Juvenal’s depiction of the proselytes and of their exclusiveness.

Name of the author: Juvenal
Date: 117 CE to 123 CE
Place: Rome
Language: Latin

Category: Roman
Literary genre: Poetry

Title of work: Satires
Reference: XIV.96-106

Commentary:

Parental responsibility towards their children is the central theme of Juvenal’s Fourteenth Satire, which was possibly written between 117 and 123 CE, that is a few years before Juvenal’s exile in Egypt (for the dating, see Sers, Juvénaux, p. 332). After having first prevented parents from being bad examples for their children, Juvenal gives two instances of some parental wrongdoings which could be imitated by their offspring: building megalomania (XIV.86-95) and superstition, exemplified here by the practice of the Jewish religion. The fact that Juvenal decided to introduce his anti-Jewish polemical statement into a more general declaration about familial responsibility may have been influenced by a passage of the third book of Quintilian’s Institutio Oratoria, written between 94 and 96 CE, more particularly in the chapter De laude et vituperatione, 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, Quintilian deals with reverse situations. Among others, he imagines that men responsible for wrongdoings bring hatred on their own parents and that “pernicious nations” cause their founders to be detested. For illustrating this last case, he quotes the example of the Jews (Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria III.7.21). Quintilian’s perspective is of course different from that of Juvenal. First, in Quintilian it is the influence of children committing crimes on their parents which is highlighted and not the reverse. Second, the Jewish case is mentioned just after this short development about familial responsibility. However, Juvenal may have chosen to associate this anti-Jewish polemical statement with the global theme of parental responsibility because he had been influenced by Quintilian’s narrative, that he developed through a different perspective. We will thus study the way Juvenal represents the Jews and their religious practice, but also the way he sets them in the Roman society.

Juvenal’s opinion of the Jews has been extensively debated, as his opinion has been considered through a comparison with his racial prejudices about other foreign peoples. For some scholars, Juvenal’s criticism may have focused on Eastern peoples and, on some occasions, on Greeks. The latter were for him the most serious rivals for the Romans (see Juvenal, Satire III; VIII.84-124). From that perspective, even if he despised Jews, he would not have felt the same aversion towards them as they did not represent a social nor an economic threat (Sherwin-White, Racial Prejudice, p. 71-73; 98-99). However, scholars have contested such a view by saying that Juvenal could sometimes recognize the value of some Greek leaders and that he may have had more racial prejudices towards the Jews than towards the Greeks (Watts, “Race Prejudice,” p. 102-104; however, Watts’s conclusions about the Greeks cannot be transposed to the Eastern peoples).

Focusing attention on the fourteenth epigram, it is first important to recall that Juvenal deals here with sympathizers (here mentioned as metuentem sabbata patrem, “a father who respects the shabbath,” v. 1) and with proselytes, that is Romans who had adopted Jewish way of life to varying degrees. The situation described by Juvenal may echo Tacitus, Histories V.5.1 in which Tacitus also focuses his criticism against proselytes – incidentally, Tacitus’s Histories, published between 106 and 109 CE, may have been a source of inspiration for Juvenal.

First, Juvenal uses crude remarks regarding the religious beliefs of the proselytes and indirectly of the Jews: they “worship nothing but the clouds, and the divinity of the heavens” (nil praeter nubes et caeli numen adorant, v. 97). Through this sentence, Juvenal defines Jewish religion as a superstition (note that the word superstition is explicitly used to refer to Jewish religion in Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria III.7.21). Already in his Satire VI.542-547, Juvenal ironically depicts an old Jewish lady who is said to be the High Priestess (magna sacerdos) of the Jewish religion,
and who is staged as a “fortune-teller” practicing low price services (Watts, “Race Prejudice,” p. 103). As the God of the Jews is a non-anthropomorphic God, many Roman authors, including Juvenal, mock the Jews by saying that they worship the clouds (nubes) or the sky to show the “nebulous nature” of their God (Courtney, A Commentary, p. 571). In The Civil War, Lucan goes further with this kind of criticism by saying that Jews have an “unknown god” (incertus deus, Lucan, The Civil War II.593). However, in this Satire, Juvenal does not limit the beliefs of the Jews to a worship of the clouds, as he adds that Jews worship caeli numen, “the divine power of the heavens.”

According to W. J. Watts, the expression caeli numen would be a “Latin equivalent of the Hebrew periphrasis ‘shamayim’ for God,” even if Juvenal “misses the point of a purely spiritual deity” (Watts, “Race Prejudice,” p. 103). Concerning his opinion of the Jewish God, Juvenal may have been also influenced by Tacitus, who in Histories V.5.2 asserts that Jews “appreciate the divine power (numen) only through their mind (mente sola).” Thus, Juvenal follows the criticism of previous Roman authors by considering that the most disturbing thing about the Jewish God was his discarnate or abstract nature.

Next, Juvenal continues his critical depiction of the proselytes by presenting some of the main rules of Jewish life. Through this listing, we can trace out what constitutes “three stages of sympathy with Judaism”: three stages symbolizing here the transition between the sympathizer father and his proselyte son (Schäfer, Judeophobia, p. 87; 116-117). In the first stage, we find respect of the shabbat (v. 105-106) – which is criticized as an excuse for laziness, as in Tacitus, Histories V.4.3 –, and the prohibition of pork consumption (also mentioned in Tacitus, Histories V.4.2). Juvenal, however, is more precise, as he marks the difference between the father who just abstains from eating it (v. 99), and his proselyte son who considers it as something as atrocious as eating human flesh (v. 98). We find another reference to cannibalism in the next Satire, in which Juvenal deals with the anthropophagic practices that he allegedly attributes to the Egyptians (Juvenal, Satire XV.1-13). However, their relationship to cannibalism, as it is depicted by Juvenal, seems opposed. For the Jews, it represents an abomination, whereas the Egyptians supposedly practiced it. For Jean Gérard, by using the anthropophagic motif when he evokes both the Jews and the Egyptians, Juvenal wanted to assert that religious superstition, here embodied by the Jewish or Egyptian beliefs and religious practices, opens the way to inhumane acts, of which cannibalism would be the awful culmination (Gérard, Juvénaux, p. 394). However, such a reading can be contested, as the inhumaness of anthropophagic Egyptians seems opposed to the misanthropy of the Jews abhorring the pork as human flesh. By using the example of anthropophagic Egyptians, Juvenal may have wanted to stress their otherness, and the fact that they were barbarians. On the contrary, in the Greek sources, misanthropy – which is, according to Juvenal, the main characteristic of the Jews – is a personality trait which is often that of a member of the civic community, and never that of a barbarian. Misanthropy is the characteristic of the de-civilized man, a definition which, we will see with the rest of the text presented here, fits in with very well with Juvenal’s prejudices against the Jews, who are presented as deviant men who had abandoned the Roman laws to respect Jewish ones. Thus, this radical aversion to pork and the open worship of the Jewish god would thus be the “intermediary stage” of sympathy with Judaism (Schäfer, Judeophobia, p. 87). The third and final stage of this process – certainly the worst for a Roman –, is the practice of circumcision (mentioned v. 99, see also Tacitus, Histories V.5.2), a practice which was the last step in becoming a real proselyte.

Among these expected rules which are presented by Juvenal as the main characteristics of Jewish otherness, one of the most problematic for a Roman may have been the tendency of the Jews to observe separate laws. This point is developed through verses 100-101: “Having been wont to flout the laws of Rome, they learn and practise and revere the Jewish law” (Romanas autem soliti contemnere legesJuliaecum ediscunt et servant ac metuunt ius Iudaicum). By mentioning the existence of a ius Iudaicum, a “Jewish law,” Juvenal echoes the Satire dealing with the old lady High Priestess of the Jews, who is also presented as “the interpreter of the laws of Solyme (leges Solymarum)” – Solyma is a transliterated abbreviation for “Jerusalem” (Juvenal, Satire VI.544). If in this last passage, the context can give the impression that these Jewish laws refer mainly to religious rules, they are presented in a slightly different way than in verses 100-101 of this epigram. In actual fact, the proselytes are presented as despising (contemnere) Roman laws, Jewish law being the only one observed by them. Jewish law is thus presented as dangerously competing with Roman laws. Juvenal’s depiction thus gives the impression that Jews formed not only a separate socio-religious minority, but a wholly independent legal community inside the Roman State. In Tacitus, Histories V.5.2, the idea that by adopting Jewish rules and practices, and thus by renouncing Roman gods, the sympathizers and the proselytes were betraying their own patria (exuere patriam), that is the Roman State, is explicitly mentioned. Tacitus had even gone further than Juvenal by saying that Jews’ aniconism led them to refuse to expose any statue of the emperor in their towns, a practice which was thus a lease-majesty crime (Tacitus, Histories V.5.4; however a later rabbinic source shows that statues of the emperors, governors, or local elites were probably exposed in the cities of Judea and that the religious authorities found strategies not to make them disappear from every public space, but to make sure that they would not be worshipped; see Jerusalem Talmud, Avodah Zarah 3:1, 42b). Juvenal’s attack against the legal exclusiveness of the Jews is less accurate
than that of Tacitus, but by saying that Jews despise Roman laws and prefer their own, the satirist is implicitly saying that they are dangerously challenging Rome’s authority and legal power.

Contrary to Greeks who are criticized by Juvenal because of their over-integration in Roman society, Jews are despised because of their need to live aside from this society. Such a view fits in with Juvenal’s polemical speech, but other sources show, on the contrary, that some native Jews could live in Roman society without living a Jewish life, and sometimes even hiding their Jewishness (see for instance Martial, Epigrams VII.82). Leaving aside the diversity of profiles of the native Jews or of the converts to Judaism, Juvenal focuses his attacks against Jews’ exclusiveness. He gives various examples. Their sacred book, here presented as the roll (volumen) of the Mosaic Law, is said to be secret (v. 102). Concerning some fundamental acts of humaneness, such as as showing the way or a water source to someone in need (v. 103-104), Juvenal claims that Jews help only verpi, that is, those who are also circumcised (on the use of verpus to refer to circumcision, see also Martial, Epigrams VII.82 and XI.94). As Edward Courtney has underlined, Juvenal’s anti-Jewish reproach about their selfishness concerning giving direction or indicating where a water source may be found could perfectly fit in with Proverbs 5:15-17, which urges Jews, and not the foreigners who could be with them, to use their own cistern (Courtney, A Commentary, p. 572) – even if it is not likely that Juvenal took his inspiration from biblical books (see Berthelot, Philanthrôpia, p. 169, n. 333). Nevertheless, it is also true that Jewish authors like Philo or Josephus wrote about the necessary humaneness that Jews have to show even to non-Jews (see Courtney, A Commentary, p. 572). Juvenal’s approach is clearly the opposite of this last point of view, and his attack against proselytes’ misanthropy and exclusiveness echoes Tacitus’s words in Histories V.5.1 (on this point see Berthelot, Philanthrôpia, p. 168-169). In this passage of the Histories, Tacitus highlights the contrast between the fact that Jews have mercy (misericordia) and demonstrate a “stubborn loyalty” (fides obstinata) among themselves, and the fact that they feel a “hostile aversion” (hostile odium) against every other man who is not a member of their community. Having Tacitus as a source of inspiration for his satire, Juvenal reuses one of the most severe criticisms against the Jews to discredit them: their misanthropy. As Katell Berthelot recalls, this accusation of misanthropy appears as all the harder in that it appeared as totally incompatible with the philosophical background influencing many Roman aristocratic groups for which humanitas, that is, the ability of men to be sociable, was a structuring value (Berthelot, Philanthrôpia, p. 169). However, even if this accusation of misanthropy has to be connected to some social realities, Jews’ misanthropy and exclusiveness have to be perceived as a particularly appropriate rhetorical motif for Juvenal. Actually, it fits in perfectly with his discussion about parents affecting excessively the destiny of their children, and it could also counterbalance the portrayal of the over-integrated Greeks developed in some of his previous satirical works. Thus, this motif has also to be understood here as the result of the rules imposed by the satirical genre.

Keywords in the original language:

- abstineo
- adoro
- arcanus
- caelum
- contemno
- fons
- humana caro
- ignavus
- ius Iudaicum
- lex Romana
- Moyses
- nubes
- numen
- pater
- praeputium
- Sabbata
- sacra
- septima lux
- suilla
- verpus
- via
Thematic keywords in English:

- circumcision
- dietary laws
- exclusiveness (Jewish)
- humaneness
- Jewish God
- Jewish Law
- Jews
- misanthropy (Jewish)
- Moses
- proselyte
- Roman law
- sabbath
- superstition
- sympathizer


Other sources connected with this document:  Text

**Lucan, *The Civil War* II.568-595**

After Caesar’s progression in Italy and Pompey’s retreat to Capua, Lucan imagines the speech that Pompey would have addressed to his soldiers before his departure for Brundisium.

- Read more about Lucan, *The Civil War* II.568-595

Text

**Martial, *Epigrams* VII.82**

Jews hiding their circumcision.

- Read more about Martial, *Epigrams* VII.82

Text

**Juvenal, *Satires* VIII.87-124**
On the risks of the misbehaviours of the Roman governors towards Rome’s allies.

- Read more about Juvenal, Satires VIII.87-124

Text

Juvenal, Satires XV.1-13

Juvenal’s condemnation of Egyptian superstition.

- Read more about Juvenal, Satires XV.1-13

Text

Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria III.7.21

Jews as a “pernicious nation”.

- Read more about Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria III.7.21

Text

Tacitus, Histories V.4-5

Tacitus’s excursus about the Jews.

- Read more about Tacitus, Histories V.4-5

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