



[Martial, Epigrams XI.94](#)

Martial's attack against a sodomite Jewish poet who swears by the temples of Jupiter.

Name of the author: Martial

Date: 96 CE

Date: 1st CE

Place: Rome

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Poetry

Title of work: Epigrams

Reference: XI.94

Commentary:

Most of the arguments presented here are developed in: [Roux, Marie, "A re-interpretation of Martial, Epigram XI.94," *Scripta Classica Israelica* 36, June 2017, p. 81-104.](#)

The eleventh book of Martial's *Epigrams* was published in December 96 CE, three months after Domitian's death. At that time, Martial repudiated his former praises of the Flavian emperor and turned his attention to Nerva. However, book XI is made up of a few imperial praises dedicated to the new emperor: only 6 epigrams out of a total of 108. It may be because of the short amount of time which existed between Domitian's death and the publication of the book. Remaining epigrams deal with Martial's usual prosaic subjects, as scenes of daily life, literary matters, personal attacks, and patronal relationships, but the most important theme of the book is certainly obscene jests or stories (38 on a total of 108 according to Kathleen M. Coleman's count; see Coleman, *M. Valerii*, p. lxxx). Epigram XI.94 is at the crossroads of these themes as it deals with a literary matter, obscenity, and a personal attack against a rival poet who is accused by Martial of plundering his poems, and, worst of all, of sodomising his own slave – who was supposed to be the sexual tool of Martial only (Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, p. 102). The most important element of the story is that the rival poet was a Jew "born in Jerusalem itself" (v. 5; for another reference to a Jewish refugee from Jerusalem, see [Martial, Epigram VII.55](#)).

Four times, Martial repeats the fact that the poet is *verpus*, an adjective meaning that "his foreskin is pulled back" (v. 2, 4, 6, 8). As Shaye Cohen recalls, the qualification of *verpus* can be ambiguous, as the glans of the penis could be exposed because of erection or circumcision (Cohen, *The Beginnings*, p. 41). Nevertheless, the fact that Martial mentions that he was born in Jerusalem (v. 5) confirms the fact that he was circumcised. As is often the case in Martial's *Epigrams* dealing with Jews, he summarises this Jewish poet by his circumcised sexual organ (for another use of *verpus*, see [Epigrams VII.82](#); see also *recutitus* in [VII.30](#); Cordier, "Les Romains," p. 344).

By presenting his rival essentially through the fact that he is a circumcised Jew, Martial may have wanted to make a fool of him by reducing his existence to the state of his penis. Considering the association of the ambiguous term *verpus* with the sexuality of the Jews, Pierre Cordier argues that Martial may not have despised circumcision because it was a sexual mutilation. For him and for many Romans of his time, the pulling back of the foreskin of the Jews may have become a humorous and provocative motif because their sex organs were associated with some kind of priapism (see for instance Martial, *Epigrams* VII.35, [55](#) and [82](#)) and unrestrained sexuality (Cordier, "Les Romains," p. 349). Actually, in other epigrams, Martial highlights the hyper-sexuality of the Jews, as for instance when a Roman man Chrestus accepts to lick the impressive sex organ of a Jew ([VII.55](#)). Circumcised Jews are thus caricatured by Martial as totally opposed to the self-control characterizing the Roman citizen with good morals.

The last two verses of this epigram are the most interesting. Martial writes that his rival denies the fact that he has intercourse with his slave, and that he swears it "by the Thunderer's temples" (v. 7). Martial concludes by asking him to swear by Anchialus. This name has been variously interpreted by scholars. First, it has been interpreted as a reference to Anchialus or Anchiale, a town founded by Sadarnapalus in Cilicia in which the king was buried and which would thus symbolize the end of some oriental sensuality (see the new Loeb translation by David R. Shackleton Bailey, p. 77, n. 117). Second, some scholars have argued that the name Anchialus could refer to some oriental deity. Alternatively, Jean Gag e has suggested that Anchialus could be the name of the procurator in charge of the supervision of the recollection of the Jewish tax, that is of the annual tax of two drachma per person



which was previously offered by the Jews to the Jerusalem Temple, and which, after the defeat of 70 CE, continued to be claimed by Rome, and was assigned to a fund, the *fiscus Iudaicus* (Gagé, “Vespasien,” p. 299-300, n. 4). The fourth hypothesis, which in our view seems more probable, is that Anchialus may be the name of Martial’s slave.

The other interesting element of this sentence is the expression *per templa Tonantis*, “by the Thunderer’s temples”. The plural of the word *templum* has not been taken into account by most of the translators of this epigram, but it has to be questioned. Martial might refer to the main shrines of Jupiter existing in Rome at that time, as for instance the Temple of Jupiter Tonans (dedicated in 22 BCE by Augustus, see *LTUR* III, p. 159-160) and the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus which was rebuilt after the damages caused by a fire in 69 CE and in 80 CE (*LTUR* III, p. 148-153). In addition, we know thanks to Tacitus that Domitian erected a *modicum sacellum* for Jupiter Conservator, at the spot of the lodge of the warden who saved him in 69 CE, and that, when he was emperor, he would have built an *ingens templum* to Jupiter Custos (Tacitus, *Histories* III.74.1 ; Alexander Heinemann has recently reconsidered this account of Tacitus and has convincingly proposed that Tacitus may have inverted the name of the two Jupiter; see Heinemann, “Jupiter, die Flavier,” p. 203-208).

The fact that Martial refers to the shrines of Jupiter and associates them with this Jew born in Jerusalem, is probably not something chosen at random. On the contrary, we suggest that Martial may have chosen to stage his Jewish rival poet swearing *per templa Tonantis* in order to mortify his rival and to create an ironical effect. Actually, from a Jewish point of view, the temples of Jupiter were associated with very cruel memories. First, the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus Capitolinus was deeply connected to Rome’s victory in Judea in 70 CE. Actually, after the destruction of this temple in 69 CE, ancient authors mention that its reconstruction in 70-71 CE was funded by the money gathered by the *fiscus Iudaicus* ([Josephus, Jewish war VII.218](#); [Cassius Dio, Roman History LXV.7.2](#)). Second, even if we cannot assert that the other restoration of the temple achieved under Domitian was funded by the money collected by the *fiscus Iudaicus*, the Vespasianic restoration of the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus with the tax imposed upon the Jews may have remained a painful memory and a humiliating symbol for some Jews of Rome (see [Cistophorus of Domitian representing the temple of Capitoline Jupiter, 82 CE](#)). Finally, the most recent temples of Jupiter which had been built in Rome at Martial’s time, had been erected or rebuilt by Domitian, an emperor who had had a particularly harsh policy towards the Jews (see [Suetonius, Life of Domitian XII](#)).

Suggesting that the association of the oath by Jupiter with the Jewish man may have been used by Martial to allude to the Jewish tax, Christopher Zeichmann develops a different interpretation of these two last verses. For him, the fact that this epigram was added to a book published three months after Domitian’s death, could be put in relation to the supposed new policy that the new emperor Nerva would have settled concerning the Jews (Zeichmann, “Martial,” p. 116). Actually, quoting Martin Goodman’s recent conclusions, according to which there would have been a temporary abolishment of the Jewish tax for all the native Jews between Nerva’s advent in September 96 CE and the adoption of Trajan during the autumn of 97 CE, Christopher Zeichmann concludes that: “the relevance of *Jupiter Capitolinus* for his rival had come to an apparent end, and with no temple in Jerusalem to swear by, he must do so by the young man himself” (Zeichmann, “Martial,” p. 116; on Nerva’s abolishment for all the native and even practicing Jews, see Goodman, “The Meaning,” and Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem*, p. 469-470; on Goodman’s former interpretation that Nerva’s policy may have concerned only apostate Jews, see Goodman, “Nerva”; see also [Sestertius depicting the head of Nerva and a palm tree, 97 CE](#)).

Nevertheless, such an interpretation can be contested, firstly because it is difficult to understand, and secondly because it largely depends on the interpretation according to which every native Jew would have been released from the payment of the Jewish tax by Nerva, an interpretation which is contested. Other scholars think that Nerva may have softened the policy towards the Jews by limiting the fiscal and judicial abuses which took place under Domitian, and also by releasing some Christian or apostate Jews from paying the Jewish tax (see Heemstra, *The Fiscus*, p. 67-74). However, the question of the evolution of the liability of the Jews to the Jewish tax, a tax symbolically linked to the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, is not the central point which has to be discussed here. The unknown point which is the most crucial for the understanding of the end of this epigram is the appreciation of the personal situation of this circumcised poet. He was probably a refugee from Jerusalem, but we do not know whether he was a practicing Jew or an “apostate” so completely integrated into Roman society that he would have sworn by Jupiter. But this second hypothesis is based on another conjecture, the fact that Martial really records his rival’s own words – a supposition which, for us, is far from being credible. We believe that the satirical and provocative tone that Martial usually adopts when he deals with Jews and/or with personal enemies is important to take into account. Thus, we tend to understand the end of the epigram in a more ironical way. Martial might have associated the figure of Jupiter with the oath of the circumcised poet in order to create some kind of grotesque end. The circumcised poet would swear by the god which was the most important god of the Romans and whose main temple, the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, had been partially funded twenty years ago, with the money taken from the Jews. But the most important point is that Martial may not believe the Jewish poet when he swears by the



temples of Jupiter. One logical explanation could be that he did not judge credible the swearing of a Jew by a Roman god which represented everything that native and practicing Jews hated.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Anchialus](#)
- [carminem](#)
- [iuro](#)
- [natus](#)
- [pedico](#)
- [poeta](#)
- [puer](#)
- [Solyma](#)
- [templum](#)
- [Tonans](#)
- [verpus](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Capitoline Temple](#)
- [circumcision](#)
- [Jerusalem](#)
- [Jerusalem Temple](#)
- [Jewish tax](#)
- [Jews](#)
- [Jupiter](#)
- [lust](#)
- [Nerva](#)

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