

Anti-Judaism in Classical Antiquity

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This summer I conducted research for an honors project that examines early attitudes toward Jews and Judaism, beginning in the Hellenistic period of the late fourth century BCE through Imperial Rome, tracing how these perceptions developed across the ancient Mediterranean. My methodology combines textual and linguistic analysis of primary literary sources, secondary scholarship, and study of Jewish material culture from Hellenistic and Roman diasporic collections housed in New York City. Based on the surviving evidence, my research suggests that the Roman world offers stronger indications of systematic, society-wide prejudice toward Jews than earlier periods. This finding has led me to focus on outsider perspectives that shaped anti-Jewish prejudice within the Jewish diaspora, a phenomenon especially visible in the city of Rome. I will argue that anti-Judaism, already evident in Greco-Roman society by the reign of Rome's first emperor Augustus (27 BCE-14 CE), expanded and took on greater significance during the Imperial period. In this project, I explore the degree to which anti-Judaism was present among Roman rulers and society, considering where these attitudes originated and how they developed over the course of Rome's tumultuous rise to empire.

I focus on the Eastern Mediterranean context in contrast with the Roman elite, exploring how the beginnings of anti-Judaism in antiquity may have drawn on Egyptian and other Near Eastern traditions. Figures such as Manetho, an Egyptian priest of the early third century BCE, and Posidonius, a Greco-Syrian philosopher of the second century BCE, both writing in Greek, provide early examples of this tradition. The Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo records horrific anti-Jewish violence in Alexandria, the Greco-Egyptian city founded by Alexander the Great, in 38 CE. I also examine Roman anxiety over Jewish loyalty to the state, evident in disputes over the customary Temple Tribute, a yearly half-shekel paid by Jewish men to support the Jerusalem Temple. This concern appears in the Roman statesman Cicero's *Pro Flacco* (59 BCE), the edict of Emperor Claudius (41 CE), fiscal policies under the Flavian emperors (69–96 CE), and by the historian Tacitus in his *Historiae* (c. 100–110 CE). Finally, my research addresses the evolving and sometimes hidden identity of Jews¹, and how Roman hostility shifted from political opposition to broader religious prejudice. This transformation is reflected in the changing meaning of the term *Ioudaios* itself, which moved from indicating a Judean national identity to a religious marker, particularly after Rome's destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, as described by the Roman-Jewish historian Josephus.

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¹ Shaye J. D. Cohen, "'Those Who Say They Are Jews and Are Not': How Do You Know a Jew in Antiquity When You See One?" in *Diasporas in Antiquity*, ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen and Ernest S. Frerichs, 1–46 (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvzpv5cc.5>.