

That the classical thinkers of the ancient world were not all avowed anti-Semites is the thesis here presented by Dr. Louis H. Feldman, assistant professor of classical languages and civilization at Yeshiva University. He is also managing editor of *The Classical World* (formerly *The Classical Weekly*), and the author of many learned articles in his field.

PHILO-SEMITISM AMONG ANCIENT INTELLECTUALS

In 1895 Théodore Reinach, the distinguished Franco-Jewish classicist, published a collection of all references to the Jews in Greek and Latin literature.¹ Scholars who have examined this corpus have emphasized the almost universal prevalence of virulent anti-Semitism in the remarks of these pagan writers of antiquity. In Germany, it became fashionable, as seen in the writings of Stähelin, Wilcken, and Willrich, to cite these passages in promoting the thesis that there was something inherent in the Jew's characteristics that produced anti-Semitism wherever he went, especially among men of intellectual attainments.² We may well ask whether there is something indigenous in Orthodox Judaism³ that the intelligent Gentile dislikes, or whether there is any evidence that some intelligent non-Jews in antiquity actually admired the

1. T. Reinach, *Textes d'auteurs grecs et romains relatifs au Judaïsme* (Paris, 1895). Certain omissions have been listed by H. Willrich in his review of Reinach's book in *Philologische Wochenschrift*, XV (1895), 987-989.

2. Cf. J. Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and Synagogue* (London, 1934), 1-2.

3. Despite the learned attempt of E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (6 vols.: New York; Bollingen Foundation, 1953-56), to show that Diaspora Judaism had deviated from what is now called the Orthodox tradition, the literary evidence of the Jewish, Christian, and pagan writers, as well as the epigraphical evidence from Jewish cemeteries, is overwhelmingly opposed to his thesis.

soldiers, including the Jews, assist in the rebuilding of a pagan temple. He quotes Hecataeus as saying that "they deserve admiration on this account."¹ Even Tacitus notes — to be sure, without comment — their contempt for death. For, speaking of the siege of Jerusalem, he says that "all who were able bore arms, and a number, more than proportionate to the population, dared to do so. There was equal stubbornness on the part of men and women; and if they were to be compelled to leave their abodes, they were more fearful of life than of death."² That Tacitus must have admired this contempt for death is clear when we recall that both of the schools of philosophy most popular with Roman intellectuals — Epicureanism and Stoicism — expressed contempt for death; and Cicero, the greatest of Roman intellectuals, had made contempt for death the chief theme of his *Tusculan Disputations*. A century after Tacitus, Dio Cassius, whose admiration for the Jews we have already noted, marvels at the Jewish resistance against Titus before the fall of the Temple in the year 70: "The Jews resisted [Titus] with more ardor than ever, as if it were a kind of windfall³ to fall fighting beside the Temple and in its defense Although they were few and fighting against a foe far outnumbering them, they were not overcome until a part of the Temple had caught fire. Then some impaled themselves voluntarily upon the swords of the Romans, others slew one another, others made away with themselves or leaped into the flames. They all believed, especially the last, that it was not a disaster but victory, salvation, and happiness to perish together with the Temple."⁴ Dio also marvels at the stubbornness of the Jewish resistance under Bar Cochba.⁵

As to justice, Apion, the confirmed anti-Semite against whom Josephus wrote his treatise, alleges without further explanation that the Jewish laws are unjust.⁶ Tacitus explains this charge by stating that the Jews are unjust toward other peoples. But even Tacitus admits that the Jews are inflexibly trustworthy and ever

1. Josephus *Against Apion* i. 22. 192-193.

2. Tacitus *Histories* v. 13.

3. The Greek word here is *hermaion*—"a gift of Hermes," i.e. an unexpected piece of luck.

4. Dio Cassius *Roman History* lxvi. 6.

5. *Op. cit.* lxix. 12-14.

6. In Josephus *Against Apion* ii. 11. 125.

ready to show compassion to their fellow-Jews.¹ The word used here by Tacitus for trustworthiness, *fides*, is one which to the Romans was, as Cicero put it in his treatise *On Moral Duties*, the foundation of justice.² It was the lack of this quality which Livy attacks more than any other failing in Hannibal, who, he claims, had *perfidia plus quam Punica* — treachery greater even than that which one would expect in a Carthaginian.³

Perhaps the greatest tribute, however, to the high ethical standards of the Jews is that paid by the Emperor Alexander Severus (possibly, though not probably, to be identified with Antoninus, the friend of Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi), who was one of the most cultured of the Roman Emperors. (He was so deeply interested in ethical philosophy that he devoted part of every day to a study of Plato's *Republic* and Cicero's *On Moral Duties* and *Republic*.) In his biography of Alexander Severus, Aelius Lampridius remarks: "He [Alexander Severus] often used to proclaim this maxim — which he doubtless had heard and retained from certain Jews or Christians — and when he corrected someone, he would order it to be proclaimed by a public crier: 'Quod tibi fieri non vis, alteri ne feceris.' ('What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to another.') He loved this sentiment so much that he ordered it engraved on the palace and on public works."⁴ This maxim, of course, is the famous statement in *Sabbath* 31a of Hillel to the proselyte; its negative form proves that it is Jewish rather than Christian in origin. Even Bishop Ambrose, whose anti-Semitism was notorious in the fourth century, admitted that the ethical standards of some Jews was high.⁵

Of the four cardinal virtues it was the wisdom of the Jews which was most admired. As early as the sixth century B.C.E., the Greek poet-philosopher Xenophanes had criticized Homer — the Bible of the Greeks — for ascribing to the gods "all deeds that are a shame and a disgrace among men — stealing, adultery, and fraud."⁶ "Mortals," he says, "seem to have begotten gods who have their own dress and voice and form."⁷ His henotheistic

1. Tacitus *Histories* v. 5.

2. Cicero *De Officiis* i. 7.

3. Livy *Ab Urbe Condita* xxi. 4.9.

4. Aelius Lampridius, "Life of Alexander Severus," 51, in *Historia Augusta*.

5. Ambrose *Commentary on the Psalms* i. 41, xiv. 943.

6. Xenophanes, fragment 10.

7. Xenophanes, frag. 12.

Philo-Semitism among Ancient Intellectuals

conclusion was that "there is one god, supreme among gods and men, resembling mortals neither in form nor in mind. He is all eye, all mind, and all ear."¹ This attack on the traditional polytheism and promulgation of an intellectual monism continue with Xenophanes' pupil Parmenides and with the latter's spiritual heirs, Socrates and Plato. It is not surprising, therefore, that the philosophers, in this attack, should have found allies in the Jews. Three contemporaries, in the generation after Aristotle's death — the historian Megasthenes and the philosophers Theophrastus and Clearchus of Soli — speak of the Jews as being philosophers by race. Megasthenes, who, as Werner Jaeger² has ingeniously argued, was probably the source of the statements of Clearchus, remarks that the same wisdom found in the old Greek philosophers was also to be seen in the doctrines held by the Hindu Brahmans (whom he had actually visited) and the Jews.³ Clearchus goes one step further and states that the Jews are actually descendants of Hindu philosophers.⁴ Theophrastus' phrase, "inasmuch as they [i.e. the Jews] are philosophers by race,"⁵ indicates, as Max Radin⁶ has properly concluded, that the pure notions of the Jews with respect to the nature of God — which was with the Greeks the chief and highest subject of philosophy — were widely known among intellectuals.⁷ Evidently word had spread of the tremendous impression made upon the great Aristotle by the learned Jew whom, according to Clearchus, he had met in Asia Minor.

Aristotle's pupil Theophrastus found the wisdom of the Jews particularly admirable because of their custom of carrying on discussions on the nature of the Deity. The fact that the masses participated in theological discussions — probably, it has been

1. Xenophanes, frags. 19-20.

2. W. Jaeger, *Diokles von Karystos: Die griechische Medizin und die Schule des Aristoteles* (Berlin, 1938), 140 ff. In his article "Greeks and Jews: The First Greek Records of Jewish Religion and Civilization," *Journal of Religion*, XVIII (1938), 127-143, esp. 138, Jaeger shows that Hecataeus must have been the source of Theophrastus.

3. Megasthenes, fragment 41, cited by Clement of Alexandria *Stromateis* (*Miscellanies*), i. 15.

4. Clearchus, in Josephus *Against Apion* i. 22. 179.

5. Cited by Porphyry *De Abstinence* ii. 26.

6. Radin (above, p. 28 note 1), 86.

7. It is interesting to note that Pythagoras' condemnation of the use of images (cf. Diogenes Laertius *Lives of the Philosophers* i. 6-9) was ascribed to Jewish influence.

conjectured, in the synagogues, which had come into being several centuries earlier — led Theophrastus to call the Jews philosophers by *race* and made them unique in his eyes.

Among the Romans this exclusiveness of Jewish monotheism aroused bitter attacks against them on the part of many intellectuals, particularly the Stoics, who felt that the Jews lacked the broad liberalism toward other religions that was a hallmark of the official Roman imperial policy. But it was precisely this pure monotheism which is praised by the learned philosopher and antiquarian Varro in a passage quoted in Augustine's *City of God*: "He [Varro] says . . . that the ancient Romans worshipped the gods without an image for more than 170 years. 'And if the custom,' he says, 'had remained until the present day, the gods would now be worshipped with greater purity.' To support this opinion he cites as a witness among others the Jewish people; nor does he hesitate to conclude this passage by saying of those who first set up images of the gods for the people that they have both taken away fear from their fellow-citizens and added error."¹ Other Romans, most notably Livy in the preface to the first book of his great history, were to compare their own degenerate times unfavorably with the simpler and purer living of the past. And it has long been argued that Tacitus himself (in his ethnographic essay *Germania*) was satirizing Roman degeneracy by describing the severe and simple institutions of the barbarians, which would often remind the Roman reader of Rome's own early golden era of simplicity before its conquest of Greece in the second century B.C.E. had introduced Greek effeminacy. Because of the high regard throughout antiquity for Varro's learning and versatility,² it is quite conceivable that he might have influenced other intellectuals whose works are now lost to look upon the simplicity of Jewish monotheism as reminiscent of their own golden age, when the Roman religion was imageless. With regard to Cicero, critics ought not to be misled into thinking that his bitter attack against the "furious mass" of the Jews in his oration in defense of Flaccus³

1. Augustine *City of God* iv. 31. 2.

2. Cf. M. Hadas, *A History of Latin Literature* (New York, 1952), 104: "Varro is indubitably the greatest scholar and most productive writer of Rome. . . . Varro's total output has been calculated to comprise seventy-four separate works in 620 books."

3. Cicero *Pro Flacco* 28. 66.

Philo-Semitism among Ancient Intellectuals

is necessarily typical of the thinking of Roman intellectuals of his era, that of the last years of the Republic. Cicero was, after all, a lawyer, who was defending a client who had been accused of, among other things, seizing money collected by the Jews of Asia Minor for the Temple in Jerusalem. He uses the rhetorical device known as *vituperatio*, which consists of commonplaces (there were commonplaces for all the nations of antiquity) built out of slanted facts and exaggerated gossip.¹

That Varro's admiration for the pure monotheism of the Jews had its followers can be inferred even from Tacitus, who thus contrasts the Jews with other peoples: "The Egyptians worship very many animals and images of composite creatures; the Jews conceive of a single Deity with their minds alone. They regard as impious those who fashion images of gods in human shape out of perishable materials. Their God is supreme and eternal, neither capable of imitation nor of death."² Tacitus, to be sure, makes these remarks without comment; but the notion of a Supreme Being who is eternal and indestructible is found in many of the pre-Socratics, Plato, and Aristotle. These, then, were ideas widely held by the philosophers, several of whom, such as Theophrastus and Varro, had seen the similarity with the doctrines held by the Jews, whom they admired for the purity of this conception.

Not only the wisdom of the Jews in spiritual matters but their wisdom in general was admired in antiquity. A few writers such as Apion criticized the Jews for not having produced any remarkable men, inventors of useful arts, or distinguished sages.³ But the wisdom of Abraham, Joseph, and Moses found many admirers. Even Apollonius Molo, the teacher of Cicero, who otherwise is a confirmed anti-Semite, speaks of Abraham as wise.⁴ The historian

1. We know from other orations that Cicero's attitudes varied to suit his case: thus, for example, when speaking before the people in defense of Rabirius (*Pro Rabirio* 14-15), he praises the great courage, sense of duty, and eloquence which the Gracchi—the great democrats—possessed; but later in the same year, while addressing the aristocratic Senate on the Catilinarian conspiracy, he declares that the murderers of the Gracchi had not been stained but honored by the blood which they had shed (*In Catilinam* i. 29). Similarly, his attitude toward the Greeks varied with the situation. Cf. my doctoral thesis, *Cicero's Conception of Historiography*, (Harvard University, 1951), 136-138.

2. Tacitus *Histories* v. 5.

3. In Josephus *Against Apion* ii. 12. 135.

4. In Eusebius *Praeparatio Evangelica* ix. 19. 2.

Pompeius Trogus,¹ who flourished under the Emperor Augustus, speaks of Joseph's *excellens ingenium* ("outstanding ability") and says that Moses was remarkable both for his handsomeness and for his knowledge — a combination of qualities which brings forth the highest praise from all of the ancients from the time of Homer.

The Jewish system of education and their level of learning won considerable commendation not only from Aristotle and Theophrastus, as noted above, but also from the Stoic philosopher Seneca the Younger, who admits that the Jews "know the cause of their rites, while most other peoples know not why they perform theirs."² But it is particularly the early Christian intellectuals who in their disputations with the Jews bear witness to the Jewish reputation for learning. Thus Justin Martyr, the greatest of the early Christian disputants, in his controversy with Trypho (whom some have identified with Rabbi Tarphon) remarks that the Jews always manage to hunt up their opponents' weak points like flies which settle on sore places.³ A number of the Christians, such as Origen, Clement, Eusebius, and Jerome, had Jewish teachers whose learning they recognize and whose Agadahs they sometimes quote or paraphrase.⁴ Eusebius, speaking of the *deuterotai* (i.e. the Talmudic rabbis, in all probability), who represent the *agraphos paradosis* (i.e. the unwritten tradition), says that they are people whose faculties have been trained to penetrate to the very heart of Scripture.⁵ Even Ambrose, who was so bitterly hostile to the Jews that he exerted the strongest pressure on the Emperor Theodosius not to force the Christians to rebuild a synagogue which they had wantonly burnt,⁶ nevertheless admitted that "some Jews exhibit . . . much diligence and love of study."⁷

1. In Justin's *Epitome* xxxvi. 2.

2. The interpretation of this passage (quoted by Augustine *City of God* vi. 11) is disputed; but cf. Reinach (above, p. 27 note 1), 263.

3. Justin *Dialogue* 115.

4. Cf. S. Krauss, "The Jews in the Works of the Church Fathers," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, V (1892-93), 122-157; VI (1893-94), 82-99 and 225-261. I am much indebted to this article for the discussion of the Jews in Patristic literature.

5. Eusebius *Praeparatio Evangelica* xii. 1.

6. Ambrose *Epistles* 40 and 41, in Migne's *Patrologia Latina* 16. 1148-1171. Cf. the discussion by J. E. Seaver, *Persecution of the Jews in the Roman Empire (300-438)*, (Lawrence, Kansas, 1952), 41-44.

7. Ambrose *Commentary on Psalms* i. 41, xiv. 943.

Philo-Semitism among Ancient Intellectuals

It is, however, the learned Jerome in the fourth century, who elsewhere bitterly accuses the Jews of depravity and of persecuting the Christians, who pays tribute to the Jewish women who undergo great sacrifices to provide religious teachers.¹ The Jews, he says — in a tone half of envy and half of reproach — go to great lengths to strengthen their memories: “In childhood they acquire the complete vocabulary of their language and learn to recite all the generations from Adam to Zerubbabel with such accuracy and facility as if they were simply giving their names.”² Jerome also alludes to the Jews’ love of books: every synagogue had its library, from which books could be borrowed. The impression gained from reading Jerome is that he regards learning as so universal among Jews that all of them are competent to answer questions on Scripture. Jerome’s own Jewish teacher knew Greek and Latin (he quotes Virgil, for example)³ as well as Hebrew and Aramaic.

It was not only in Biblical matters that the Jews were well versed. In those days also the Jews had excellent reputations as physicians; and Celsus, the greatest Roman authority on medicine, mentions two Jewish medical authorities, one for a remedy for fracture of the head and the other for a remedy to stop the extension of gangrene.⁴

Not all of the ancients, however, regarded the Jews as cultured intellectuals. Thus the astronomer and mathematician Cleomenes, who lived after Posidonius, satirizes the infelicity of Epicurus’ style by remarking that he gathered his expressions from the midst of the synagogues or among the people who go begging there: “it is a Jewish jargon of bad character,⁵ indeed lower than anything that creeps under the sun.”⁶ And yet, it is the very opposite quality, felicity of expression in the Jews’ great book, the Bible, which is praised by one of antiquity’s most distinguished literary critics, pseudo-Longinus, the author of the treatise *On the Sublime* in the first century C.E. Longinus quotes part of the opening of Genesis (the first quotation from the Bible in classical literature)

1. Jerome *Against Jovinianus* 25.

2. *Epistle to Titus* 3. 9. Quoted by Krauss (above, p. 36 note 4), VI (1893-94), 231-232.

3. Jerome *Preface to Daniel*.

4. Celsus *De Medicina* v. 19. 11 and v. 22. 4.

5. The Greek word *paracharasso*, which is here used, refers to debased coins.

6. Cleomedes *Theoria Kyklike* ii. 1.

and praises Moses: "It is thus that the legislator of the Jews, who was not a chance comer, has worthily conceived and expressed the power of the Divinity."¹

In summary, an examination of the references to the Jews in classical writers indicates that there is no real basis to the view that there is something inherent in Orthodox Jewish particularism and separatism which the non-Jewish intellectual has always disliked. The very highest praise which could be accorded anyone in antiquity, namely the ascription of the four cardinal virtues — temperance, courage, justice, and wisdom, was bestowed upon the Jews. Their temperance, particularly in the observance of the dietary laws, was lauded especially by Aristotle, who as a physician and as the master of the theory of the "golden mean" was well equipped to pass judgment on this characteristic. The courage of the Jews, particularly in their refusal to violate the Sabbath and to participate in idol worship, is mentioned by the historians Hecataeus and Dio Cassius, the latter of whom is notably impressed by the zeal with which they fought in defense of the Temple against Titus. The Jewish concept of justice was so admired by the Emperor Alexander Severus, as we have seen, that he engraved Hillel's rule upon the palace and the public works. Finally, and above all, the reputation of the Jews for wisdom was so high that it was recognized by three of the greatest philosophers — Aristotle, Theophrastus, and Varro — produced in antiquity, as well as by the Church Fathers, especially Jerome. Jewish skill in the medical arts and in literary style was likewise noted by two of the foremost authorities in these respective areas, Celsus and pseudo-Longinus. If we later find attacks on the Jews, we must remember that they are often rhetorical commonplaces² or satirical exaggerations, and they first arise in Alexandria, where the Jews, who were socially and economically ambitious, attempted to "harmonize" their Judaism with pagan thought and to minimize the differences between their neighbors and themselves.

It is significant that the highest praise for the Jews is voiced by those who first came into contact with them: thus, the first

1. "Longinus" *On the Sublime* 9. The authenticity of this passage has been questioned, but it has been vindicated by W. R. Roberts, *Longinus on the Sublime*, (Cambridge, 1907), 231 ff.

2. Cf. Radin (above, p. 28 note 1), 196.

Philo-Semitism among Ancient Intellectuals

Greek to mention them, Aristotle, finds that they possess all four cardinal virtues, particularly wisdom; and Varro, who was a close friend and contemporary of the first Roman (Cicero) to speak of them, is impressed by the purity of their monotheism. Anti-Semitism arises in Alexandria largely because the Jews turned their chief energies away from the study and pursuit of Judaism toward gaining greater political prominence through citizenship and greater social prominence through admission to the theatres and the public games. The background for the final expulsion of the Jews from Alexandria in the year 414 is thus described in the *Church History* of Socrates: "In consequence of the Jews being disengaged from business on the Sabbath, and spending their time not in hearing the Law but in theatrical amusements, dancers usually collect great crowds on that day, and disorder is almost invariably produced."¹ On one such Sabbath, an incident in an Alexandrian theatre led to such violence that the archbishop Cyril caused all the Jews to be expelled from the city. An Aristotle or a Theophrastus tells us not of the Jews' eagerness to attend theatrical amusements but of their zealous devotion to the pursuit of wisdom through study.

1. Socrates *Church History* vii. 13. Quoted by Seaver (above, p. 36 note 6), 15.