



## [Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria III.7.21](#)

Jews as a “pernicious nation”.

**Name of the author:** Quintilian

**Date:** 94 CE to 96 CE

**Place:** Rome

**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Roman

**Literary genre:** Rhetorical treatise

**Title of work:** Institutio Oratoria

**Reference:** III.7.21

**Commentary:**

Marcus Fabius Quintilianus was born around 35 CE in Calagurris, a city settled in Tarraconensis. He must have moved quite early to Rome to be instructed by the most famous teachers of the time, and, after this, he returned to Spain where he taught rhetoric, probably in Tarraco. From 68 CE onwards, Quintilian went back to Rome – where he stayed – and devoted himself mainly to teaching and to practicing as an advocate. He was particularly famous in Rome, as is attested by the fact that he was the teacher of Pliny the Younger, the grandsons of Domitian’s sister (namely the children of Flavius Clemens and Flavia Domitilla) and probably of Tacitus. In 78 CE, Vespasian appointed Quintilian to “the first public chair of rhetoric” in Rome, which he held until his retreat in 88 CE (Fernández López, “Quintilian,” p. 308; Cousin, *Quintilien, Institution oratoire. Tome I*, p. vii-xxii).

His *Institutio Oratoria* is the largest preserved handbook dealing with rhetoric. Concerning the dating of composition and publication, Quintilian mentions that he spent slightly more than two years researching and writing it, and that he kept the manuscript for some time before sending it to a bookseller named Trypho (Quintilian, *Letter to Trypho* 1-2). As a consequence, Quintilian may have composed the *Institutio Oratoria* between 93 and 95, or during the very first months of 96 CE, and he may have decided to publish it slightly before Domitian’s death (Cousin, *Quintilien, Institution oratoire. Tome I*, p. xxiii-xxviii). The *Institutio Oratoria* is thus a “work of retirement, a reflection of a lifetime’s teaching and advocacy” (Russell, *Quintilian*, I, p. 4). Through the writing of the twelve books of this work, Quintilian wanted to gather all the rhetorical techniques, but also all the literary and philosophical background necessary to form the ideal orator, namely a man who is exceptional not only because of his culture and knowledge, but also because he uses these skills to serve his community, by being a major figure in public life. For what concerns the global structure of the *Institutio Oratoria*, it is possible to distinguish three parts (structure presented in Fernández López, “Quintilian,” p. 309). The first is from book I to book III.5, and deals with general considerations about the teaching of rhetoric, the nature of rhetoric, its origins and finally the components of rhetoric and the way to arrange them. The second part explains the five usual “duties” (*officia*) of the orator: *inventio* (“invention,” III.6-VI.5), *dispositio* (“arrangement of arguments,” VII.1-10), *elocutio* (“elocution,” VIII.1-XI.1), *memoria* (“memory,” XI.2) and *actio* (“delivery,” XI.3). The third and last part deals with the “practice of rhetoric in society” (XII.1-11).

This text comes from the third book, which may have been composed after the Capitoline games of 94 CE (about the dating, see Cousin, *Quintilien, Institution oratoire. Tome I*, p. xxiv-xxv). More particularly, it is an excerpt from the chapter dealing with “the oratory of praise and blame.” In this chapter, Quintilian enumerates situations in which people can be praised or blamed. He thus states that successful children reflect glory on their parents, cities on their founders, laws on the men who made them, etc. (VII.18). A few lines later (from where our text comes), Quintilian deals with reverse situations. He imagines that men responsible for wrongdoings bring hatred on their own parents, that pernicious peoples cause their founders to be detested – he then quotes the example of Moses – and that a similar process also concerns bad lawgivers. The message of Quintilian is that the orator has to exploit all the tricks of vituperative speech, which consisted of not only criticizing the effective vices or wrongdoings of a living man or people, but also in blaming the origin of these vices. We will focus our commentary on the nature of Quintilian’s attack towards the Jews, in order to fit it within a broader context.

The first important element of Quintilian’s attack is that he presents the Jewish nation as being the best example of a *perniciosa ceteris gens*, “a nation which is pernicious for others.” By qualifying the *gens Iudaica* as *perniciosa*, Quintilian might have echoed the fact that around fifteen years prior, the Jews revolted against Rome and her laws (Berthelot, *Philanthrôpia Judaica*, p. 122). Even after the Roman victory at the end of the Jewish war, many Romans must have continued to perceive the *gens Iudaica* as a deceitful nation intrinsically hostile to Rome.



The second interesting element of Quintilian's anti-Jewish statement is that he presents Jewish religion as a "superstition" (*Judaica superstitio*). By using the word *superstitio* to discredit Jewish religion, Quintilian subscribes to an older tradition. Cicero, in *Pro Flacco*, had already assimilated Jewish religion to a "barbarian superstition" (*barbara superstitio*, Cicero, *Pro Flacco* XXVIII.67; about the use of *superstitio* in association with Jewish religion see Gruen, *Rethinking*, p. 181). As Erich S. Gruen remarks, Quintilian's uses of the expression *Judaica superstitio* reflects the fact that the Romans despised Jewish religion – as they did with other alien cults –, without feeling themselves endangered by it (Gruen, *Rethinking*, p. 181). After Quintilian, Tacitus and Juvenal continued with this tradition (Tacitus explicitly uses the word *superstitio* in *Histories* II.4.3, V.8.2-3, V.13.1 and *Annals* II.85; Juvenal ironically depicts an old Jewish lady as High Priestess of the Jewish religion, who appears as a fortune-teller in his *Satires* VI.542-547; he also depicts very vaguely the nature of their worship as being "nothing but the clouds, and the divinity of the heavens" in [Satires XIV.97](#)). In addition, in Quintilian's polemical statement towards Jews, Moses is presented as the wicked founder of the Jewish religion. One remarkable point is that the name of Moses is not explicitly mentioned; a fact which proves that Moses was sufficiently well-known among Quintilian's audience and in Roman literary circles that they could directly understand that Moses was here implicitly referred to (Gager, *Moses*, p. 81).

With this criticism of the Jews, Quintilian may have wanted to condemn implicitly Jewish exclusiveness, namely their will to live aside from non-Jews (Berthelot, *Philanthrôpia Judaica*, p. 122). Actually, the fact that they are presented as a "pernicious nation for others" implies that they were intrinsically hostile to Rome and unable to maintain a secure relationship with Rome, and probably with non-Jews in general. In addition, the strangeness of their religion, which for a Roman was nothing more than *superstitio*, reinforces the idea of Jewish exclusiveness. In this sense, Quintilian fits in with a tradition that continued to expand during the beginning of the second century CE, as we can see with Tacitus or Juvenal. According to this tradition, Jews are uncivilized men who refused to follow Roman laws and also the most simple rules of hospitality towards fellow human beings, respecting Jewish laws only (see [Juvenal, Satires XIV.96-106](#); [Tacitus, Histories V.5](#)). If the idea of Jewish exclusiveness is actually implicitly present behind Quintilian's words, this text is thus a good example of the fact that in Rome, from the end of the first century CE onwards, Jewish misanthropy had become commonplace in many Roman speeches dealing negatively with Jews (Berthelot, *Philanthrôpia Judaica*, p. 123).

Another interesting question to ask about this text is how to appreciate Quintilian's critical assessment of the Jews considering his personal concerns, or the context in which he wrote these lines. Margaret H. Williams has nuanced the following words of Francis H. Colson: "But I doubt whether the passage is to be taken as any guide to Quintilian's feelings either about Moses or the Jews. He is merely sketching lines of argument which speakers might or did adopt" (see Colson, "Quintilian," p. 168, n. 4; Williams, *Jews in a Graeco-Roman*, p. 105). Margaret H. Williams admits that Quintilian does not innovate by using the word *superstitio* to speak about Jewish religion. However, the scholar considers that his treatment of Moses presents "something quite new in Latin literature" (Williams, *Jews in a Graeco-Roman*, p. 105). Actually, Quintilian's presentation of Moses as the founder of a "pernicious nation" is very different from a tradition that can be found for instance in Strabo (*Geography* XVI.35-36) or in Trogus Pompeius, who present Moses in a much more favourable way as a wise lawgiver/man (Gager, *Moses*, p. 38-47 [Strabo]; 54-56 [Trogus Pompeius]; 80-82 [Quintilian]). For instance, the portrayal that Trogus Pompeius gives of Moses – which we know through Justin's anthology – is entirely favourable: the author insists on his physical beauty and does not accuse Moses of being hostile towards other peoples or of having committed crimes against foreign cults (see Justin, *Epitome of the Philippic Histories of Pompeius Trogus* XXXVI.2.11-16; Berthelot, *Philanthrôpia Judaica*, p. 119-122). Thus, the fact that Quintilian makes Moses the founder of a pernicious nation appears as something new in Latin literature (however, Greek authors such as Hecataeus of Abdera or Diodorus Siculus had already criticized Jews for their misanthropy). Can it be interpreted as a reflection of the development in Rome of a growing hostility towards Jews after the Jewish war? Or, was this negative presentation of Moses already part of a tradition – now lost – which existed before the Jewish war? This question is impossible to answer. All that we can say is that Quintilian's criticism of Jews associates anti-Jewish topoi, maybe of Greek origin, with apparently slightly different forms of attack in the Latin repertoire. We can add that he wrote this development at a time when it must have been common and well-considered to criticize the Jews.

To explain the intentions of Quintilian when he wrote these lines, some scholars have taken into account the issue of his relationship with Flavius Clemens. Various elements prove that Quintilian may have had close ties with him. Thanks to Cassius Dio, we know that, after Flavius Clemens fulfilled the consulate in 95 CE, he was accused of atheism (*atheôt?s, ????????*), a charge which was frequently used to condemn "many others who drifted into Jewish ways" ([Cassius Dio, Roman History LXVII.14.1-2](#); see also [Suetonius, Domitian XII.1-2](#)). Many scholars have debated if the condemnation of Flavius Clemens could have incited Quintilian to write this polemical passage towards Jews or not. For instance, Martin Clarke has suggested that this passage of hostility towards the Jews may



have been inserted by Quintilian after Clemens's condemnation to prove that he broke with his former support (Clarke, "Quintilian," p. 35; followed by Williams, *Jews in a Graeco-Roman*, p. 105). As Benjamin Isaac rightly remarks, this hypothesis cannot be proved or unproved (*The Invention*, p. 468, n. 128). Even if Flavius Clemens and his wife led a Jewish life – which is not certain (see Levieils, *Contra Christianos*, p. 113-116) –, it may not have been necessary for Quintilian to manifest that he departed from his relationship with Clemens by making a critical statement towards Jewish people in general. We suggest rather that in the passage presented here, Quintilian uses stereotypes, which, at his time, were very commonly used for mocking Jews.

Knowing if Quintilian wrote or added this passage to react to Clemens's condemnation may be useless. It is more important to have in mind that Quintilian had been appointed, by Vespasian himself, to the first public chair of rhetoric in Rome in 78 CE; a fact which shows that he was a protégé of the Flavian emperors. This special relationship must have influenced his perception of Jews. In addition, Quintilian wrote this passage between 94-96 CE, namely under the reign of an emperor who led a policy hostile towards Jews. The epigrams of Martial attest that at that time, to make some vulgar and/or scornful jokes or remarks about Jews was a practice which was quite successful. With the exception of the accusations of misanthropy which appear more and more frequently in Roman sources after 70 CE, the form of some of these attacks remained quite stereotypical and not very different from what they were already before the Jewish war (this continuity is highlighted in Gruen, "Romans and Jews," p. 430-431). As emphasized previously, by saying that Jewish religion was a *superstitio*, Quintilian actually contributed to a tradition going back at least to Cicero. Additionally, the originality of his presentation comes from the fact that he describes the Jews as a "pernicious nation," and draws a negative portrayal of Moses. We cannot be certain that these two elements are actually the reflection of a universal hardening of Roman critical attitudes towards Jews from the end of the Jewish war onwards. All that we can say is that the expression *perniciosa ceteris gens*, "a nation which is pernicious for others," can be indirectly associated with the accusations of Jewish misanthropy which are attested more and more in Roman sources a few years after Quintilian, as for instance with Tacitus or Juvenal.

Finally, the fact that in his whole work Quintilian criticized the Jews only once is something that should be remembered. Erich Gruen rightly remarks that this shows that for Quintilian, Jews and the Jewish religion were absolutely not a central preoccupation (see Gruen, *Rethinking*, p. 181-182, esp. n. 20; Gruen, "Romans and Jews," p. 429). This remark is totally relevant and is not specific to Quintilian. It is also relevant for all Greek and Roman authors, even Martial or Tacitus. The best evidence which can confirm this statement is certainly the contrast existing between the fact that Jews caused serious difficulties for Roman power between 66 and 115 CE, and the fact that there are finally very few echoes of these troubles in Roman literary sources.

Keywords in the original language:

- [auctor](#)
- [gens pernicios](#)
- [ludaica superstitio](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [exclusiveness \(Jewish\)](#)
- [Jewish Law](#)
- [Jewish people](#)
- [misanthropy \(Jewish\)](#)
- [Moses](#)
- [superstition](#)

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