CHAPTER FOUR

SABBATH AS DOMESTIC CELEBRATION:
GRAECO-ROMAN NON-CHRISTIAN SOURCES

Introduction

This study of the origins and location of Jewish sabbath worship will now be placed in a wider cultural context by surveying what was said about the Jews and their sabbaths in the writings of classical authors (Roman mainly, with a few Greek) from roughly 100 BCE to 150 CE, where the Jews and their institutions are described by non-Jews.\(^1\) All the literature studied in the other chapters of this book has been written by Jewish or Christian authors, but these classical authors can be expected to understand Jewish religious affairs from quite a different knowledge base. Their perception of Jews depends on how the practice of Judaism affects Roman society; to them Judaism is one more among the many strange, imported ways of life that co-exist within the Roman Empire. They are observers who are also outsiders.

For these writers, Jews are indeed part of their world—both actual and literary—sometimes as exotic travellers or merchants from far away lands, telling tales of the Salt Sea and of the bitumen pits, or selling dates and flax of the highest quality. But Jews were also immigrants of the poorest sort, scraping a living on the fringes of Roman society.\(^2\) They might also be slaves, perhaps bought as slaves

\(^{1}\) M. Stern, ed., Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism. I. From Herodotus to Plutarch (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1976); M. Stern, ed., Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism. II. From Tacitus to Simplicius (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1980); M. Whittaker, Jews and Christians: Graeco-Roman Views (Cambridge Commentaries on the Writings of the Jewish and Christian World 200 BC to AD 200, 6; Cambridge: CUP, 1984).

\(^{2}\) Martial, Epigrams 12.57.7-14, in Martial, Epigrams (tr. W.C.A. Ker; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919; rev. edn, 1968); Juvenal, Satires 3.12-16; 6.542-47, in Juvenal and Persius (tr. G.G. Ramsay; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940); Cleomedes, De motu, 2.1.9,1 in Cléomède: Théorie
elsewhere and brought to Rome, perhaps captured in a military campaign, although such slaves may have been few in number due to the alleged Jewish practice of ransoming their co-religionists as soon as possible. There were also Jews who were former slaves, emancipated by their masters, and thus Roman citizens.

These classical writers take different stances and use different tones in their comments on, and descriptions of, Jews. They may show respect, misunderstanding, envy or disgust. The full range of emotions can easily be discovered—although sometimes they are voiced more strongly in the translation than in the original text.

Some of the texts studied are moral discourses, historical or geographical treatises and contain what are, as far as we can tell, misapprehensions about Jews along with valid material. But many of the texts are written in a less didactic mode: law court orations, love poetry, satire. In these, irony, exaggeration and invective all abound. ‘Jews’, presenting their more notable—to Roman eyes—characteristics in stereotyped ways, are used as a sort of shorthand to create an image in the mind of the reader. In order to take ‘information’ from such texts we have to absorb and take the measure of the writer’s stance in the production of the text. So, some texts about Jews that are unrelated to the topic of sabbath worship are included and discussed here to help in getting the measure of the writers’ comments about Jewish sabbaths and Jewish meeting-houses.

Certain themes and topics recur through all the texts and should be borne in mind as being constitutive of Jews to the Roman mind, or at least typical of Jews as they appear in metaphors, or as


5 Philo, Embassy 155.

6 All the writers studied are male, so non-inclusive language may be used without any erroneous implications.