

TACITUS, HISTORIES, BEFORE 117 CE

Caius Cornelius Tacitus (56-after 117) is perhaps the most renowned Latin historian. As an active statesman, including holding the posts of consul and later governor of Asia, Tacitus had access to the inner workings of imperial Rome under Nero and his successors, which provides the cogent factual and analytical basis of this text. In his other major work, The Annals, Tacitus provides one of the earliest references (15.44) to the historical Jesus. The introduction to Histories describes Tacitus's view of the state of affairs in his day; his selection on Jewish practices, although he mis-understands them, nonetheless provides some insight into how the Romans viewed this ancient monotheistic religion and culture.

begin these Histories with the year [69 cE] when Ser-vius Galba held the consulship for the second time and Titus Vinius was his partner. Many authors have written of the preceding 820 years, reckoning from the founding of our city, and in describing all the doings of the Roman people they wrote with equal parts of eloquence and liberality. After the battle at Actium, when the only way to preserve peace was for all power to be held by a single man, those great writers passed away. The truthfulness of history took a blow, too, first through men's acquired ignorance of public mat-ters (since they no longer played a role in them), and second through the passion to flatter their new masters even though they hated them. Between the people's servile nature, on the one hand, and their hatred, on the other, all regard for posterity disappeared. We in-stinctively recoil from any writer's use of an adulating tone, but we pay rapt attention when he makes snide and spiteful remarks, because a fawning tone implies a dishonorable servility but bitchiness comes across (though falsely) as bold honesty

I am beginning the history of an era filled with disasters, frightful wars, and bitter civil strife. Even the period's peaceful times had their horrors. Four emperors died by the sword; there were three civil wars and even more foreign ones, and some of the conflicts had both qualities at once. Successes in the east were matched with losses in the west. There was trouble in Illyricum. Gaul's loyalty was never certain. Britain was crushed, but then abandoned. The Suevi and Sarmatiae joined forces to repel us. The Dacians scored a renowned victory over us, then suffered a renowned defeat. And the Parthians were spurred to action by the deceits committed by that fraud, Nero.

Italy herself was struck by disasters, some entirely unexpected and others the result of a long build-up. The cities of rich Campania were swallowed whole and buried. Rome itself was beset with riots that con-sumed some of its most venerable temples; citizens set fire even to the Capitol itself. People profaned our sacred rites; our greatest nobles gave themselves to corruption; the sea was clogged with refugees, its rocks bloodied by violence. Even worse horrors took place in the capital city. Nobility and wealth became causes for political accusations, as did either accept-ing or declining public office. If one maintained a life of virtue, one was done for. The rewards gained by rumor-mongers were more disgusting than their

crimes, for while some snatched up consulships and priestly offices as booty, others grabbed procurator-ships and positions of a more personal nature. But they all stole and pillaged in every direction, paying no heed to the hatred and terror they aroused in people. Slaves were bribed to betray their masters, and freedmen to inform on their patrons. Even those without any enemies were brought down-by their own friends.

Bad as it was, the age wasn't so utterly bereft of good qualities that it did not exhibit a few examples of virtuous action. Mothers followed their sons into exile, as wives did for their husbands. Some kinsmen were brave, and some sons-in-law were loyal. Some slaves remained true to their masters even when subjected to torture. Some men of virtue were driven to the ultimate sacrifice (i.e. suicide) and faced it with courage, and their last moments resembled the most fabled deaths of antiquity. Despite the reckless chaos of men's actions, there were divine prodigies to be seen in the skies and on the earth: cautioning rumbles of thunder, for instance, and other signs of things to come, both auspicious and gloomy, doubtful and certain. In sum, at no other time did so many terrible disasters strike the Roman people, nor was there clearer proof that the gods care nothing for our happiness-only for our punishment.

Since I am about to describe the last days of a great and renowned city, it is fitting that I first de-cribe its origins. According to some authorities, the Jews began as exiles from the island of Crete who settled on the northern coast of Africa about the time when Jupiter overthrew Saturn from his throne. The evidence for this resides in their name, since the Idaeii were the people who lived by the famous mountain on Crete called Mount Ida, and these Idaeii became gradually known as the Judaeii by the lengthening of their name in the vernacular. Others maintain the Jews originated in Egypt in the time of Isis when excess population flowed into neighboring lands under the guidance of the figures Hierosolymus and Judas. Many others claim the Jews began as a race from Ethiopia who were driven out by the loathing of their neighbors to find a new homeland during the time of King Cepheus. A few insist they are Assyrians, a rabble who failed to find land to settle in Mesopotamia and so seized a part of Egypt, but not before establishing a number of cities in what is called Judaea along the border with Syria. Lastly, some writers hold that the Jews sprang from quite a distinguished root, being none other than the Solymi people celebrated by Homer, who named their most famous city after themselves: Hierosolyma.

Almost all writers, however, agree that at some point in the past, a terrible disfiguring disease struck Egypt, for which King Bocchoris turned to the oracle of Hammon to discover the cure. Hammon instructed the king to purify his realm by driving out of the land this detestable race of Jews. The Jews were diligently rounded up and sent into the desert, where they remained, miserable, idle, and forsaken until one of them, Moyses by name, convinced them to expect no rescue from God or man. They should rely only on themselves and take for their leader, whoever might guide them out of their present misery...

Wanting to secure his own position of authority, Moyses gave the Jews a unique form of worship, one that runs counter to everything practiced by all other nations. What is sacred to us is worthless to them, and they allow themselves what is forbidden to us. In their temple,

they consecrated an image of the animal who guided them during their long, parched wandering. They slay rams in derision of Hammon and sacrifice oxen to mock the Egyptian worship of Apis. They refuse to eat pork, which they associate in memory with leprosy. (Swine are vulnerable to the disease.) They commemorate the long hunger of their wanderings by performing regular fasts, eating only unleavened bread in honor of what they had grabbed in their haste when entering exile...

Among themselves, the Jews are unfailingly honest and compassionate, but they regard all other nations as their hated enemies. They sit apart from other people at meals and will not sleep under the roof of a non-Jew. As a race, they are almost uniquely prone to lust, yet they will not couple with foreign women... They practice circumcision as a way to distinguish themselves from others; anyone who joins their religion must submit to the custom. They despise all the gods of other nations... The Jews have only a mental image of their God as a single essence and regard representations of God in human form, made out of perishable materials, as profanations. They believe only the essence of things to be supreme and eternal. ... and do not allow any images to be put up in their cities even to flatter their own kings or to pay respect to our emperor. ...

Their country is bounded by Arabia to the east, Egypt to the south, Phoenicia, and the Mediterranean to the west. To the north, it commands a sweeping view of Syria. As a people, the Jews are healthy and do not tire easily. Rain is uncommon in Judaea, but the soil there is fertile Judaea consists largely of scattered villages, but it does have some cities. Jerusalem is the capital where once stood a temple of immense grandeur Only a Jew was allowed to approach its gates, and only their priests were permitted to cross the threshold...

Pompey was the first Roman to subdue the Jews, and availing himself of the right of conquest, he entered their temple. That is how it became known that it was empty, with no image of their God inside and their shrine possessing no secret knowledge. The walls of Jerusalem were subsequently destroyed, but the temple was left standing... Under the emperor Tiberius, everything remained quiet. When Caligula, however, ordered his own statue to be set up in the temple, the Jews opted for war.

Document Questions:

1. What was the effect, in Tacitus's opinion, of one-man rule on the entire state's moral character?
2. How does Tacitus relate the exclusivity of Jewish culture to the resentment of Jews by others?