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"Superstitious and Abominable": Jews in the Epicurean Account of Diogenes of Oinoanda

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Abstract: A fragment of the Epicurean account of Diogenes of Oinoanda (2nd century AD), which was found in 1997, revealed a mention of the most superstitious and abominable Jews and Egyptians. The fragment is part of *A Treatise on Physics* and repeats the Epicurean view that gods do not interfere in people's lives. The aforementioned peoples serve the exemplification that the world of humans is separated from the world of the gods. Both expressions refer to the stereotypical perception of the Jews and Egyptians that is well-known from Greek-Roman literature. However, it seems that the way both *ethne* imagined their gods – in the form of animals (the Egyptians' view) and without any cultic statues (the Jews' view) – was meaningful for Diogenes, who like other Epicureans attached great importance to the worship of images of gods.

The inscription erected during the reign of Emperor Hadrian (in the 120s or 130s CE) by Diogenes, a rich and educated follower of Epicurean philosophy, in Oinoanda in northern Lycia, is among the Greek epigraphic texts that have been known the longest. The figure of Diogenes himself still remains unknown, although it is obvious that he was not an original thinker.[1] The text was carved in the stoa c. 80 m long and c. 3.25 m high, filling c. 260 m^2 of wall space, and must have broken down during an earthquake. The biggest number of stone blocks of the stoa was found in the area of the so-called Esplanade, a Hellenistic agora that was the center of public life in Oinoanda at least till the times of Hadrian. Probably in the third century AD the stoa became a costly and comfortable building material for the city wall (the so-called Great Wall), along the western side of the Esplanade, and its adjacent structures. The first fragments of the inscription (88 fragments) were found by Maurice Holleaux and Pierre Paris towards the end of the 19th century. In the years 1968–1994, the British scholar Martin Fergusson Smith, who had been involved in finding and publishing Diogenes' inscription for decades, discovered 125 new fragments. The legal excavations conducted in 1997 brought ten further fragments.[2] Since 2007, regular excavations at Oinoanda have been carried out by the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (see http://www.dainst.org/de/project/

[1] For Diogenes as a representative of the second-century culture, see Gordon 1996.
[2] Smith 1998: 125-170.

oinoanda?ft=all). Martin F. Smith and Jürgen Hammerstaedt have published new fragments of Diogenes' inscription in *Epigraphica Anatolica*.[3]

As an old and sick man, Diogenes presented Epicurus' teachings to his fellow citizens and visitors of his home *polis*. On the basis of the size of the blocks, the number of lines in a column and the content itself, Smith proposed the following arrangement of the inscription: the top three courses were occupied by Diogenes' treatise *Old Age*, and in the next course are the so-called *TLC* (= Ten-line-column) *Writings* of Epicurus and Diogenes and *Maxims* written by an unknown author (each maxim was carved on a separate block). The two bottom belts included two fundamental treatises of the account, namely *Physics* and *Ethics*, whereas Epicurus' Κύριαι δόξαι constituted the base of the inscription.

In 1997, two limestone blocks (0.49 m high and 1.65 m high, 0.3 m deep; height of characters 1.8 cm) were found, containing a continuous text, marked by Smith as NF 126 and NF 127. Both inscriptions belong to the treatise *Physics*, i.e. the account of the Epicurean theology and religion. The fragment of interest to us develops the well-known Epicurean idea that gods do not interfere in the world of humans:

> "(**I col.**) [Proof that wrong-doers manifestly neither are afraid of severe penalties nor even] have a fear of legally sanctioned [executions is] that, if they had [a different attitude, they] would not [do wrong]. As for the others, [it is my opinion] that the [wise] are not [(reasoning indicates) righteous] on account of the gods, but on account of [thinking] correctly and the [opinions which] they hold [regarding] certain things [and especially] pains (**II col.**) and death (for indeed invariably and without exception human beings do wrong either on account of fear or on account of pleasures), and that ordinary people on the other are righteous, in so far as they are righteous, on account of the laws and the penalties, imposed by the laws, hanging over them. But even if some of their number are contentious on account of the gods, not on account of the laws, they are few: only just two or three individuals (**III col.**) are to be found among great segments of multitudes, and not even these are steadfast in acting righteously; for they are not soundly persuaded about providence. A clear indication of the complete inability of the gods to prevent wrong-doings is provided by the nations of the Jews and Egyptians, who, while being the most superstitious of all peoples (**IV col.**), are the vilest one (NF 126 III 7-IV 2: ἐναργὲς δὲ ση/μεῖον τοῦ μηδὲν δύ/νασθαι τοὺς θεοὺς πρὸς / τὸ ἀπερύκειν τἀδική/ματα τὰ Ἰουδαίων καὶ / Αἰγυπτίων ἔθη, πάν/των γὰρ ὄντες δεισιδαιμονέστατοι, / πάντων εἰσὶ μιαρώτα/τοι). So on account of what kind of gods will human beings be righteous? For they are not righteous on account of the real ones, or on account of Plato's and Socrates' judges in Hades. We are left with this conclusion; otherwise, why should not those who disregard the laws scorn fables much more?" (tr. M.F. Smith).[4]

The example of the Jews and Egyptians, referred to in the context of Diogenes' exposition, was obviously to serve the exemplification that the gods are helpless and cannot punish even the wrong-doers, very superstitious and abominable people as the representatives of these nations. The writings of the Epicureans concerning the gods were numerous, though in most cases known only by their titles and preserved fragments. The founder of the Epicurean school was the author of the treatises *On Piety* (Περὶ

[3] For the history of the discovery of the inscription see Smith 1996: 17-20; Smith 2000: 64-75; Smith and Hammerstaedt 2007: 1-5. The most complete publications of the fragments of the Epicurean exposition of Diogenes: Smith 1993, and Smith 2003.

[4] The publication of the Greek text in Smith 1998: 132; the English translation: 137.

εὐσεβείας), *On the Gods* (Περὶ θεῶν), and *On Holiness* (Περὶ ὁσιότητος). Demetrius Laco (2nd c. BC) wrote *On the Gods*. Phaidros, the chair of the Epicurean school in Athens during Cicero's lifetime, wrote a treatise bearing the same title. The treatises *On the Gods* and *On Piety* by Philodemus (c. 110-40 BC), the known Epicurean of the period of the Republic, were found in the famous library in the so-called Villa dei Papiri (most probably belonging to Lucius Calpurnius Piso, one of Philodemus' friends) in Herculaneum, which was destroyed by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79.

Although it is not known on which source Diogenes based his exposition, his theory concerning the gods is naturally in accordance with the theology of Epicurus' school.[5] Diogenes only repeats its well-known and fundamental principles, legible in the preserved works of the Epicureans: the works by the Latin writer Lucretius, author of *De rerum natura*, by the aforementioned Philodemus in the first volume of the philosophical dialogue of the opponent of Epicureanism Cicero, *De natura deorum*, where the Epicurean teaching on the gods was presented by Velleius. According to Epicurus it was the first humans that received the images of the gods in their dreams, and then these true images were falsified. Human knowledge of the gods was corrupted through the manipulation of intellectualists and leaders, poets and philosophers. Gods can be perceived by reason. The Epicureans believed that happy gods were anthropomorphic and immortal, but remaining in the distant world (μετακόσμια, *intermundia*), they neither participated in the matters of the world and the fate of the universe, nor punished the imperfect, nor awarded the just. As opposed to the Stoics (clearly stressed also by Diogenes of Oinoanda), the Epicureans did not think that the gods needed humans (but received their offerings), and because of their superfluous fear of the gods humans had obscured pictures of them and could not reach the state of tranquility of mind (*ataraxia*).

However, Smith was the first publisher to notice in his commentary[6] that the mention of the Jews in Diogenes' exposition sounded almost sensational, since no preserved fragments of the Epicureans made any reference to the Jews (the Ciceronian Epicurean Velleius mentioned the madness, *dementia*, of the Egyptians in a religious context[7]), and the mention of the Jews must have been Diogenes' addendum.

In his commentary on Diogenes' comparison, Smith states that the word *deisidaimonia* (the word has two clear aspects: in the positive sense it means "religious, devout," while in the negative sense it expresses an obsessive fear of the gods; undoubtedly, it is in the latter meaning that Diogenes uses the adjective *desidaimonios* in the cited fragment) is well-known in the Epicurean literature. Lucretius renders *superstitio* – the Latin equivalent of *deisidaimonia* – by the word *religio*. Moreover, Smith mentions the well-known stereotypes about the Jews used by Greek-Roman authors: the Jews' separatism, their aversion towards mankind and xenophobic behavior, the accusation of leading pagans to proselytism, the accusation of cannibalism or finally, the abominable circumcision, which connects the Jews and Egyptians (the word μιαρώτατοι, the most impure, used by Diogenes in the moral sense as "abominable," may refer to this). One cannot exclude the possibility that the Jewish revolt in the diaspora in 115-117 (and

[5] For the Epicurean images of the gods, cf. Lemke 1973: esp. 23-41; Long 1974: 41-49; Obbink 1989: 187-223; Obbink 1996: 1-23; Purinton 2001: 181-231; Sedley 2011: 29-52.

[6] Smith 1998: 140-143.

[7] Cicero, *De natura deorum* I 43.

maybe the revolt of Bar Kochba if the inscription originated in the 130s AD) as well as the circulated stories about the terrible cruelty committed by the Jews were echoed in the exposition of the Epicurean. The Egyptians had a bad press, especially from the civil wars during the Republic. Thus, calling them "superstitious and abominable" seems to follow the images of the epoch completely.

Pieter van der Horst,[8] the second commentator of the quoted fragment, also notices that Diogenes refers to the common images about the Jews and Egyptians. However, he analyzes the term *miarotatoi* used to describe the Jews. The word *miaino*, which was well known from the traditional religious sphere, and its derivatives, refer to the religious stain. *Miaros* may mean "anyone stained, defiled, or polluted in the literal sense," and the Jews in Hellenistic literature, known from the apologetic work *Contra Apionem* by Flavius Josephus, were presented as a group of lepers defiling the country, and for this reason they were expelled from Egypt. Van der Horst emphasizes that Diogenes might have meant "the moral depravity of the Jews," which suits the context that the gods do not punish the wrong-doers. Like Smith, he remarks that the Jews as rebels in the Empire evoked the abomination of their contemporaries. The rhetorical description of Cassius Dio (a historian living in the first half of the third century), in which we can read that during the revolt in the diaspora the Jews ate the bodies of the victims, "made belts for themselves of their entrails" and sprinkled themselves with the blood of the murdered,[9] may reflect the war stories that also reached Oinoanda.

One should also stress that the quoted fragment of Diogenes was placed in the edition of the Jewish inscriptions from Asia Minor by Walter Ameling,[10] who emphasizes the distinctive negative perception of the Jews as superstitious people by Greek and Roman authors, as well as their practices – though old – as horrible.

It should be recognized that all of the commentators are surely right in focusing on the stereotypes of the images of the Jews and Egyptians, which can be clearly perceived in ancient literature as well as the Jewish and Egyptian religions as superstition, using Cicero's words "barbaric superstition."[11] Calling the Jews "superstitious" is in accordance with what we can read in the Greek-Roman literature;[12] similarly, the same

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[8] van der Horst 2006a: 291-298 = van der Horst 2006b: 227-233.

[9] Dio Cass. 68,32.1-2.

[10] *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis* II: *Kleinasien*, Tübingen 2004: 472-477, no. 222.

[11] Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 28, 67: *barbara superstitio* (on the Jews).

[12] On the Jewish religion as superstition, see Agatharchides of Cnidus (II c. BCE) *apud* Josephus Flavius, *Ant. Jud.* 12, 5 (= *GLAJJ*, 30b): "The account is attested by Agatharchides of Cnidus, the historian of Diadochi, who reproaches us for our superstition on account of which we lost our liberty" (ἡμῖν δεισιδαιμονίαν ὡς δι᾽αὐτὴν ἀποβαλοῦσι τὴν ἐλευθερίαν); Strabo (c. 64 BCE – c. 23 CE), *Geogr.* 16, 2.37 (= *GLAJJ* 115): "His (i.e. Moses') successors for some time abided by the same course, acting righteously and being truly pious toward God; but afterwards, in the first place, superstitious men were appointed to the priesthood, and then tyrannical people; and from superstition arose abstinence from flesh, from which it is their custom to abstain even to-day, and circumcisions and excisions (i.e. of the females) and other observances of the kind"; Quintilianus (I c. CE), *Inst. Orat.* 3, 7.21 (= *GLAJJ* 230): "founders of cities are detested for concentrating a race which is a curse to others, as for example the founder of the Jewish superstition" (*primus Iudaicae superstitionis auctor*); Suet. *Tib*. 36 (= *GLAJJ* 306): "He (i.e. Tiberius) abolished foreign cults, especially the Egyptian and the Jewish rites, compelling all who were addicted to such superstitions (*qui supersitione ea tenebantur*) to burn their religious vestments and all their paraphernalia"; Plutarch (I/II c. CE) *De superstitione* 8 (= *GLAJJ* 256): "But the Jews, because it was a Sabbath day, sat in their places immovable, while the enemy were planting ladders against the walls and capturing the defenses, and they did not get up, but

opinion concerned the Egyptians. Even Flavius Josephus, polemicizing with Apion, calls him "Egyptian," referring to the prejudices towards the Egyptian culture and religion: to their political impotence, social inferiority and theriomorphic cults.[13] It should be stressed even more strongly that in the practice of the Greek of the early Imperial period the word *miaros* meant "abominable" in the general sense: for example, Plutarch speaks of "abominable work", Dio of Prusa uses this term to define the tyrannical system, while Lucian very often uses the call ὦ μιαρέ ("you abominable man!"), but this author also speaks of "abominable words."[14]

Therefore, according to the Greek and Roman intellectualists the Jews were superstitious and abominable through their circumcision, refraining from eating pork and abstaining from any work on Saturdays. It seems that one can stress yet another aspect joining the Egyptians and the Jews, which suits the reasoning of Diogenes: in my opinion, Diogenes of Oinoanda used stereotypes also referring to the way of presenting a deity that was incomprehensible, and regarded as abominable by the representatives of the traditional religion. The Greeks and Romans knew the Egyptians best on the basis of their two customs: the commonly condemned animal worship[15] and mummification. Generally, the Egyptian animal worship was regarded as negative as seen in the Greek literature of the early Imperial period, more or less contemporary to Diogenes of Oinoanda. Plutarch dedicated a whole treatise to Isis and Osiris, in which he ridiculed and considered as dangerous Egyptian animal worship and the Egyptian images as expressions of superstition (*deisidaimonia*). Lucian derides the Egyptian gods many times. In *Philopseudes* he depicts a caricature of an Egyptian priest, and, interestingly, he also writes of the Egyptians that they are "the most superstitious of all peoples."[16] Heliodorus, author of the romance *Aethiopica*, depicts an Egyptian whom the Greeks questioned about the Egyptians in Delphi. Such stereotypical interests include the deification of animals.[17]

On the other hand, it was commonly known that the Jews did not have any statues and anthropomorphic images of their deity.[18]

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remained there, fast bound in the toils of superstition as in one great net"; Tacitus, *Hist*. 5, 8.2 (= *GLAJJ* 281): "King Antiochus endeavored to abolish Jewish superstition and to introduce Greek civilization" (*demere superstitionem et mores Graecorum dare*), also Tacitus, *Hist*. 5, 13.1 ("prodigies had indeed occurred, but to avert them either by victims or by vows is held unlawful buy a people which, though prone to superstition, is opposed to all propitiatory rites") and *Ann*. 2, 85.4 ("tainted with that superstition"; Fronto (II c. CE) *ep.* 2, 9 (= *GLAJJ* 341): "But I stick fast in Rome bound with golden fetters, looking forward to the first of September as the superstitious to the star at sight of which to break their fast"; Apuleius (II c. CE), *Florida* 6 (= *GLAJJ* 362): "Far away it lies, (…), beyond the superstitious Jews".

[13] Josephus Flavius, *Contra Apionem* 2, 72; 65-67; 85-86; 125-133; 139.

[14] Plutarch, *Lyc.* 28; Dio of Prusa, *or.* 1, 83; Lucian, *Peregr.* 7.

[15] For this topic, see Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1852-2000 showing the suitable places in the sources; cf. also Isaac 2004: 352-370.

[16] Lucian, *Pro Imag*. 27: τοὺς Αἰγυπτίους, οἵπερ καὶ δεσιδαιμονέστατοί εἰσιν πάντων.

[17] Heliodorus, *Aethopica* 2, 27.3.

[18] For example, Hecataeus of Abdera (Diod. Sic. 40,3 = *GLAJJ* 11): "But he had no images whatsoever of the gods made for them, being of the opinion that God is not in human form"; Strabo, *Geogr*. 16, 2,35-36 = *GLAJJ* 115): "Moses taught that the Egyptians were mistaken in representing the Divine Being by the images of beasts and cattle as were also the Libyans, and that the Greeks were also wrong in modelling the Gods in human form; for according to him, God is the one thing alone that encompasses us all and encompasses land and sea – the thing which we call heaven, or universe, or the nature of all that exists. What man, then, if he has sense, could be bold enough to fabricate an image of God resembling any creature among us"; *Scholia in*

Such a perception of gods must have seemed abominable to the representatives of the Epicurean trend. Although the Epicureans believed in the separation between the world of the gods and the world of humans (that is why the followers of Epicurus were often accused of atheism, *asebeia*), they defended themselves by stressing both their faith in the gods and the importance of worshipping the statues of the gods. Philodemus wrote that although nobody had presented undeniable evidence of the existence of the gods, the Epicureans believed in their existence and worshipped them like all people except for madmen (παράκοποι).[19]

Epicurus and his successors recommended traditional forms of worshipping the gods, not because they wanted to influence them but because it was a proper way to get to know divine nature and to make sure people had proper images concerning their gods. The Epicureans therefore made offerings and dedications to the gods as well as participating in feasts, official and private worship. They also underwent initiations during the mysteries. In the treatise *On Piety*, Philodemus cited Epicurus, "Let us sacrifice to the gods, he says, devoutly and fittingly on the proper days, and let us fittingly perform all the acts of worship in accordance with the laws, in no way disturbing ourselves with thoughts concerning the most excellent and august of beings. Moreover, let us sacrifice justly on the view I was giving. For in this way it is possible for a mortal nature, by Zeus, to live like Zeus" (tr. D. Obbink).[20] Epicurus and his successors – and this is especially important to the argumentation presented here – worshipped the statues of the gods (*agalmata*). In his work *On Piety* Philodemus writes about this, "statues of the gods he [i.e. Epicurus] says that he reveres."[21] In Cicero's dialogue the sceptic Cotta, refuting the arguments of his Epicurean adversary, says that he knows some Epicureans who worshipped all statues.[22] Furthermore, Origen, teaching that the Christians rejected the cult of statues, states that prayers to the statues are foolishness, while the Peripatetics, the Epicureans and the followers of Democritus joined such prayers.[23]

Similarly, in the exposition of Diogenes of Oinoanda, the statues of the gods play an extremely important role. He typically criticizes those who made improper images of gods in literature and art,[24] and then expresses the thought, extremely rare in the preserved Epicurean literature (but consistent with the spirit of this trend), that statues should be satisfied and smiling so that people might smile back at their gods and not fear them. In fact, in his text Diogenes encourages his readers to worship the gods in the traditional way, "Let us then contradict Homer, who talks [all sorts of nonsense] about

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Lucanum, II 593 (= *GLAJJ* 133): "They do not state to which deity pertains the temple at Jerusalem, nor is any image found there, since they do not think the God partakes of any figure."

[19] Philodemus 150 Obbink.

[20] Philodemus 779-896 Obbink.

[21] Philodemus 910-912 Obbink: θε]ῶν ἀγαλμάτ[ων σέ]βε[σ]θαι φησ[ί] (and commentary pp. 443-444).

[22] Cicero, *De natura deorum* I 85: *novi ego Epicureos omnia sigilla venerantes*. At this point, it is worth remarking that Cicero may have used Philodemus' work directly rather than using some epitome *De pietate* or that the similarity between the texts, shown already in the 19th century in the classic edition of T. Gomperz (1866: 93-151), can be explained by the fact that both authors used the works of the known Epicurean philosophers: Zenon, the teacher of Philodemus, or Apollodorus, the teacher of Zenon.

[23] Origenes, *C. Celsum* VII 66 (= Usener 1887, fr. 390): Καὶ οὐ μόνον τὸ εὔχεσθαι τοῖς ἀγάλμασιν ἠλίθιόν ἐστιν ἀλλὰ γὰρ καὶ τὸ συμπεριφερόμενον τοῖς πολλοῖς προσποιεῖσθαι τοῖς ἀγάλμασιν εὔχεσθαι, ὁποῖον ποιοῦσιν οἱ τὰ ἀπὸ τοῦ Περιπάτου φιλοσοφοῦντες καὶ οἱ τὰ Ἐπικούρου ἢ Δημοκρίτου ἀσπαζόμενοι.

[24] Cf. Cicero, *De natura deorum* I 42.

them, [representing them sometimes as adulterers, sometimes as] lame, [sometimes as thievish, or even as being struck by mortals with spears as well as [including the craftsmen to produce inappropriate portrayals. Some statues of gods shoot [arrows and are produced holding] a bow, [represented] like Heracles in Homer; others are attended by a body-guard of wild beasts; others are angry with the prosperous, like Nemesis according to popular opinion, whereas we ought to make statues of the gods genial and smiling, so that we may smile back at them rather than be afraid of them (δεῖ δ' ἱλαρὰ τῶν θεῶν ποιεῖν / ξόανα καὶ μειδιῶντα). Well, then, you people, let us reverence the gods [rightly] both at festivals and on [unhallowed occasions, both] publicly [and privately], and let us observe the customs [of our fathers in relation to them, and let not the imperishable beings be falsely accused at all] by us [in our vain fear that they are responsible for all misfortunes], bringing [sufferings to us] and [contriving burdensome obligations] for themselves. [And let us also call upon] them [by name…]."[25] The words of the smiling gods seem to come from Diogenes himself, as this concept was not known in the preserved Epicurean literature.

Consequently, in his exposition on the gods Diogenes shows that the Egyptians and Jews who were extremely afraid of their gods and abominable in the moral sense, and who reverenced their gods in an abominable way, are the best proof that the gods do not interfere into human affairs, do not correct their false images made by people and do not punish them.

ABBREVIATIONS

ANRW – H. Temporini, W. Haase (eds.), *Austieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Reihe II: *Principat*, Berlin – New York 1970.

GLAJJ – M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, vol. I-II, Jerusalem 1974-1980.

Philodemus – Philodemus, *On Piety*. Part I: *Critical Text with Commentary*, ed. by D. Obbink, Oxford 1996.

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[25] Smith 1993, Fr. 19 = NF 115: Greek text: 178-180; English translation: 376; commentary: 459-460.

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