CHAPTER SIXTEEN
KOSHER OLIVE OIL IN ANTIQUITY

I hope that it may be thought appropriate to offer to Geza Vermes, who has dedicated much of his scholarly life to the elucidation of the varied nature of Judaism and the attitudes of Jews towards their tradition in late antiquity, a study of a religious development which both originated and came to an end in this period.

The problem to be tackled may be stated quite succinctly. In the hellenistic period some Jews objected to using oil produced by non-Jews. Some time in the third century CE the rabbinic patriarch and his court decreed that the ban on gentile oil was no longer to be enforced, and their decision seems to have been generally followed, if not immediately then at least within a few generations. No ancient text gives an adequate explanation either of the original prohibition or of the later relaxation. My purpose is to investigate the underlying religious attitudes which might account for both developments.1

Olive oil was an item of considerable importance in the economy of the land of Israel. Oil was one of the three staple products of the land (Deut. 11.14; 2 Kings 18.32). Of the many varieties of oil, olive oil was among the most expensive, but it was widely used for cosmetics (Eccl. 9.7–8), for medicine (Isa. 1.6), and as a fuel for lamps (cf. R. Tarfon in m. Shabb. 2.2, on the Sabbath lights). It was of course a ubiquitous ingredient in food. Josephus made special mention of the productivity of olive trees in the hills of Galilee (B.J. 2.592). The concern of the inhabitants to ensure their supply of olive oil is illustrated by finds of oil presses on Mount Hermon some way above the height at which olive trees flourish.2 Whether olives actually grew at such a height in antiquity or were transported raw to the upland settlements for processing is unclear. In either case the importance attributed to the product is striking.3

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1 The only work specifically devoted to this topic is S.B. Hoenig, ‘Oil and Pagan Defilement’, JQR 61 (1970/71), pp. 63–75.
3 Apart from the greater ease in the transport of olives rather than oil, it may be that people preferred to process their own oil to prevent adulteration by inferior olives or other substances.
In this reliance on olive oil the Jews of Palestine shared in the general culture of the Mediterranean region. By the time of the early Roman empire olive cultivation was almost universally found in lowland coastal regions, and the long-distance trade in high quality luxury oil was equalled in bulk and distribution only by the trade in wine.\(^4\)

When Jews decided in the Hellenistic and early Roman imperial period not to use gentile olive oil, they were, then, deliberately turning their backs on some of the more widely traded goods in their society. But it may be that by the time such trade had fully evolved in the last centuries BCE, Jews could already justify the taboo to themselves by claiming reliance on ancient tradition, for the first evidence for a prohibition on the use of gentile oil may date back to before 281 BCE.

According to Josephus (\textit{Ant.} 12.119–120), Seleucus Nicator, who ruled from 312 to 281 BCE, gave special privileges to the Jews as follows.

Seleucus Nicator granted them citizenship in the cities which he founded in Asia and Lower Syria and in his capital, Antioch, itself, and declared them to have equal privileges with the Macedonians and Greeks who were settled in these cities, so that this citizenship of theirs remains to this day; and the proof of this is the fact that he gave orders that those Jews who were unwilling to use foreign oil should receive a fixed sum of money from the gymnasarchs to pay for their own kind of oil; and, when in the present war the people of Antioch proposed to revoke this privilege, Mucianus, who was then governor of Syria, maintained it.

If Josephus is to be trusted, at least some Jews in Asia Minor and/or Syria were unwilling to use foreign oil before 281 BCE. How many

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\(^4\) On the olive trade of the early Roman empire, see in general D.P.S. Peacock and D.F. Williams, \textit{Amphorae and the Roman Economy: an Introductory Guide}, London and New York, 1986. For the economic importance of this trade, see D.J. Mattingly, ‘Oil for Export? A Comparison of Libyan, Spanish and Tunisian Olive Oil Production in the Roman Empire’, \textit{JRA} 1 (1988), 33–56, but note that there has been more study of the trade in this period in the Western Mediterranean than in the Levant. For olive oil production in Roman Palestine, see the articles and bibliographies in M. Heltzer and D. Eitam, eds., \textit{Olive Oil in Antiquity: Israel and Neighbouring Countries from the Neolithic to the Early Arab Period}, Haifa, 1987.