12. Tacitus and the Defamation of the Jews

Jews do not fare very well at the hands of Cornelius Tacitus. The great consular historian devoted thirteen chapters to them at the beginning of Book V of his Histories, chapters constituting a digression from his main text, but a remarkably extensive one. Tacitus sets them at the point where he intends to embark on the narrative of the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The reason, as he puts it, is that, since he is about to relate the demise of a famous city, he thought it appropriate to say something about its origins.¹ The opening sends its own signal. Tacitus employs the phrase famosa urbs, a characteristically Tacitean touch, i.e. “infamous” or “notorious” city, rather than “renowned” or “celebrated”. And matters seem to go downhill from that point on.

This excursus is the longest extant discussion of the Jews by any Greek or Latin author—or rather by any pagan author. Hence it merits a spotlight for the treatment of ancient attitudes toward Jews. And it does so on more than one count. The digression arguably contains some of the most hostile comments on record regarding that people.² Among other remarks, Tacitus brands the Jews as a race of men hated by the gods.³ They regard as profane everything that we (Romans) hold as sacred—and vice versa.⁴ Their practices are base and wicked, and prevail through their own depravity.⁵ They are a people most especially inclined to lust. Although they won’t sleep with gentiles, among themselves there is nothing they won’t do (nihil illicitum). Those who cross over to their ways scorn the gods, abandon their own nation, and hold their parents, siblings, and children cheap.⁶ Jewish rites are sordid and ridiculous.⁷ Jews throughout their history were the most despised of subject peoples and the basest of nations.⁸

¹ Tac. Hist. 5.2.1: sed quoniam famosae urbis supremum diem tradituri sumus congruens videtur primordia eius aperire.
³ Tac. Hist. 5.3.1.
⁴ Tac. Hist. 5.4.1.
⁵ Tac. Hist. 5.5.1.
⁷ Tac. Hist. 5.5.5.
⁸ Tac. Hist. 5.8.2.
That is pretty strong stuff. One should hardly be surprised that Tacitus has been reckoned as the quintessential pagan anti-Semite, the Jew-baiter, a representative of fierce Roman animosity toward Jews, indeed of its most virulent strain. That view prevails almost without dissent. Even those who have found some favorable allusions to Jews in this dark text ascribe them to Tacitus’ sources rather than to Tacitus himself. An odd conclusion. If so, did Tacitus transmit those favorable views inadvertently? This historian almost never did anything inadvertently. Modern scholars have without exception taken the digression on the Jews as an authentic reflection of Tacitean animosity.

An immediate question arises. Just why should Tacitus have expressed such offensive opinions about the Jews? The question has important bearing upon our understanding of the historian himself. Although his remarks have often been taken as exemplifying Roman reactions in general and hence a window on broader attitudes toward alien religions, they do not, in fact, fit neatly into such a picture.


11 The greatest of Tacitean scholars, Sir Ronald Syme, surprisingly evinced almost no interest in the matter. The more than 800 pages of his magisterial two-volume work on the historian devote only a few lines to the subject of Tacitus on the Jews. The opinion expressed, however, takes the standard line: “Tacitus appears to nourish in hypertrophy all the prejudices of an imperial race. His anger bears most heavily upon the Greeks and the Jews”. Jews are “beyond the pale”; R. Syme Tacitus, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1958), 530.
The vast majority of preserved comments about Jews by Roman writers and intellectuals in the early and high Empire deliver a rather different impression.¹² Such writers were not, of course, great advocates or admirers of Jews. But their comments, on the whole, do not fall into the category of intense antipathy. They were generally dismissive or scornful rather than malicious. They puzzled over the observance of the Sabbath, they found monotheism foolish, they wondered why anyone would exclude pork from his diet, and they regarded circumcision as mutilation of the genitals. So, for instance, Seneca made the crack that, by observing the Sabbath, Jews use up one seventh of their lives in idleness.¹³ Pliny the Elder indeed claims to know of a river in Judaea that dries up every Sabbath. One should presumably infer that even Jewish rivers take one day a week off.¹⁴

Abstention from pork struck the Romans as especially bizarre. Petronius concluded that since Jews don’t touch pork, they must worship a pig-god (porcium numen).¹⁵ Juvenal observed that Judaea is the one place in the world where pigs must be happiest, for they can live to a ripe old age.¹⁶ Plutarch went to the lengths of inventing a full-scale dialogue in which the interlocutors debated whether Jews shrank from pork out of reverence for the hog or abhorrence of that creature. It is not easy to take the arguments on either side as entirely serious. The spokesman who maintained that Jews honored the animal suggested that pigs first dug up the soil with their projecting snouts, thereby prompting men to conceive the idea of inventing the plow from which Jews learned to farm the soil. And the interlocutor on the other side offered as one explanation for Jewish distaste for pork that pigs’ eyes are so twisted and pointed downward that they can never see anything above them unless they are carried upside down.¹⁷ That hardly seems a compelling reason for refraining from swine’s flesh. One may well suspect that Plutarch was having his own little joke in this fictitious after-dinner debate.

Circumcision provoked a similar combination of perplexity, misinformation, and amused disdain. Petronius remarks about a talented Jewish slave who pos-

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¹³ Seneca apud Augustine, CD, 6.11.
¹⁴ Pliny, NH, 31.24.
¹⁵ Petronius, fr. 37.
sesses many skills that he has but two faults: he is circumcised and he snores,—never mind that he is also cross-eyed. And Juvenal observes that Jews are so exclusive in keeping their own company that they decline even to give directions in the street to those who are not circumcised—quite a feat since men were not in the habit of going about unclothed.

In short, most Romans writing in the early Empire who deigned to take notice of this alien people contented themselves with superficial appearances and impressions. As a consequence, they retailed shallow, half-baked, and misinformed opinions. They were either indifferent to Jews or derided them with mockery.

Why should Tacitus be any different? Did he carry a bitterness and anger that set him apart? Some scholars have indeed detected a deep-seated antagonism and proposed reasons for it. A number of explanations have made the rounds. Tacitus sought, so it is claimed, to justify Rome’s destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and thus felt a pressing need to blacken Jews, their beliefs, and their practices as forcefully as possible. On a different view, Jewish proselytism enraged Tacitus. The historian was furious that this defeated people should still be in Rome and elsewhere converting good gentiles to their wicked creed and undermining Roman morals. Or else his intense aversion represented anxiety about this rebellious folk who continued to multiply, rejected Roman deities, grew in strength, and threatened Roman values. The digression has elsewhere simply been dismissed as the product of anti-Semitism, ignorance, and silliness.

None of these suggestions compels assent. The idea that the Jewish nation, so devastatingly crushed in the failed revolt of 66–73 CE, represented any sort of threat to Rome or was even perceived to do so stretches the imagination. Tacitus composed his Histories in the period from roughly 105 to 110 CE, long after the

18 Petr. 68.8; cf. 102.14.
Jewish revolt and in a period of Jewish quiescence. To be sure, new outbreaks of rebellion would occur near the end of Trajan’s reign, several years after publication of the *Histories*. But unless we confer upon Tacitus the mantel of a prophet, he can have had no inkling of that.²⁴ The Jews of Rome itself, it is worth noting, did not participate in either uprising. Their circumstances, so far as we can tell, were no different in Tacitus’ time than they had been before. If they engaged in any vigorous proselytism, for which there is in fact little or no evidence, they seem to have carried it on without interference—and without any concern on the part of Roman authorities.

What of the purported need to justify the destruction of the Temple? No hint exists that Tacitus or any other Roman felt the urgency to manufacture an apologia by ascribing moral failings or religious perniciousness to the Jews. The practices of the Jews had been familiar to dwellers in Rome for at least two centuries. They may have found them bizarre, but hardly menacing. Nothing in monotheism gave cause for anxiety, and Romans had long tolerated Jewish unwillingness to participate in the imperial cult. Destruction of the Temple followed a lengthy and tenacious rebellion. The Jews, as the conqueror and future emperor Titus put it in the account of Josephus, had been ingrates, turned against their Roman benefactors, and bit the hand that fed them.²⁵ Romans required no further justification.

How then does one account for Tacitus’ rage and bitterness? To begin, it is important to note that the historian’s excursus on the Jews by no means constitutes a consistently anti-Jewish tract. A number of remarks imply a rather positive assessment, even admiration of Jewish character or actions. So, for example, among the stories that Tacitus retails regarding the origin of the Jews is one that identifies them with the Solymoi, celebrated in the Homeric poems, whence they got the name Hierosolyma (Jerusalem) for their central city—a most distinguished lineage, says Tacitus.²⁶ In recounting a version of the Israelite exodus from Egypt, Tacitus ascribes to Moses a speech affirming self-reliance and determina-

²⁶ *Tac. Hist.* 5.2.2.
tion in his people. The historian, in his own voice, pays a comparative compliment, asserting that the inhabitants of Judaea were men of healthy constitution and capable of enduring fatigue. Indeed, they proved themselves durable in other ways. Tacitus elsewhere affirms that the Jews patiently suffered the oppression of Roman procurators until the arrival of Gessius Florus when they could not take it any longer. Jews then readied themselves for the onslaught of Roman power. They had, according to Tacitus, made every provision well in advance for a lengthy siege. When the assault came, everyone who could take up arms did so, indeed more than their numbers would ever have suggested. Men and women exhibited tenacious resolve, reckoning death preferable to loss of their country. This was unmistakably admirable behavior. And not for the first time. Tacitus reports that when Gaius Caligula proposed to set up his image in the Temple in Jerusalem, the Jews preferred to take up arms rather than to acquiesce. Further, Tacitus notes, Jews may not be eager to mix with gentiles, but among themselves they show a fierce loyalty and a ready compassion. They regard it as evil to slay any late-born child, they consider all souls lost in battle or by execution to be immortal, and they thus have no fear of death. In all these statements Tacitus takes a decidedly admiring line on Jewish traits, values, and behavior.

What do we make of this paradox? Is this schizophrenia on the part of Tacitus? One does not readily discern such a characteristic in that crafty and calculating historian. Did he get the favorable bits from his sources and transmit them, even though inconsistent with his own assessment? If so, this can only be by design, not through inattention. Did he underscore Jewish courage and determination in order to alert Romans to the possible menace that Jews represented? Hardly a plausible scenario for a people whose rebellion, for all its dogged-

27 Tac. Hist. 5.3.1. See the notes on this passage by Heubner and Fauth P. Cornelius Tacitus, 33 – 38.
28 Tac. Hist. 5.6.1.
29 Tac. Hist. 5.10.1. Bloch Antike Vorstellungen vom Judentum, 106 – 107, unjustifiably puts a negative interpretation upon this.
30 Tac. Hist. 5.12.2; cf. Hist. 2.4.3.
31 Tac. Hist. 5.13.3: arma cunctis, qui ferre possent, et plures quam pro numero audebant.
33 Tac. Hist. 5.9.2.
34 Tac. Hist. 5.5.1.
35 Tac. Hist. 5.5.3. See the commentary of Heubner and Fauth P. Cornelius Tacitus, 74 – 76.
ness, had ended in abject failure. Have we then reached a dead end? Should one regard the Tacitean account a mere muddle, a mass of confusion? Few will take that route.

A different approach may be salutary. Whatever else may be said about Tacitus, one aspect of his work holds primacy. Tacitus is the consummate ironist. None questions the fact, which is obvious on almost every page of the historian's work. Paradox and inconsistency abound, juxtaposed statements and explanations undermine one another, suggestions are put forward, then turned upside down, plausible versions emerge only to be compromised by subtle hints, bitter jibes, or cynical analysis. None of this is innocent, none of it is inadvertent. The wit is sharp, and the humor is dark. One thinks immediately, of course, of the barbs aimed at the Julio-Claudians in the *Annals*. But Tacitus' caustic wit was already there in the *Histories*. None can forget the concentrated contempt in his assessment of Galba: *capax imperii—nisi imperasset* Equally devastating is the historian's remark on the exchange of letters between Otho and Vitellius, each accusing the other of shamelessness and felonies: they were both right (*neuter falsō*).

A fresh look at the excursus on the Jews in this light offers provocative possibilities. Previous interpretations have tended to play it straight. They have taken the anti-Jewish statements as read, a symptom of Tacitean prejudices and animosity, even of a broader Roman malice. The ostensibly favorable comments are then explained away as conveying the opinions of others, not Tacitus' own, or as a means of alerting Romans to the dangers of Jewish strengths and accomplishments. All of this misses the irony and black humor for which Tacitus is otherwise justly renowned.

Perhaps the most conspicuous paradox occurs in relation to a matter that speaks directly to Jewish religious sensibilities: images in the Temple. Tacitus as-

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37 Tac. *Hist.*, 1.49.

38 Tac. *Hist*. 1.74.

39 Bloch *Antike Vorstellungen vom Judentum*, the best study of the excursus, does recognize ironic elements in it, 174–176, but sees them in the service of Tacitus' broader purpose, a dark portrait of the Jews. The fine treatment of Tacitean irony by O’Gorman *Irony and Misreading in the Annals of Tacitus* confines itself to the *Annales*. Robin *L'Ironie chez Tacite*, takes a much broader sweep. But the excursus on the Jews receives only one brief paragraph in his extensive work; op. cit. 303. P. Plass's useful monograph *Wit and the Writing of History: The Rhetoric of Historiography in Imperial Rome* (Madison, 1988) has much of value to say about wit, parody, and incongruity in Tacitus, but also gives less than a paragraph to the Jewish excursus; op. cit. 55.
serts flatly, without ascribing the report to other authors, gossip, or rumor, that
the Jews dedicated an image of an ass in the inner sanctum of their sacred
shrine. That animal, he had earlier noted, this time on the authority of other writ-
ers, had directed Israelites wandering in the wilderness to a watering hole, thus
preventing them from perishing of thirst. The image of an ass in the Temple? Is
this evidence for anti-Semitic propaganda retailed by our historian? That would
be a hasty inference. In a subsequent paragraph, Tacitus, without referring to his
previous statement, refutes it unequivocally. He asserts that the Jewish concep-
tion of the deity is a purely mental construct, and that Jews condemn as profane
those who set up images of gods in the form of men. Moreover, he adds, they
erect no statues in their cities, let alone in their temples. Tacitus reinforces this
affirmation a bit later in the text when he records the entrance into the Temple of
the conquering Pompey who found the shrine empty, devoid of any representa-
tion of the gods.

Where did the statue go? Interpreters have scrambled to explain away this
starkly discordant note. Perhaps Tacitus only transmitted other writers’ ac-
counts of the ass story? Not very likely. He alludes to no other authors here.
Does the image, effigies, refer only to a dedication, not a sacred object, i.e. an
anathema rather than an agalma? In the context of his statement which involves
a direct contrast of Jewish and Egyptian worship of divinities, that is a most im-
plausible interpretation. Was Tacitus simply nodding the first time, then correct-
ed himself, without having the mettle to admit the earlier mistake? That too has
been suggested. In such an event, however, the historian could simply have
erased the offending lines. And it is always hazardous to ascribe inattention
to the ever vigilant Tacitus.

Leaving the two inconsistent assertions in place and unreconciled must be
deliberate. The story of Jewish adherence to a cult of the ass had made the
rounds. In one form or another, it had appeared in Diodorus, in Apion, and in

40 Tac. Hist. 5.4.2: effigiem animalis, quo monstrante errorem sitimque depulerant, penetrali sac-
ravere; cf. 5.3.2: grex asinorum.
41 Tac. Hist. 5.5.4: ludaei mente sola unumque numen intellegunt; profanes qui deum imagines
mortalibus materiis in species hominum effingant.
42 Tac. Hist. 5.5.4: igitur nulla simulacra uribus suis, nedum templis sistunt.
43 Tac. Hist. 5.9.1.
44 These and other efforts to wriggle out of the inconsistency are conveniently assembled by
Bloch Antike Vorstellungen vom Judentum, 66. See also J.N. Sevenster The Roots of Anti-Semitism
in the Ancient World (Leiden, 1975), 120–121. They point to the paradox but provide no real
resolution. Bloch’s view that Tacitus did not worry about inconsistencies so long as they left
his general picture unaffected is unsatisfactory; op. cit. 65–67, 159–160.
Josephus (who, of course, rejected it).⁴⁵ Without explicitly refuting it, a heavy-handedness that would not accord with Tacitus’ style, he presents it in a matter-of-fact fashion—and then, in similar fashion, reports Jewish aniconism as well-known and long-established. The implication was subtle and suggestive: no need for argument, let alone for reconciling contradiction. The irony exposed the fatuousness of those who imagined an Eselkult among a people who scorned both images and animals.

A comparable example emerges from close scrutiny of another item in the text. Tacitus ostensibly reacts with ira and studium against the converts to Judaism: they despise the gods, turn their backs on their patria, and hold their own parents, children, and siblings in contempt.⁴⁶ The language is harsh, suspiciously so, perhaps consciously hyperbolic. Tacitus’ outburst here, unsurprisingly, has caused many to infer that Jewish proselytism had deeply infiltrated Roman society and undermined Roman values.⁴⁷ Commentators, however, have overlooked a rather intriguing incongruity in the Tacitean presentation on this point. Only a few lines earlier, he had depicted in sardonic fashion the Jews’ observance of the Sabbath. The Jews, in his account, adopted the practice of taking leisure every seventh day because, so they say (ferunt), it represents an end to their labors.⁴⁸ This, of course, had been observed by a number of Latin writers such as Seneca who, as we saw, derided the Jews for wasting one seventh of their lives in idleness.⁴⁹ But Tacitus went him one better, adding that they enjoyed the delights of indolence so much that they created the sabbatical year in order to prolong their sloth.⁵⁰ That delivers a characteristically Tacitean insinuation. But a more interesting implication lies therein. A proclivity to idleness is hardly compatible with a policy of energetic proselytism. Once again, this surely represents no innocent conjunction by Tacitus. In the directly preceding passage, which contains his remarks about converts to Judaism who were indoctrinated to de-

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⁴⁶ Tac. Hist. 5.5.2: transgressi in morem eorum idem usurpant, nec quicquam prius imbuuntur quam contemnere deos, exuere patriam, parentes liberos fratres vilia habere.
⁴⁷ See the works cited by Heubner and Fauth P. Cornelius Tacitus, 70–73. Add also Feldman Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World (Princeton, N.J., 1993), 300; Barclay Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora, 315, 410; Schäfer Judeophobia, 32.
⁴⁸ Tac. Hist. 5.4.3: septimo die otium placuisse ferunt, quia is finem laborum tulerit.
⁴⁹ Seneca, apud Augustine, CD, 6.11. Other references in Heubner and Fauth P. Cornelius Tacitus, 54–57.
⁵⁰ Tac. Hist. 5.4.3: dein blandiente inertia septimum quoque annum ignaviae datum.
spise their own gods, country, and families, Tacitus provided a noteworthy account of Jewish practices. The Jews, he claims, keep themselves apart from all other peoples, even exhibit an undeviating detestation of them. They emphasized their distinction from all gentiles. The paradox is stark. How does one gain converts among gentiles while insisting upon dissimilitude and distance from them? The juxtaposition of two incompatible ideas, once more, is unlikely to be an accident. The historian deftly discloses the incongruity of holding both those opinions simultaneously. This is less a statement of Tacitus’ own attitude toward Jews than a sardonic comment on simplistic stereotypes.

At the outset of his Jewish excursus, Tacitus lists no fewer than six different—and largely incompatible—versions of where the Jews came from. They have received much discussion. For our purposes it is unnecessary to dwell on them at length. Most of the debate has centered upon the issue of which of these versions Tacitus actually believed—or wanted his readers to believe. That may be precisely the wrong question to ask. Scholars have pored over the different tales, finding some favorable, some neutral, and at least one downright hostile. General agreement has it that Tacitus opted for the last, the most negative portrait, one drawn from Egyptian sources that conveyed a dark tale of the Exodus as an expulsion of Jews for having brought a plague upon the land. On the face of it, that appears to make sense. Tacitus saves the story for the end, he ascribes to it a consensus of most authorities, and he devotes more space to it than all the other versions combined. Presumably, then, this is what he wanted his readers to remember, without having committed himself to it—a familiar Tacitean technique. One need mention only the famous account of Augustus’ character and motivations as perceived by two opposing groups of interpreters at his funeral in the beginning of the *Annals*. The debunking interpretation comes last, has greater length, and is more memorable. On that analogy, Tacitus here too opts for the most hostile tale, further evidence for his animosity toward the Jews.

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51 Tac. *Hist.* 5.5.1–2: *adversus omnis alios hostile odium; separati epulis, discreti cubilibus… circumcidere genitalia instituerunt ut diversitate noscantur.*
53 Tac. *Hist.* 5.3.1; Heubner and Fauth *P. Cornelius Tacitus*, 30; Rosen “Der Historiker als Prophet,” 111–112; Schäfer *Judeophobia*, 31; Yavetz “Latin Authors on Jews and Dacians,” 91–94.
54 Tac. *Ann.* 1.9–10; cf. Yavetz “Latin Authors on Jews and Dacians,” 93.
The conclusion seems obvious. But the obvious solution is not always the correct one. Strong reasons call for reconsideration. First, the allegedly negative narrative, saved for the end and given at some length, is not all that negative. The story identifies the Jews as stemming from Egypt, blamed for a plague that infected the country, and expelled by the king on the advice of the oracle of Ammon.\textsuperscript{55} Hence began the Exodus, a wandering in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses, the discovery of an oasis through the arrival of a herd of wild asses, a march of six days, and, on the seventh, they seized the promised land, drove out the inhabitants, and founded a city in which they dedicated their Temple.\textsuperscript{56} Comparable stories, with variants, can be found in several earlier authors, from the time of Manetho in the early 3\textsuperscript{rd} century BCE. Tacitus did not invent the material, but he did put his own spin on it. The earlier narratives, from Manetho to Apion, contained far harsher assessments of the Hebrews as lepers and villains. Tacitus omits most of that, and even holds Moses in some esteem for his leadership in bringing his people to eventual triumph.\textsuperscript{57} To be sure, he calls them “a race of men hateful to the gods” (\textit{genus hominum invisum deis}). But it is essential to stress that Tacitus does not here deliver his own judgment. He conveys the characterization applied to Jews by the Egyptian king, and the gods in question are the Egyptian gods—a vital distinction. These are not divinities whom Tacitus embraced (the Egyptians, after all, worshipped animals). And the last part of the passage is particularly noteworthy. The Hebrews wandered for just six days and accomplished their purpose on the seventh. The figure of six days for the time spent in the wilderness plainly served others as an etiological explanation for the Sabbath.\textsuperscript{58} But Tacitus takes it to a whole new level. He has them not only arrive in the Promised Land on the seventh day but expel all the indigenous dwellers and occupy the whole country, founding Jerusalem and building the Temple!\textsuperscript{59} To debate the degree to which this account is favorable or unfavorable seems singularly irrelevant. Its main characteristic is absurdity. And one would be hard pressed to imagine that Tacitus expected anyone to believe it. As a vehicle for blackening Jews, this would hardly do the job.

\textsuperscript{55} Tac. \textit{Hist.} 5.3.1.
\textsuperscript{56} Tac. \textit{Hist.} 5.3.1–2.
\textsuperscript{58} Justin, 36.2.14; Apion apud Jos. \textit{C\textsuperscript{a}p}. 2.21; Plut. \textit{Isis and Osiris}, 31.
\textsuperscript{59} Tac. \textit{Hist.} 5.3.2: \textit{et continuum sex dierum iter emensi septimo pulsis cultoribus obtinuere terras, in quis urbs et templum dicata}. The phraseology, probably intentional, leaves the impression that the city and temple were founded in Moses’ lifetime. Cf. Heubner and Fauth \textit{P. Cornelius Tacitus}, 42.
Furthermore, the other stories of Jewish origins that Tacitus retails more briefly and ascribes to unnamed sources claim no greater credibility. Some of them assigned Jewish beginnings to the island of Crete at the time when Saturn lost his throne to Jupiter. The explanation for this theory, according to Tacitus, lay in the existence of Mt. Ida in Crete which led some to identify the Idaei of Mt. Ida with the Iudaei of Judaea.\(^6^0\) Such a notion stands neither to the advantage nor to the disadvantage of the Jews.\(^6^1\) Rather it serves to discredit the story. The alternative versions reach similar levels of implausibility. One has the Jews migrate from Egypt at the time of Isis, also in the distant mists of legendary antiquity.\(^6^2\) Another has them stem from Ethiopia, driven by fear and hatred to seek new lands in the reign of king Cepheus, father of Andromeda, once more shrouded in myth and beyond chronology.\(^6^3\) Still another makes them Assyrian by origin, a striking contrast with the biblical narrative in which Assyrians are the fiercest foes of the Israelites. In Tacitus’ account they lacked sufficient land in Assyria, packed their bags, conquered part of Egypt, and planted their own cities in the Hebrew country adjoining Syria.\(^6^4\) Further, he records the apparently flattering tale that identifies Jews with the Solymoi, a Lycian people renowned in the Homeric epics for their toughness as fighters. But flattery is not Tacitus’ prime objective. The root of this fiction counts for more. The name of Jerusalem, Hierosolyma, suggested to some a connection with the Solymoi, thereby generating the conjecture.\(^6^5\) Once again the issue of whether or not the yarn compliments the Jews misses the point. Tacitus in this entire segment simply plays with a farrago of legends that foolish authors have transmitted and credulous readers have bought. We hear the voice of the sardonic historian, not the Jew-baiter.

\(^6^0\) Tac. Hist. 5.2.1. See Feldman “Pro-Jewish Intimations in Tacitus’ Account of Jewish Origins,” 339 – 346; Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World, 184 – 188, for whom this represents a most positive assessment of Jews.

\(^6^1\) The claim of Bloch Antike Vorstellungen vom Judentum, 84 – 86, that Tacitus here delivers a negative judgment, presenting the Jews as a Randvolk, is implausible.

\(^6^2\) Tac. Hist. 5.2.2; cf. Plut. Isis, 31. Bloch Antike Vorstellungen vom Judentum, 86 – 87, sees this as a hostile report.

\(^6^3\) Tac. Hist. 5.2.2. On this legend, see the discussions of Levy (1946), 332 – 334; Heubner and Fauth P. Cornelius Tacitus, 25 – 26.

\(^6^4\) Tac. Hist. 5.2.3.

The digression reinforces this analysis at several junctures. Comments frequently serve Tacitus’ purpose less as reflections on the Jews than as indirect jabs against others. So, for instance, he refers to Jewish sacrifices of rams and oxen. Why make this seemingly innocuous point? Tacitus leaves his readers in little doubt. Jews sacrifice the ram, he explains, as if to deliver a deliberate insult to Egyptian reverence for the ram-god Ammon. And they slay the ox as a further affront to the Egyptians, worshippers of the Apis bull.\(^{66}\) Tacitus, we may venture to assume, knew full well that the ancient Israelites led a variety of animals to the sacrifice—as did the Greeks and the Romans. That he should single out these particular motives for sacrificing the ram and the ox and cast them as derisive of Egyptian religion suggests recourse to some black humor. The remarks serve more as a snide commentary on Egyptian homage to animals than on the customs of the Jews.

Nor does Tacitus miss a chance to take an indirect swipe at the Caesars. The Jews, he says, refuse to set up images in their cities or temples. They pay no such flattery to their kings, nor such honor to the emperors.\(^ {67}\) Some have taken this as a Tacitean criticism of the Jews for failing to pay due allegiance to Rome.\(^ {68}\) Not very likely. Tacitus had little enthusiasm for emperor worship himself. One might recall his nasty remark about Augustus’ aggressive push to have his own priests and flamens, and to promote reverence of his sacred images in temples. The historian adds that there would be nothing left by which to honor the gods.\(^ {69}\) A similarly caustic comment surfaces when Tacitus reports a proposal to build a temple to the divine Nero. Some interpreted it, so he notes with relish, as a sign of Nero’s impending death.\(^ {70}\) One may be quite confident that when the historian narrates the Jews’ refusal to accept a statue of Caligula in their Temple, he was holding no brief for Caligula.\(^ {71}\) In short, the mention of Jewish aversion, to divine honors for the Caesars constitutes a sneer at the imperial cult, rather than at the Jews. Tacitus further takes a gratuitous slap at Claudius in this excursus. He speaks of the Jews as having bought the privilege of constructing walls in peacetime as if they were going to war, thus availing themselves of Roman avar-

\(^{66}\) Tac. Hist. 5.4.2: caeso ariete velut in contumelidm Hammonis; bos quoque immolatur, quoniam Aegyptii Apin colunt. On Egyptian practices here, see the scholarship cited by Heubner and Fauth P. Cornelius Tacitus, 48–51.

\(^{67}\) Tac. Hist. 5.5.4: nulla simulacra urbis suis, neddum templis sistunt; non regibus haec adulation, non Caesaribus honor.

\(^{68}\) Bloch Antike Vorstellungen vom Judentum, 95–96.

\(^{69}\) Tac. Ann. 1.10.

\(^{70}\) Tac. Ann. 15.74.

\(^{71}\) Tac. Hist. 5.9.2.
ice in the age of Claudius. Even one of Tacitus’ supposedly favorite principes comes in for a cutting put-down. Titus preferred to assault Jerusalem rather than wait for its surrender. Why? Tacitus offers his own elucidation: Titus already envisioned the wealth and pleasures he could enjoy in Rome, and, unless Jerusalem fell swiftly, he would have to delay his delights. The cynical historian injects a characteristic analysis—and he has the Roman leader, not the Jews, as his victim.

Jewish history also afforded Tacitus an opportunity to skewer one of his favorite targets: the imperial freedman. He maintains that Claudius converted Judaea into a Roman province and entrusted it to equites or to freedmen. That happens to be inaccurate, but no matter. Tacitus’ objective was to heap further abuse upon Antonius Felix. That individual was, in fact, the only libertus to serve as procurator of Judaea, an appointee of Claudius, a man who had insinuated himself into the imperial household and family, and one who behaved with monarchical savagery and licentiousness in his procuratorial capacity. Tacitus’ strictures, of course, did not arise out of compassion for the Jews but from malevolence toward ex-slaves appointed to the imperial service. The digression on the Jews served a variety of purposes for the acerbic historian.

Finally, the matter of religion. The excursus concludes with a chapter on prodigies that flared up at the time of the Jewish rebellion against Rome. Armies were spotted contending in battle in the skies, the fiery gleam of arms flashed, and suddenly the Temple itself lit up with a flame from the clouds. Tacitus remarks that the Jews misconceived and fatally misunderstood those omens. As a people inclined to superstition and hostile to religio, they rejected as improper any expiation of prodigies by sacrifice or vows. Instead, they relied on their own messianic prophecies that promised world rule by men who set forth from Judaea. The Jewish commons, blinded by ambition, insisted upon interpreting those predictions in their own favor and refusing, even in adversity, to see the truth. For the truth was, according to Tacitus, that the ambiguous prophecy pointed to the future universal power of Vespasian and Titus, not to any supremacy of Jews.

72 Tac. Hist. 5.12.2: per avaritiam Claudianorum temporum.
73 Tac. Hist. 5.11.2: ipsi Tito Roma et opes voluptatesque ante oculos; ac ni Hierosolyma conciderent, morari videbantur.
74 Tac. Hist. 5.9.3.
75 Tac. Hist. 5.13.1.
76 Tac. Hist. 5.13.1: evenerant prodigia, quae neque hostiis neque votis piare fas habet gens superstitioni obnoxia, religionibus adversa.
77 Tac. Hist. 5.13.2.
On the face of it, that interpretation appears to be a decisive rebuke of Jewish belief, practice, and trust in the divine. And so it is always read. Yet one might well ask just how much faith Tacitus himself put in prodigies—*quindecemvir sacris faciundis* though he was. The historian, of course, rarely wears his heart on his sleeve on such, or indeed any, matters. In this connection, however, it is worth considering his comment at the beginning of the *Histories*. Tacitus takes note of warning prodigies in heaven and on earth, whether equivocal or obvious (*ambigua manifesta*). He then adds that the gods do not trouble themselves about our well-being, only about our punishment. Even more telling, later in the *Histories*, he records a whole series of bizarre omens, almost in the style of Livy, that spread terror at the time of Otho’s preparations against Vitellius. The canny Tacitus does not commit himself to their authenticity. Men took as omen or prodigy, he says, what actually came by chance or nature. The historian was even more direct in recording a torrent of portents that followed the assassination of Agrippina the Younger. They came with frequency, he observes—and without meaning (*prodigia crebra et inrita*). Indeed they exhibited only the indifference of the gods (*sine cura deum*).

In view of these passages, the vigilant reader could put into perspective Tacitus’ sneer about the Jews’ proclivity to read omens to their own advantage. Romans were as prone to misinterpret prodigies as the Jews—or anyone else. As Tacitus notes, it was a general human inclination (*mos humanae cupidinis*). In fact, as he put it elsewhere, the gods treat instances of virtue and vice with perfect impartiality. In short, at the close of the excursus we still hear the caustic tone of the master of irony.

Tacitus is not quite finished on this subject. He includes one other striking omen among those forecasting the doom of the Jewish rebellion. He remarks that the doors of the Temple suddenly flew open, and a superhuman voice was heard to exclaim that the gods were exiting the sacred shrine. That sort of portent, i.e. divine abandonment of a city or shrine thereby signaling its imminent demise, is a common convention, a means of reassuring the besiegers or justifying their victory. But why “gods” in the plural? The Jews had only one deity who could abandon them, as he had done so many times in the past. Was this a slip by Tacitus,

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78 On his priesthood, see Tac. *Ann.* 11.11.
79 Tac. *Hist.* 1.3: *non esse curae dei securitatem nostram, esse ultionem*.
80 Tac. *Hist.* 1.86: *a fortuitis vel naturalibus causis*.
83 Tac. *Hist.* 5.13.1: *apertae repente delubri fores et audita maior humana vox, excedere deos*. 
an unconscious use of customary language, or an interpretatio Romana? Not a likely solution. The historian had made a point of underscoring Jewish monotheism, contrasting Jews here not with Romans, interestingly enough, but with the Egyptians who worship a multitude of bestial and composite divinities. Tacitus once again, it would be reasonable to infer, plays with paradox, testing his readers. Are they alert? Do they recognize the dissonance? What will they make of it? The narrative teases as much as it informs.

A summary is in order. This investigation does not propose that Tacitus was a friend of the Jews. They were hardly his favorite people. The text contains a number of offensive statements that cannot easily be dismissed or explained away. Tacitus undoubtedly shared the preconceptions and misgivings of many Romans before, during, and after his time toward the practices of alien peoples which they found outlandish and did not bother to understand properly. But he did not compose the excursus on the Jews to effect a denunciation and intellectual demolition of that people. Tacitus acts here neither as polemicist nor as advocate. This segment of the Histories has for too long been taken too straightforwardly. It is no mere ethnographical diversion. What we find instead is the familiar Tacitus, the historian fond of paradox and antinomies, prone to irony and incongruity, who challenges his readers, forces them to pick apart the opinions and images set before them, offering solutions and then snatching them away, forever eluding their grasp. The digression on the Jews served to put on display the skills of the cunning and cynical writer who professed to inform his readers but in fact teased and toyed with them.

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84 Bloch Antike Vorstellungen vom Judentum, 111–112, presumes that Tacitus thinks purely in Roman terms, offering Verg. Aen. 2.351–352 as parallel. Similarly, Heubner and Fauth P. Cornelius Tacitus, 150. But Josephus, BJ 6.300 also uses the plural here, presumably not as an interpretatio Romana. Whether this indicates that Josephus and Tacitus drew on the same source is a question that can be left aside. We may, in any case, be confident that Tacitus did not mindlessly adopt a phraseology inconsistent with assertions about Jewish monotheism.

85 Tac. Hist. 5.5.4.

86 Bloch Antike Vorstellungen vom Judentum, 143–166, usefully compares the excursus with Tacitus’ treatments of Germans and Britons, finding both parallels and illuminating differences that give the discussion of the Jews a special character. His stress on the negative side of the Jewish excursus is somewhat unbalanced. But he rightly observes that none of the excursuses is pure ethnography for its own sake. Cf. also Bloch “Geography without Territory: Tacitus’ Digression on the Jews and its Ethnographic Context”, in J.U. Kalms, Internationales Josephus-Kolloquium (Münster, 2000), 38–54.