



## [Cassius Dio, Roman History XXXVII.16-17](#)

Digression on Jews

**Name of the author:** Cassius Dio

**Date:** 207 CE to 229 CE

**Language:** Greek

**Category:** Roman and Greek

**Literary genre:** History

**Title of work:** Roman History

**Reference:**

XXXVII.16-17

### **Commentary:**

L. Cassius Dio (163/164-229 CE) came from a prominent family of Nicaea in Bithynia who played an important role both in local and in imperial administration. Previously, his father M. Cassius Apronianus had fulfilled a brilliant career (he entered the Roman Senate, became consul suffect, proconsul of Lycia-Pamphylia, Cilicia and Dalmatia), so Cassius Dio spent a large part of his time in Italy. Cassius Dio is famous for having being part of the imperial entourage from the end of the second to the first decades of the third century. L. Cassius Dio became praetor in 193 or 194 CE and, from 198 CE onwards (the moment when he composed a history of the civil wars that may have helped him to keep the favour of the emperor), he remained in the entourage of Septimius Severus. Under this emperor, he became suffect consul in 205 or 206 CE. Later, Cassius Dio also served the emperor Caracalla; he actually escorted the latter in 214-215 CE during his trip in Bithynia. Then, he was part of the entourage of Macrinus who nominated him as curator of Pergamum and Smyrna in 218-219 CE. Under Severus Alexander, he became proconsul of Africa, perhaps in 223 CE, and imperial legate in Dalmatia (224-226 CE) and then of Upper Pannonia (226-228 CE). Finally, in 229 CE, he went back to Rome to hold the ordinary consulship with Severus Alexander, before retiring definitely to Bithynia (for his career see *RE* 3.2 [1899] s. v. "Cassius" n° 40, col. 1684 [Schwartz]; *PIR*<sup>2</sup> C 492; Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio*, p. 5-27).

Cassius Dio is the author of a *History of Rome* in 80 books from the foundation of the city to 229 CE, that is until his retirement mentioned in LXXX.1-5. Cassius Dio writes that he spent ten years collecting documents to write about the achievements of the Romans up to Septimius Severus's death (211 CE) and that he spent twelve years writing the work (LXXXIII.23.5). Fergus Millar has thus assumed that he collected the documents from 197 to 207 CE and that he composed the *Roman History* between 207 and 219 CE. According to Millar, once the work had been finalised in 219 CE, it was only minimally revised by the author thereafter. Thus, most of the initial narrative may not have gone further than the early years of Caracalla. Nevertheless, in the last part of his life, Cassius Dio may have chosen to pursue his narrative up to 229 CE and to deal with the reigns of Caracalla, Macrinus, Elagabalus, and very briefly with that of Severus Alexander without coming back to the rest of his historical narrative (Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio*, p. 30, 38-40).

The *Roman History* has been preserved only partially, as only books XXXVI to LX (68 BCE-46 CE) and part of books LXXIX-LXXX (217-218 CE) have survived directly through various manuscripts, though sometimes with big lacunae. We only know the rest of the work through two channels. The first is a selection of classical and Byzantine Greek historians compiled in the reign of Constantine Porphyrogenitus during the tenth century CE. Second, we also know the *Roman History* through the epitome of books XXXVI to the end (for the period 69 BCE to 229 CE) made by a monk of the eleventh century, Ioannes Xiphilinus. The third work that helps to reconstruct the numerous gaps is the *Epitome historion*, *The Extracts of History*, made by Ioannes Zonaras during the twelfth century CE. As Zonaras used Dio for the history of Rome from Aeneas's arrival in Italy to 146 BCE, this *Epitome* is particularly useful to reconstruct the first quarter of Dio's work. Zonaras also used Dio with other sources to narrate the period from the death of Julius Caesar to the reign of Nerva, which appears thus as a useful complement to the *Epitome* made by Xiphilinus. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the *Roman History* appears not to have been published as a whole (Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio*, p. 30-31). Rather, it may have been read to the various audiences that Cassius Dio encountered, especially in the course of its composition.

The thirty seventh book of Cassius's Dio *Roman History* is the second book of Cassius Dio's *Roman History* that has been transmitted, nearly completely, through a direct tradition. This book covers the period 65-60 BCE. The text presented here belongs to a section that deals with the campaigns led by Pompey in the Caucasus, in Syria



and in Judea.

This text is the first one of the four *logoi*, or digressions, composed by Cassius Dio in order to give information about the customs and way of life of various peoples. The digression presented here deals with Jews, whereas the other ones, later in the narrative, deal with Parthians (XL.14-16), Pannonians (XLIX.36), and Britons (LXXVII.12). As stated by Estelle Bertrand, these digressions mark a real break in the narrative. In some of them Cassius Dio chose to focus on one particular point of their culture. For the Jews, he chose to deal only with their religious beliefs (Bertrand, "L'empire," p. 712). The digression on the Jews is located immediately after the narrative of the conquest by Pompey in 63 BCE of the region he calls Syria Palaestina (XXXVII.15.2) – a region that in fact corresponds here to the Hasmonean kingdom as it expanded under the reigns of John Hyrcanus and Alexander Jannaeus (XXXVII.15.2-16.4). The author previously states that the Roman armies exploited the "day of Cronos" to take possession of the Jerusalem Temple, so the fact that he then deals with these singular Jewish customs and especially with the Shabbat creates a continuity in the narrative (Bertrand, "L'empire," p. 712). We will see which elements Cassius Dio chose to mention in order to briefly characterise the Jews, and more particularly their religious customs, while keeping in mind that this digression is first and foremost a literary exercise. Actually, the digression ends with the author's own assessment that many peoples have written about the god of the Jews and that to restate all the elements would be irrelevant for him and his work (see the last sentence; about this passage, see Lachenaud, "Récit et discours," p. 412).

As rightly recalled by Estelle Bertrand, the geographical and ethnographical elements selected by Cassius Dio show that he followed the conventions of the genre, namely that of a geography which was "useful," "personal," and "encyclopaedic". However, Dio shows a particular taste for the names of places and peoples (see Bertrand, "L'empire," p. 709-710). This interest of his explains why he opens his digression on the Jews with a reflection on the evolution of the name of the territory in which the Jews lived. His words about Palestine fits with the traditional use of the term in Greek and Roman sources. Actually Palestine corresponded to the narrow region along the coast that Herodotus presents in *Histories* VII.89 as being the area formerly inhabited by the Philistines. Later, Palestine continued to be a geographical denomination but it did not become an official administrative denomination until the reign of Hadrian when the latter decided to change the name of Judaea to Syria Palaestina (Feldman, *Studies in Hellenistic Judaism*, p. 553-576). The link highlighted by Cassius Dio between the name of the population, i.e. the Jews, and the name given to the area in which they settled directly echoes the first occurrence of the term *Ioudaia* in the work of Hecataeus of Abdera, as we know it in Diodorus Siculus, *Historical Library*, fragment XL.3.1-2. Actually, in this passage, the term appears in the framework of the narration of the exodus from Egypt (see the other sources quoted in Lachenaud and Coudry, *Dion Cassius, Histoire Romaine*, p. 148, n. 109). As rightly recalled by Louis Feldman, the appellation of Judea remained the official one used by the Roman administration up to the time of Hadrian. After the Bar-Kokhba revolt, the name of Judea was changed to Syria-Palestina in order to get rid of the Jewish character of the province (the term *Ioudaia* or *Iudea* remains however sporadically attested even after the revolt; about the shift in terminology, see Feldman, *Studies in Hellenistic Judaism*, p. 553-576). Cassius Dio was of course aware of this shift in terminology. In the previous passage in which he narrates Pompey's campaigns, he writes that after having submitted the Nabataean king Aretas, Pompey went to *Syria Palaistin*? (????? ??????????; XXXVII.15.2).

One interesting aspect of Cassius Dio's digression on the Jews is that he deals with the issue of the spread of Judaism. First, he highlights the fact that the denomination of ?????????/Ioudaios is not limited to the people (?????/ethnos) living in Judea. On the contrary, he writes that the condition of ?????????/Ioudaios is determined by the observance (literally the "emulation," corresponding to the verb ??????/z?lo?) of the Jewish customs (?? ??????/ta nomima). At the beginning of the third century, Cassius Dio was aware that the meaning of *Ioudaios* had evolved from an ethno-geographic definition to a socio-religious one (see Williams, *Jews*, p. 27; note that this shift has been traced back to the second half of the second century BCE; see Cohen, "Ioudaios," p. 770). This situation implies that persons stemming from a different ethnos (?????????/alloethneis) who followed the Law of Moses could become Jews (for a similar use of ?????????, see Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XIX.329-330, who opposes the term to ?????????/homophulos, which designates the Jews). The fact that Judaism spread throughout the cities of the whole Empire is a reality which is highlighted by various ancient authors from a positive or at least a neutral perspective (this is the case with Strabo according to Josephus, in *Jewish Antiquities* XIV.112-118; but also with Philo in *Legatio ad Gaium* 281-284 or Josephus in *Jewish Antiquities* XIV.110-111; *Against Apion* II.282; all these references are quoted in Lachenaud and Coudry, *Dion Cassius, Histoire Romaine*, p. 148-149, n. 110). However, there are also authors who judged this spread of Judaism throughout the Empire as harmful. This is the case with Seneca the Younger, according to Augustine's quotation in *The City of God* VI.11, who says that the "customs (*consuetudo*) of this most villainous nation (*sceleratissimae gentis*) have gained such influence that they are now received throughout every land." The spread of Judaism is thus presented by Seneca as being dangerous and degrading for Rome. Another Roman author, Juvenal, also presented the spread of Jewish customs and their



adoption by Judaizers in a critical way. In his fourteenth *Satire*, Juvenal enumerates two stages of sympathy with Judaism, stages symbolizing the transition between a sympathizer and his proselyte son (see Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, p. 87; 116-117; [Juvenal, Satires XIV.96-106](#)). The tone of Juvenal's depiction is highly polemical; he denigrates various Jewish customs, and focuses his attacks against Jewish exclusiveness. We can thus appreciate the difference in Cassius Dio's passage, when he generally observes that many men who were not from the Jewish *ethnos* had adopted Jewish customs, becoming Jews themselves. Contrary to Seneca or Juvenal, Dio does not present the spread of Judaism and its adoption by non-Jews as something negative or dangerous. His perspective is also quite general, as in contrast to Juvenal, he does not take the trouble to differentiate between Judaizers and converts.

The following sentence when he deals with the fact that this *genos* "... though often repressed has increased to such a great extent that they have acquired the right to practice freely their cult (???? ??? ?? ?????????? ??? ?????????? ??????????/hôte kai es parrêsian tes nomiseôs eknikêsa)" has been commented upon abundantly. Concerning the "repressions," he must refer to the Great Revolt of 66-73 CE and to the Bar Kokhba Revolt between 132 and 135 CE, and maybe to the so-called Diaspora Revolt as well. Second, the connection made by Cassius Dio between Jewish proselytism and the fact that they acquired "the right to practice their cult freely" seems quite strange. In another part of Cassius Dio's *Roman History* that has been preserved only through fragment 79 of John of Antioch, it is, on the contrary, Jewish proselytism that is presented as the cause of the Roman repression towards the Jews (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* LVII.18.5a). In this episode, we are told that because Jews had flocked to Rome in great numbers and because they tried to convert many natives, Tiberius took the decision to banish most of them (this passage has been put in relation to Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XVIII.81-84; Tacitus, *Annals* II.85.5 and Suetonius, *Tiberius* XXXVI when they narrate that in 19 CE Tiberius banished Jewish ceremonies – along with Egyptian ones – and ordered members of the Jewish community to be sent to Sardinia to serve as soldiers; however, Margaret Williams has rightly recalled that we cannot be sure that Cassius Dio refers to the same event, see Williams, *Jews*, p. 65). What remains certain is that since the Republican period the sanctions of Roman authorities against Jews were most of the time to react to revolts or social troubles implying more or less important communities of Jews. Even if the consequences of the sanctions or of the military operations led by Rome against the Jews in Judea or the Jews of the Diaspora were harsh and dramatic for the Jews – with the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, the creation of the Jewish tax, the foundation of Aelia Capitolina, or the limitations against the practice of circumcision at least under Antoninus Pius –, the aim of the Roman authorities was not to forbid the Jewish cult as such. Finally, it remains difficult to know whether when Cassius Dio alludes to the fact that Jews had obtained "the right to practice their cult privileges freely" he had in mind a precise past event or if he simply alluded to a possible recent improvement of the rights of the Jews under Severan emperors (for this perspective, see Stern, *Greek and Latin* II, p. 353; Lachenaud and Coudry, *Dion Cassius, Histoire Romaine*, p. 149, n. 111). The soundest sources referring to a possible improvement of the rights of the Jews under Severan emperors are as follows. Firstly, there is a passage of the *Digest* (L.2.3.3) quoting an excerpt from Ulpian's *De officio proconsulis*. It is stated that the *divus* Severus (the text says *divi* but it is probably a later interpolation), that is Septimius Severus, and Antoninus (that is Caracalla) legislated in favour of the participation of Jews in civic life (about this law, see Nemo-Pekelman, *Rome et ses citoyens juifs*, p. 30-32). Second, Jerome in his *Commentary on Daniel* XI.34-35 (= PL 25, col. 596) writes that the emperors Severus (perhaps Septimius Severus) and Antoninus (probably Caracalla) had been favourable to the Jews (Schwartz, "Aspects politiques," p. 147, n. 1; about the debate related to the identity of the Severus and of the Antoninus mentioned by Jerome, see Courtray, *Prophète des temps derniers*, p. 250 and n. 502).

The second main aspect of Cassius Dio's digression on Jews is that he makes some general reflections about Jewish customs and in particular their monotheism (XXXVII.17.2-3). Actually, the fact that they worship only one god is presented as one of the main manifestations of the extreme otherness of the Jews; an otherness highlighted through the following sentence: "they are distinguished (?????????????) from the rest of mankind in practically every detail of life..." It is thus quite interesting to note that this assessment is not followed by a development about Jewish exclusiveness, nor about the Jews' alleged misanthropy as we can find in many other Roman sources dealing with the singularity of the Jewish customs (Stern, *Greek and Latin* II, p. 347; about the connection between the otherness of Jewish customs and the misanthropic nature of the Jews, see [Tacitus, Histories V.4-5](#); [Juvenal, Satires XIV.96-106](#)). As rightly recalled by Katell Berthelot, Cassius Dio's singular perspective appears also in the narrative he gives of the origins of the Bar Kokhba revolt under Hadrian when he writes that many people from other nations joined the Jews in their revolt (see [Cassius Dio, Roman History LXIX.13.2](#)). As a consequence, the Jews do not appear as a people isolated because of their seditious and misanthropic character. Thus, Cassius Dio's quite neutral appreciation of the otherness of the Jews could be interpreted as a manifestation of the progressive disappearance, from Juvenal onwards, of the accusation of Jewish misanthropy. This disappearance can be explained firstly by the fact that under Hadrian, after the end of the Bar Kokhba revolt, the political situation



of the Jews was stabilised, but also by the growing influence of the Medio- and Neoplatonic approach to ancestral cults, which finally led to a much more tolerant attitude towards Judaism than Stoic universalism (see Berthelot, *Philanthrôpia Judaica*, p. 179-180).

However, to give an example of the extreme otherness of the Jews, Cassius Dio did indeed choose to deal with their religious beliefs. He insists upon the fact that they worship only one god, upon their “extreme reverence” for him, but also upon the prohibition to represent the deity or even to pronounce his name. This last prohibition is certainly the element which is highlighted the most frequently by Greek or Roman authors dealing with the religious beliefs of the Jews. We can of course quote Lucan who qualifies the Jewish god as an *incertus deus*, that is “a not-well defined god” ([Lucan, \*The Civil War\* II.592-593](#)), whereas Tacitus mocks the Jews who “conceive of one god only, and that with the mind alone” ([Tacitus, \*Histories\* V.4, \*mente sola unumque numen intellegunt\*](#)). In comparison to Tacitus, who assimilates the Jewish god to a *numen*, or even of Strabo who while making a quite neutral presentation of the origins of Jewish aniconism, calls the Jewish god ?? ?????/to theïon (see Strabo, *Geography* XVI.2.35), Cassius Dio does not name the Jewish god. His assessment of Jewish aniconism remains factual and his aim may have been to show the otherness of Jewish religious beliefs without denigrating them. Similarly, when Cassius Dio deals with the Shabbat, he simply writes that Jews dedicated (????????/anethesan) to their god the day of Kronos and he only characterises the Shabbat by the fact that on this day “they undertake no serious occupation” (??? ????? ???????? ?????????? ?????????????/kai ergou oudenos spoudaiou prosaptontai). Thus, in contrast to many Roman authors like Tacitus who despised the observance of the sabbatical rest by assimilating it to a time of idleness and by presenting it as a proof that the Jews love inactivity, Cassius Dio presents it in a much more neutral way (about the association of the Shabbat with indolence and idleness, see Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, p. 86-89; [Tacitus, \*Histories\* V.4.3](#); [Juvenal \*Satire\* XIV.105-106](#); [Rutilius Namatianus, \*On his return\* I.389-392](#)).

Finally, this part of Cassius Dio’s excursus on Jewish customs is particularly interesting because Dio must have reworked elements taken from two other works in order to write it (on this point, see Lachenaud and Coudry, *Dion Cassius, Histoire Romaine*, p. xxi-xxii and p. 150, n. 115-116). Before seeing the possible borrowings of Dio, it is important to remember that it is quite rare to succeed to identify the authors whose work Dio used. First, the passage in which Cassius Dio quickly describes the Temple of Jerusalem, emphasizing its impressive dimensions and beauty, but also that it had no roof, may recall the description that Josephus makes of the Temple during the Roman siege (Josephus, *Jewish War* V.184-256). Josephus also highlights the monumentality of the temple or the luxury of its ornaments, but in contrast to Dio, he deals with the ornaments of the roof – implying thus that there was a roof. This discrepancy could be explained by the fact that Dio confused the roof with the leaves of the monumental entrance of the Temple. Actually, Josephus writes that the entrance of the Temple did not have a door “as it expressed the wide open nature of the sky that cannot be closed” (Josephus, *Jewish War* V.208). The similarity of Cassius Dio’s expression ?????? ?? ??? ????????/achan?s te kai an?rophos and ?????? ?? ??? ?????????????/ achan?s te kai adiakleiston in Josephus’s narrative shows that Dio, while inspired by it, may have distorted the narrative of Josephus. Second, Cassius Dio may have been influenced by Tacitus’s excursus on the Jews and his remark that one possible explanation of the instauration of the Shabbat is an astronomical one (see [Tacitus, \*Histories\* V.4.4](#); Lachenaud and Coudry, *Dion Cassius, Histoire Romaine*, p. xxii). However, even if Cassius Dio knew Tacitus’s excursus on the Jews, the way he deals with them in his own digression shows his ability to rework his sources and to borrow from them only the specific elements that would fit his own purposes (Lachenaud and Coudry, *Dion Cassius, Histoire Romaine*, p. xxii). All in all, it is clear that the tone of Cassius Dio’s excursus on the Jews is far less cynical and critical than that of Tacitus or of other Roman authors such as Juvenal or even Quintilian. This is probably to be explained by the period in which Dio lived, a period during which the Jews did not revolt against Rome, and were even granted Roman citizenship thanks to Caracalla’s edict.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [Gentiles](#)
- [Jerusalem Temple](#)
- [Jewish customs](#)
- [Jewish God](#)
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- [Roman people](#)
- [Shabbat](#)

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