OENOMAUS AND TALMUDIC ANECDOTE

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In ihrem Kampfe gegen die verschiedenen Arten des Polytheismus fanden Judenthum und Christentum wenig wirksamere Bundesgenossen als die überall umherziehenden kynischen Wanderprediger.

J. BERNAYS, Lukian und die Kyniker, p. 31.

It is surely ironic for any self-respecting Cynic to be turned into an exemplary character by religious authority—and all the more so when his philosophical career was built on criticism of the established cult. The second century A.D. Cynic, Oenomaus of Gadara, was considered by the Emperor Julian to be but “an impudent scorn of all that is human and divine”, but yet his arguments were extensively cited by Eusebius as an integral part of Christianity’s assault on paganism¹. Furthermore, many scholars have even seen Talmudic references to Oenomaus behind a figure much esteemed in Rabbinic literature as a great heathen philosopher and ally of Israel². It is true that Julian’s assessment of Oenomaus’


godlessness was influenced rather by the latter’s criticism of those very cults and oracles that the emperor respected and was bent on reviving two hundred years later. However, Bernay’s concept of the Cynics as a ‘reinste deistische Secte’, standing in direct opposition to conventional polytheism, still does not explain the philosophy of the historical Oenomaus, nor even any possible relationship between him and the figure of Talmudic anecdote as is still sometimes claimed3). Furthermore, the anecdotes themselves have still to be properly analysed both for their development as a tradition as well as their individual testimony concerning a Greek philosopher in the Talmud. While I intend to discuss the last issue in the second part of this paper, it will prove in many ways profitable to base it upon a thorough examination of Oenomaus’ philosophical activity—and especially its relevance to the rôle played by Cynic criticism of the old pagan cults.

**Oenomaus’ Activity**

Not much can be gathered concerning the story of Oenomaus’ life: although the precise period of his activity is uncertain, he seems to have flourished sometime between 120 A.D. and the beginning of the third century4). What is certain is that Oenomaus

3) Sperber, loc. cit. (above n. 2)—but see earlier: J. Bernays, Lukian und die Kyniker (Berlin, 1879), 31, 95; Lewy, op. cit (above, n. 2), 384. On Oenomaus’ original philosophy: J. Hammerstaedt, ‘‘Der Kyniker Oenomaus von Gadara’’, in ANRW II. 36.4 (Berlin-N.Y., 1990), 2843-2860, sect. ii-iii; H. Niehues-Probsting, Der Kynismus des Diogenes und der Begriff des Zynismus (München, 1979), 79 ff.; D. R. Dudley, op. cit., 162-170. On Julian’s idealization of the earlier Cynics—who unlike the new ones were supposed to be ‘god-fearing’, see: Dudley, op. cit. (above, n. 1), 202 ff; on the re-establishment of pagan cults, see: W. C. Wright, Julian III (Harvard, 1980), xvi, xxiv, Ep. 29, 42. On the later Cynics in general, see: R. Höistad, Cynic Hero and Cynic King (Uppsala, 1948); A. Caspari, De Cynicis qui fuerunt aetate imperatorum Romanorum (Prop. Chemnitz, 1895/1896), 5 ff.

4) Jul., Or. vii. 209 b; Euseb., Chron. II 164-5 (Schöne). Hammerstaedt has shown that his exact date is still far from resolved (op. cit. (above, n. 1), 11-19; op. cit. (above, n. 3), 2836), although many standard authorities (e.g., Dudley, op. cit. (above, n. 1), 184) have long followed Vallette (op. cit. (above, n. 1), 2-4) in rejecting the third century date adopted by T. Saarmann (De Oenmao Gadareno (Leipzig, 1887, diss.), 5-6). On the cultural background of Gadara and the Decapolis, see: S. Mittmann, Beiträge zur Siedlungs- und Territorialgeschichte des nördlichen Ostjordanlandes (1970, Wiesbaden), 135-7; I. Browning, Jerash and the Decapolis (1982, London), 47; Des Places, op. cit. (above, n. 1), 8; M. Stern, Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism I (Jerusalem, 1974), 293; Schürer (ed. Vermes-Millar-Black), The History of the Jewish People II (Edinburgh, 1979), 50.