



Judeophobia and Judaism in the Ancient World

Judeophobia is a term developed to try to describe the phenomenon of fear of Judaism.
Who are the Jews and what are the roots of anti-Judaism in the ancient world?

Overview

As the first monotheistic religion, Judaism was an abnormality in the ancient, polytheistic world. Jews faced the constant conflict between observing their religious customs while being sensitive to local traditions. As a unique group, Jews were sometimes blamed for the "anger of the gods" when natural disasters befell a community. A common reaction to Jews was that they were "lazy" (not working on the Sabbath) and were "strange" due to their food and purity laws. Others saw them as atheists who, having no statues, "worshipped the clouds." However, being different did not mean that ancient peoples were necessarily hostile to Jews. In fact, Judaism attracted followers. The Greeks and Romans were fascinated by Judaism's philosophical elegance. Despite this, Roman stereotypes reflected ancient prejudices. Ideas circulated that Jews were exclusive and isolated themselves. One factor may have been circumcision which violated the Greco-Roman aesthetic. In the end, Roman cruelty and provocations caused rebellion.

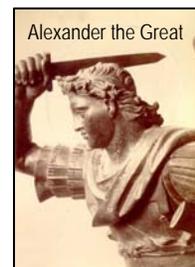
Jewish Experience and the Babylonian Exile

After the destruction of the first Jewish Temple in Jerusalem (585BCE), Jews reshaped their religion in exile in Babylon. There they were called "Jews" (from the kingdom of Judah) and never gave up their connection to the land of Judah. A basic religious question they faced (to paraphrase Psalm 137) was "How can we sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land?" Their response began to shape their tradition. In Babylon, they began to preserve their community through reaffirming their belief in one God; practice and rituals; writing their history; and through developing courts and institutions.

In 538 BCE Cyrus of Persia issued an edict allowing Jews to return to their land and build a Temple in Jerusalem. A small minority returned from Babylon and began rebuilding the Temple in 515 BCE. The Torah became the authoritative code of the Jews and Judah became a vassal state of Persia.

Hellenistic Period

In 332BCE things changed dramatically when Judah suddenly found itself the vassal state of Macedonia, a Greek state led by Alexander the Great. An infusion of Greek peoples and cultures dramatically changed the region. These Greeks encountered 'curious' people who "worshipped the air" (Jews); people who lived scattered around the hills of Jerusalem and around the Temple, who did not speak Greek, and used smoky lamps and had no statues to their God. "*Judaism*" (all isms are Greek) is the Hellenistic interpretation of what and who these people were.



In general, the Greeks left the Jews alone. They allowed the Jews to run their own country, declared that the law of Judah was the Torah, and attempted to preserve Jewish religion. The Greeks set about translating the Torah, calling it the **Septuagint** after the number of translators it required (*septuaginta* is Greek for "seventy"). Despite imperfections, the Septuagint is a watershed in Jewish history. This translation would make the Hebrew religion into a world religion by making the Hebrew Scriptures available to the Mediterranean world.

Violence and Desecration

After two centuries of peace under the Persians, the Hebrew state found itself once more caught in the middle of power struggles between two great empires: the Seleucid state with its capital in Syria and the Ptolemaic state, with its capital in Egypt. Once more, Judah, the vassal state, would be conquered and would change hands seven times between 319 and 302 BCE.

Watershed: Jewish reaction to Hellenization

For Jews in the *Diaspora* (dispersion) a choice had to be made about how to live in the Greek world. Like others in the region, many Jews bitterly resented the Greeks. They were more foreign than any group they had ever seen. In a state founded on maintaining the purity of the Hebrew religion, the gods of the Greeks and Greek customs seemed wildly offensive. However, the Greeks brought a new concept of citizenship that would allow foreigners to become part of society. All that was needed, potentially, was to speak Greek, be accepted by a community, and participate in Greek civic rituals.



Samuel anoints David. Synagogue fresco shows a congregation of Hellenized Jews, clean-shaven and without tassels on garments. (Syria, 3rd century BCE.)

Was assimilation possible? Although many Jews lived in the numerous Greek cities and spoke Greek, they could not remain traditionally Jewish and take part in Greek civic rituals. In the end, many Jews went over to the Greek way. They sacrificed in the public arena, played games and went to the gymnasium. Many in the Jewish elite abandoned the everyday people. Jews who did not conform (although many spoke Greek) were now seen as a threat to the survival of the Greek world and its dream of a universal Hellenistic culture. A crisis had come to Jewish identity.

Rebellion

There were degrees of assimilation (using the fork and knife, dramatic arts, literature, and internalizing views), but in the end,

Jews would have to give up their way of life to become assimilated. Jews therefore were faced with the choice of either collaborating or resisting. Resistance could mean anything creating a place where you could observe the laws to becoming a martyr (“witness”) to the faith.

In 167 BCE the Seleucid king Antiochus IV forbade the practice of “Judaism.” He outlawed: Sabbath/festivals (historical memories); sacrifice to one God; Jewish dietary laws; circumcision; and Temple worship. Antiochus desecrated the Temple, imposed idolatry and the eating of pig. Those who did not eat the pig, he declared, were Jews! In response, the Maccabees (a group led by Judah Maccabee) rebelled against Antiochus IV and for a brief time, reestablished Judah as an independent state. Their revolt is marked by the festival of *Hanukah*.

New Era in Jewish History

In the next thirty years, a new Jewish state stabilized itself. A new ruling dynasty, the Hasmoneans (Greeks out) and new high priests became leaders of a sovereign state of Judea. With a new focus for the Jewish people, pilgrimages to Jerusalem increased, as did Temple support. Judea was once again a political power and could make alliances. A major alliance was made with the Roman Republic.

The Romans

The Romans expanded throughout the Mediterranean and eventually gained control of approximately two million Jews. In 63 BCE Pompey invaded Judea and Jerusalem after siding with one of two brothers who claimed the throne of Judea. Eventually, Herod the Great would secure power over the region from 37-4 BCE through collusion with Rome.

What Were the Rights of Jews in Roman world?

The Jews were a special group in the Roman world. Because of their substantial population and because Romans admired people who had established traditions, Jews were granted certain rights. They were allowed the freedom of religion; the right to a communal life - and all the institutions of communal life, such as a place of assembly (synagogue – Greek word for assembly), holidays, and meals; a system of justice – based on *patrious nomos* (“ancestral law”). Jews did not have to appear in court on or before the Sabbath, were not required to perform military service and were allowed to collect funds for the Temple in Jerusalem. Still, Jews were not given the right to become a Roman citizen and knew that their rights relied only upon the whims of the ruler in Rome.

What was the status of Jews in the Roman world?

The Romans granted citizenship to people (Greeks) who had town citizenship. Jews were not granted citizenship, but could gain that status by: buying it, being a freed slave, through inheritance, or through political favors. The disciple Paul (Saul), for example, probably inherited his Roman citizenship, but continued his Jewish beliefs and practices.

Most Jews, however, were not Roman citizens. Growing Jewish demands for citizenship caused tensions between Greeks and Jews. Greeks argued that there were too many Jews and resented their keeping their own traditions while asking to become Roman. Deadly riots against Jews broke out in places like Alexandria. Eventually a major revolt against Rome broke out in Jerusalem in 66 CE, not many years after the death of a Jewish teacher from Nazareth named Jesus.