

Marginal Privilege: Roman Imperial Society and the Jews

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Abstract

The concessions accorded the Jews of the Roman empire had once been lauded by Jean Juster (1924) as no less than their "Magna Carta." His opinion prevailed until the 80s of the previous century when first challenged by Tessa Rajak (1984), for whom the so-called privileges were revealed under closer scrutiny to have been no more than high-sounding "political statements" with little enduring value.

Most recently (1998) Miriam Pucci Ben Zeev has suggested that although real enough in themselves, and quite valuable from the Jewish point of view, there was in fact nothing extraordinary about them inasmuch as they constituted normal Roman practice paralleled elsewhere across the empire. She met the obvious challenge posed by the uniqueness of the Jewish predicament as dispersed minority communities by pointing out two parallels of extra-territorial entities granted similar privileges, namely, the guild of the Dionysiac Artists and that of the Roving Athletes devoted to Heracles.

The comparison, I should argue however, only goes to underscore the abnormality of the situation when applied to a people. There was nothing extraordinary neither in the Jews' quest for privileges nor in the nature of those actually obtained by them – nothing, that is, apart from the context, their wholly abnormal situation as a people lacking a territorial base acknowledged as their own. In such abnormal conditions, to have obtained what elsewhere went for normal concessions was indeed quite abnormal.

Both the quest for privileges and their failure to ameliorate the condition of the Jews should, I submit, be addressed in the framework of an account of Jewish society undergoing a process of marginalization, both internal and external. By setting the marginality of the Jews against a model of social integration of imperial society at large, their privileges will further be shown as marks of mal-integration and as factors of marginalization.

My preference is for panel no.3 on your list, Cultural Encounters and Fusions in the Roman Empire.

The length of my proposed paper is 20 minutes.

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