History and Hate
The Dimensions of Anti-Semitism

edited by David Berger
One of the most important objectives of the historian is the interpretation of the past on its own terms, and not on the terms of the interpreter. Most historians, however, especially the historians of antiquity, would concede that this goal is often unattainable. Our knowledge of the ancient world is so fragmentary, our documentation so sparse, and our uncertainties so numerous that the temptation to retroject upon antiquity the conditions and attitudes of the modern world is almost irresistible. This generalization is well exemplified by the study of ancient "anti-Semitism."

Nineteenth-century scholars “discovered” that humanity consisted of different races, each with its own characteristics. The classification of languages into Semitic, Indo-European, Hamitic, and other families was transmitted by these scholars into a racial classification of mankind. Hatred of the Jews was “scientifically patentable” and received the scientific-sounding name “anti-Semitism.” During the latter part of the century even those scholars who were not virulent anti-Semites used the hatred of the Jews in Greco-Roman antiquity to “prove” that Christianity was not responsible for anti-Semitism, since even in pre-Christian times the Jews were odious to Indo-Europeans. The fact that the Jews demanded civic equality while refusing to surrender their
distinctiveness and peculiar religious practices was the cause of
the anti-Jewish riots in Alexandria in 38–39 C.E., claimed these
scholars. In addition, the Jews of Egypt were tax collectors and
economic middlemen who aroused the righteous anger and jeal-
ousy of their hosts. The Jewish troubles in first-century Egypt
proceeded and justified the unfriendly reception that the Jews were
receiving in post-emancipation Europe. Against this approach
Jewish scholars argued that the ancient and the modern hatreds
of Jewry were world apart (see, for example, the preface of
Theodore Rehak to his Jews of Greece and Roman Authors Concern-
ing Jews and Judaism, published in French) in Paris in 1993, when
the Dreyfus affair was on the mind of every Frenchman), but the
issue was not easily treated on a scholarly basis. Polemics were
opposed by apologists.

Even contemporary scholars, whose interest in ancient “anti-
Semitism” is neither polemical nor apologetic, sometimes retro-
ject modern conditions upon antiquity. Some of the charges
levied against the Jews of antiquity (e.g., hatred of outsiders,
clannishness) were identical with those heard in modern times, but
not all the ancient charges have modern analogues and not all the
modern charges have ancient roots. No ancient text assigns an
economic motive to the hatred of Jews. The Jews as money-
lenders, usurers, tax collectors, exploiters—these are the images
of modern, not ancient, anti-Semitism. It was in modern rather
than ancient times that the Jews became a prosperous middle-
class that penetrated the power structure of society and displaced
many of the old elites, thereby arousing their hatred. Many
ancient authors, especially in Rome, explicitly describe the Jews
as poor. Similarly, the ancients did not accuse the Jews of “dual
loyalty.” Jews were accused of sedition, rebellion, and con-
spiracy, but not of dual loyalty.

The most serious example of retrojection is the very notion of
“anti-Semitism.” The Greeks and Romans did not have a
conception of “race.” Their division of humanity into “Greeks”
(or “Romans”) and “barbarians” was a product not of racism but
of cultural snobbery (compare the Jewish use of the term guy.
“Gentile”). Greek and Roman ethnographers knew that the in-
habitants of each nation had specific physical and moral charac-
teristics, but these were generally attributed to the effects of
various natural phenomena (climate, soil, water, air, and so forth).
For example, the blacks (“Ethiopians”) were regarded not as a
“race” but as people whose skin had been baked by the heat of the
sun (see Frank Snowden, Blacks in Antiquity). The Greeks and
Romans knew nothing of “Semitics.” Their statements on the
Jews and Judaism must be compared with their views of the
Egyptians, Syrians, Indians, Germans, and Gaels, with the Roman
views of the Greeks, and with the Greek views of the Romans.

The use of the term “anti-Semitism” to describe the anti-
Judaism of antiquity is not only anachronistic but also misleading.
The term conjures up a vision of an irrational and deep-seated
hatred of Jews, but it is far from certain that such a hatred ever
existed in antiquity. Many Jews imagine that Antiochus Ephip-
nes, the leaders of the Alexandrian pogroms, and the emperors
Titus and Hadrian were motivated by just such a rabid hatred of
Judaism, summed up in the rabbinic adage “Esau hates Jacob;”
but there is room for doubt. Most modern scholars would agree
that the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. was not an “anti-
Semitic” act, because the Romans had good reason to do what
they did. The Jews rebelled against the state, and the Romans
were acting to preserve their empire. The Antiochean and
Hadrianic persecutions of Judaism can be similarly understood (at
least in part) as the brutal attempts of the state to repress a

"Anti-Semitism" in Antiquity: The Problem of Definition
rebellion that was motivated (at least in part) by religious zeal. Even the Alexandrian pogroms had some justification. As Apion, the leader of the "anti-Semitic" party, asked, "if the Jews wish to become Alexandrian citizens, why don't they worship the Alexandrian gods?"—an excellent question. The Jews wanted equality with tolerance, to be allowed to be the same as everyone else while also being different from everyone else, and Apion rightly refused. The reasons for these attacks against the Jews were not irrational or imaginary or trivial, and the label "anti-Semitism" does not help us understand them.

Anachronism and retrojection can be avoided by the substitution of the term "anti-Judaism" for "anti-Semitism," but the essential historical problem concerns not on nomenclature but on definition. Even in modern times we often have difficulty in justifying the application of the epithet "anti-Semitic" to a specific incident or text. Some Jews are very sensitive and immediately denounce as "anti-Semitic" any criticism of Israel or any action detrimental to Jewish interests. Other Jews have a much higher threshold and bestow the epithet "anti-Semitic" on only the most blatant and extreme manifestations of anti-Jewish or anti-Israeli behavior. The uncertainty that is at the heart of this contemporary debate has even greater force in our attempted interpretations of anti-Semitic actions and statements from a period in which there was no clearly articulated ideology of "anti-Semitism." Where is that elusive point that separates justifiable hatred from unjustifiable, legitimate opposition from illegitimate, and the "anti-Jewish" from the "anti-Semitic"? To illustrate this uncertainty, let us return to Apion and Hadrian. The former had good reason to dislike the Jews and to oppose their attempts to obtain civic equality, and the latter had good reason to suppress a Jewish rebellion and to forbid the practices of Judaism. But would Apion's policies have led to the creation of a Jewish ghetto, the prohibition of Jewish synagogues, the looting of Jewish property, and anti-Jewish pogroms, had these policies not been motivated, at least in part, by hatred of Jews and Judaism? Would Hadrian's suppression of a rebellion have led to a three-year-long persecution of Judaism and the deaths of numerous martyrs had it not been motivated, at least in part, by hatred of Jews and Judaism? I indicated in the previous paragraph that the simple application of the term "anti-Semitic" to these incidents is neither justifiable nor helpful, but here, I concede, perhaps we must allow for a certain degree of "anti-Semitic" feelings to account for the scale and severity of the incidents. Both Apion and Hadrian crossed the point that separates the justifiable from the unjustifiable, but the precise location of this point is as elusive for historians of antiquity as it is for students of contemporary "anti-Semitism."

A narrow focus on "anti-Judaism" does not do justice to the complexities of Jewish life in antiquity and merely perpetuates the myth that Jewish history is primarily a history of persecutions and martyrdom. The Greco-Roman world consisted of those who hated Judaism, those who were indifferent to it, and those who loved it. The latter group included those who embraced Judaism wholeheartedly ("proselytes," or "converts") and those who accepted one or another of Judaism's rituals and beliefs ("God-fearers"). Judaism's hybridity, its dual allegiance to both paganism and paganism, and its refusal to be incorporated into the religious systems of the civilized world (beliefs that could be called "Jewish anti-paganism") aroused both hatred and admiration. A discussion of "anti-Judaism" in antiquity that ignores the other half of the question, the power of attraction exerted by Judaism on the Greco-Roman world, is lopsided indeed.

* If it be objected that I am following the "anti-Semitic" interpretation of the events in Alexandria, I believe that the reconstruction is correct no matter what its origin. For a recent discussion of the issue, see Aryeh Kasriel, The Jews of Hellenistic-Roman Egypt (Hebrew edition, Tel Aviv, 1974; English edition, Tübingen, 1985) with my review in the Jewish Quarterly Review 72 (1982) 330–331.