous Ass Libel) by the Jews, an image that had its origins in Egypt but was heavily used in the anti-Jewish propaganda of Antiochus Epiphanes (Bar-Kochva, 1996), ridiculing primarily the religious steadfastness of the Jews.

A specific accusation that began to circulate in the Hellenistic era, stemming from the religious rituals practiced in the Temple of Jerusalem, is that of “human sacrifice” or “ritual murder.” Referring to an incident during the Maccabean Revolt, Apion of Alexandria¹⁰ (30-20 BCE – 45-48 CE), one of the most Judeophobic Hellenistic writers, tells the story of how Antiochus IV entered the Temple in Jerusalem and found a Greek

⁹ For the attraction of non-Jews to Judaism and the issue of proselytism in the ancient world, see Feldman 1993.

¹⁰ In fact, Apion himself is reiterating the story from other authors, such as Posidonius of Apamea (cf. Langmuir 1996: 212, Bar-Kochva 2010: 441).

man who had been abducted, taken to the temple, and placed there “to be fattened” for sacrifice. Apion’s writings have not been preserved, but they were summarized by Flavius Josephus in his treatise *Against Apion* (*Contra Apionem*, approximately 94 CE):

„The practice was repeated annually at a fixed season. They would kidnap a Greek foreigner (*Graecum peregrinum*), fatten him up for a year, and then convey him to a wood, where they slew him (*occidere quidem eum hominem*), sacrificed his body with their customary ritual (*eiusque corpus sacrificare secundum suas sollemnitates*), partook of his flesh (*et gustare ex eius visceribus*), and, while immolating the Greek, swore an oath of hostility to the Greeks (*iusiurandum facere inimolatione Graeci, ut inimicitias contra Graecos haberent*). The remains of their victim were then thrown into a pit. The man (Apion continues) stated that he had now but a few days left to live, and implored the king, out of respect for the gods of Greece (*erubescens Graecorum deos*), to defeat this Jewish plot upon his life-blood and to deliver him from his miserable predicament.” (Josephus *apud* Schäfer 1997: 63)

It is important to take note of this anti-Jewish “narrative” because it already foreshadows the medieval accusation of ritual murder (the Blood Libel)¹¹ and the conspiracy against the entire world. Other observations about the peculiarities of Jewish customs, most of which derive from the rigor of their religion, would further reinforce the perception of the Jew as a “cultural outsider” in antiquity: the dietary prohibition of consuming pork, the practice of circumcision, the observance of the Sabbath as a day of rest (especially in the Roman era, where accusations of laziness and indolence emerged) – all these elements contributed to the negative popular perception of Jews, primarily as an “antisocial” people. These elements merely echoed, in a shocking manner, the earlier negative attitudes, reinforcing the idea that the Jew was a foreign body not only to the Hellenistic and later Roman culture but also to all of humanity (Daniel 1979: 61).

The silent conflict between Greeks and Jews, in which Egyptians and Roman authorities also participated, had its moments of violence, particularly during the Roman imperial era, indicating a gradual accumulation of cultural animosities. One of the most significant outbreaks of violence was the pogrom in Alexandria in the year 38 CE. This event occurred during

¹¹ It is just an anticipation. As the medievalist Gavin Langmuir (1996, 214) argues, „there is a complete discontinuity between the earliest accusations of ritual murder against Jews in antiquity and the earliest medieval accusations [such as those in Norwich around the year 1150].”

a period of imbalance in the relationship between Rome and its provinces. The imperial throne had just been occupied by Caligula, and local governors (such as a certain Avillius Flaccus in the case of Alexandria) created conflicts on the local level to prove their usefulness or to form new alliances. Several circumstantial events were added to this mix, such as the visit of Agrippa I, the king designated by Caligula for Judaea, and the placement of the emperor's statues in the Alexandrian synagogues at the request of the Hellenized crowds. These events exacerbated the differences between the groups, placing the Jewish community in the role of a scapegoat, including through local decrees. Flaccus abolished the citizenship rights of the Jews through a proclamation and forcibly confined them to a single district in Alexandria, Delta, "the first known ghetto in history" (Schäfer 1997: 140). Abandoned houses and shops were looted, some of those who did not make it to the "ghetto" were lynched, and others, losing their means of livelihood, died of starvation. Here is how Philo described the violence (*Flaccus*: 66-68):

"[...] and in this way their enemies, who in their savage madness had become transformed into the nature of wild beasts, slew them and thousands of others with all kinds of agony and tortures, and newly invented cruelties, for wherever they met with or caught sight of a Jew, they stoned him, or beat him with sticks, not at once delivering their blows upon mortal parts, lest they should die speedily, and so speedily escape from the sufferings which it was their design to inflict upon them. Some persons even, going still great and greater lengths in the iniquity and license of their barbarity, disdained all blunter weapons, and took up the most efficacious arms of all, fire and iron, and slew many with the sword, and destroyed not a few with flames. And the most merciless of all their persecutors in some instances burnt whole families, husbands with their wives, and infant children with their parents, in the middle of the city, sparing neither age nor youth, nor the innocent helplessness of infants."

In the case of the Alexandria pogrom, we see the image of the first potentate (Flaccus) who uses the masses' hatred and their need to channel their violence towards a scapegoat for personal political gain¹². In this

¹² Cf. Schäfer 1997: 143: "It is first and foremost a political drama in the triangle of Flaccus, Gaius Caligula, and the Alexandrians. The Jews are the innocent victims of a political conflict of interests: Gaius' accession to the throne disturbs the balance of power in Alexandria. The Roman prefect, until then of unimpeachable reputation, suddenly has reason to fear falling out of favor with the new emperor and begins to run amok. He neglects his duties and finally, in his desperate search for allies, cooperates with his former enemies, the representatives of the Greek Alexandrians. They demand that he

instance, as frequently in the history that would follow, the Jews found themselves on the receiving end of a political maneuver that exploited the majority's animosity towards a marginalized minority. Other incidents of this kind would be sporadic and not reach the intensity of the one in Alexandria. However, such an incident (an anti-Jewish pogrom in Caesarea in 66 CE) would trigger the Judaeen revolt and the Roman war against the rebels between 66 and 70 CE. This war led to the destruction of the Second Temple and the disintegration of the Jewish community in Judaea. The causes of the revolt were more systemic (poverty, poor Roman administration of Judaea, the acceleration of Hellenization, the rise of religious fundamentalism among the Jerusalem Jews due to social discontent, etc.), but that specific incident served as the immediate spark. Jerusalem was besieged and destroyed by Titus (in 70 CE), the son of Emperor Vespasian and a future emperor himself, and part of the population was enslaved and expelled from Judaea. The Jewish diaspora grew with these events. The destruction of the Temple gave rise to a new religious vision, the rabbinic vision, a decentralized focus on the strict preservation of religious identity in the diaspora. This vision would become the foundation of Judaism for the next two millennia, enabling the preservation of identity through strict adherence to the Law, the memory of Jerusalem, and the hope of return. However, as a side effect, this vision also fostered an isolationist psychology among the Jewish communities worldwide and led to the amplification of negative perceptions of the Jews, accusing them even more intensely of religious fundamentalism and anti-civilizational particularism.

As we have seen above, in the Roman world conflicts are exacerbated at its extremities, although feelings of hostility seem to be widespread, being conveyed in a more or less direct form in classical texts. In fact, the Romans feared the subversive nature of Jewish customs for Roman culture and traditional values, and they despised the boundaries imposed by the Jews' religious rigor, which, in their view, made the Jews unreceptive to the cultural and civilizational richness of Rome. A good synthesis of these negative sentiments can be found in the fictional reconstruction of the autobiography of Hadrian written by Marguerite Yourcenar:

“The Alexandrian Jews, egged on by their coreligionists in Judaea, did their best to aggravate a situation already bad. The synagogue of Jerusalem

sacrifice the Jews, and in acquiescing to their demand he brings on a horrible pogrom. His political calculation, however, turns out to be wrong: he does fall out of favor, for whatever historical reason and is arrested, banished, and later executed.”

delegated Akiba to me, its most venerable member; almost a nonagenarian, and knowing no Greek, he came with the mission of prevailing upon me to abandon projects already under way at Jerusalem. Aided by my interpreters I held several colloquies with him which, on his part, were mere pretext for monologue. In less than an hour I felt able to define his thought exactly, though not subscribing to it; he made no corresponding effort concerning my own. This fanatic did not even suspect any reasoning possible on premises other than those he set forth. I offered his despised people a place among the others in the Roman community; Jerusalem, however, speaking through Akiba, signified its intention of remaining, to the end, the fortress of a race and of a god isolated from human kind.” (M. Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Adrian*)

Historians who have conducted detailed analyses of classical literature have observed predominantly negative attitudes and stereotypes, as well as a widespread contempt (cf. Daniel 1979: 46) that, by reflecting popular sentiments, would also manifest at the level of the elites. In the 2nd century, it even led to a “state” hostility directed against the Jewish identity. This manifested, for instance, during the reign of Emperor Hadrian, a great admirer of the Greek culture and a proponent of a Pan-Hellenic policy for cultural homogenization in the eastern regions of the empire. His intention to completely rebuild Jerusalem as a Roman city (Aelia Capitolina) and his laws against circumcision would lead to a new Jewish revolt in the region¹³, which the emperor would brutally suppress. This is the historical moment when the Jews became a minority in Judaea, now renamed Palestine. The Jewish identity continued to exist through the diaspora communities, which now became the focal point of Judaism.

However, we should not deduce from this, despite sporadic events (the persecution by Antiochus IV, the Alexandria Pogrom, the Roman-era rebellions and their bloody suppression), a passionate antisemitism as would emerge later, or a state-sponsored antisemitism (Poliakov 2001: 21). State-sponsored antisemitism would emerge in the subsequent period, along with medieval religious antisemitism. The only elements of anti-Jewish legislation were Hadrian’s laws against circumcision, which were later revoked by his successor, Pius Antoninus. But we cannot deny the presence of cultural antisemitism in antiquity (stemming from direct negative assessments of Jewish customs and religious practices), which initially framed hostile attitudes towards Judaism. This cultural antisemitism at this

¹³ Which, according to Cassius Dio, would lead to the death of 580,000 Jews (cf. Strauss 2021, 215).

stage mainly observed the fact that the Jew was a foreign entity within a unified “universal” culture (Greco-Roman spirituality) and fueled a popular attitude of hostility, sometimes expressed with violence. Moreover, as seen above, the triggering mechanism for this cultural antisemitism is the religious difference, which would intensify in the centuries to come.

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