

An Anti-Semitic Utterance of Pliny the Elder?

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Among 23 texts from Pliny the Elder, brought by M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, 1.465–501, there is one utterance on which he comments (p. 495): “This is Pliny’s one reference to Jews or Judaea that has an indisputably anti-Semitic ring.” This is his interpretation of the words (*NH* 13, 46): “...Judaea gens contumelia numinum insignis.”

Since this hostile remark is so out of character for Pliny, we may well ask whether there might have been anything that provoked it. We have to read the words in their context. Pliny here is treating different sorts of dates, their properties and their places of growth. Some thrive in Judaea, among them one “which we offer to the honour of the gods.” This sort, he states, “is called *chydaeus* by the Jews, a race remarkable for their contempt for the divine powers.” Translated this way, the context does not seem to be a sufficient occasion for a sudden outburst of anti-Semitic feeling.

But Stern should not have left the word *chydaeus* untranslated. According to Liddle-Scott-Jones *χυδαῖος* means “common, ordinary”, and is used in this sense to designate certain sorts of plants. Concerning persons, we find *χυδαῖον πλῆθος* “the common people”, as opposed to *οἱ σοφοί*. Used metaphorically, it develops a pejorative connotation, “vulgar”, “coarse”, so that we find the combination *χυδαῖα καὶ φαῦλα*.

Now, this is the attribute applied by the Jews to plants “*quos honori deorum damus*.” Obviously, Pliny feels insulted by the fact that the Jews use such a derogatory word for a fruit with which the Romans honour the gods. They must do so out of disrespect for the gods themselves, he feels. For such disrespect, he adds, they are largely known.

This last remark does not seem to be very far from the mark. Obviously, “common dates” were grown and sold by Jewish farmers, who gave them an uncomplimentary name; they may even have diminished their own profits

thereby. The Jews may have had their scruples when selling their neighbours a product that they knew was used by them in a pagan cult Jews were enjoined against having contact with. The use of a disparaging name for that product may have alleviated their conscience.

If this is correct, Jewish nomenclature here may have been motivated by their abhorrence of idolatry. Can we deny that this feeling was correctly translated into the categories of a Roman, loyal to his religious tradition, as “contumelia numinum”?

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