

WHY DID ROMANS BELIEVE JEWS FAST ON THE SABBATH?

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To be a Jew in ancient Rome meant many things. To Jews, broadly speaking, it meant maintaining the religious and ethnic traditions they inherited from generations past. To their Gentile neighbors, to be a Jew meant above all to be different. Roman ethnographers were endlessly fascinated by what they knew as the superstition of the Jews and their unusual beliefs and behaviors. Caustic pundits in poetry and in prose heaped ridicule on the Jews, casting their breed as one of the most alien in a city teeming with foreigners of all kinds.¹

To admirers and critics alike, among the most distinctive characteristics of the Jews was their day of rest. So familiar was their habit of removing themselves from mundane concerns every seventh day that Romans commonly called it by its Hebrew name, *šabbat*, or, in Latin, *sabbatum*.² Among the surviving Roman authors who commented on the Sabbath, several allude to the notion that Jews customarily fasted on their sacred day, that is, that they abstained from food and drink. That notion has puzzled generations of scholars. For as long as Jews have had the Sabbath, its observance has involved not fasting but feasting, wining and dining with uncommon gusto. Efforts to

1. On the satirical designs of Roman observations of ethnic difference, see Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 51-52, with comments on Roman views about Jews, pp. 140-42. Compare, however, Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 231-35, who sees Roman descriptions of ethnic difference, however humorously intended, as anxiety-ridden expressions of intolerance.

2. Brenda Bell, 'The Language of Classical Latin Poets as an Indication of Familiarity with Jewish Institutions', *Acta Classica* 35 (1992), pp. 61-71 (62-63).

explain the stark disagreement between the joyful Jewish rite and the somber occasion attested in the Latin literary sources have yielded unsatisfactory results. My purpose in this paper is to propose a new theory as to why certain Romans believed that Jews fasted on the Sabbath. Although I consider that belief misbegotten, I shall argue nevertheless that it was informed by authentic knowledge of how the Jews of Rome observed their sacred day of rest.

To Fast or to Feast?

Let us begin by considering the primary evidence. Possibly the earliest known expression of the idea that Jews fasted on the Sabbath appears in the work of the Greek geographer Strabo of Amaseia. Amid his survey of Judea, Strabo recalls the seizure of Jerusalem by the Roman general Pompey in 63 BCE. He repeats an anonymous rumor to the effect that Pompey, upon reaching the city's walls, suspended his attack 'until the next day of fasting, when the Jews abstained from all work'.³ Strabo's use of the term 'work' (ἔργον) for the manner of the Jews' non-defense of their stronghold evokes the scriptural ordinances enjoining Israel to refrain from laboring on the Sabbath.⁴ As Strabo does not mention the Sabbath by name, one might infer that he alludes to one of the Jews' established fast days. To wit, when the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus read Strabo's account of the siege, he surmised the date of the attack was 'the day of fasting', that is, Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement, an annual penitential rite involving both fasting and refraining from work.⁵ But Strabo himself implies that Pompey knew he had to withhold his forces only

3. Strabo, *Geogr.* 16.2.40: τὴν τῆς νηστείας ἡμέραν ἡνίκα ἀπέιχοντο οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι παντὸς ἔργου. For comments, see Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (3 vols.; Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1976–84), I, p. 307.

4. See LXX Exod. 20.9-10; LXX Deut. 5.13-14 *et al.*

5. Josephus, *Ant.* 14.66: τῆς νηστείας ἡμέρα. On the likelihood that Josephus consulted and attempted to correct Strabo's account of the siege, see Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)* (eds. Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar and Matthew Black; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973–87), I, pp. 239-40 n. 23. Of possible relevance to Strabo's apparent confusion is the superlative account of Yom Kippur as the 'Sabbath of Sabbaths' (σάββατα σαββάτων) in LXX Lev. 16.31 and 23.32, the name by which Greeks perhaps knew the holiday.

for a short time before he could expect to overtake his famished and lethargic opponents. That might indicate his awareness of the alleged Sabbath fast, for which Pompey would have had to wait no more than six days from the time of his arrival.⁶

Other allusions to fasting on the Sabbath are less ambiguous.⁷ The Roman historian Pompeius Trogus, a contemporary of Strabo, dubiously reports that Moses, upon reaching Mount Sinai, consecrated the seventh day as a fast to commemorate his people's having gone hungry for seven days following their departure from Egypt.⁸ Needless to say, that notion does not square with the traditional Jewish account of the Exodus. The historian Tacitus likewise

6. In an earlier work, Josephus related that the attack took place on a Sabbath and attributes Pompey's success merely to the refusal of Jerusalem's residents to perform manual labor on their day of rest (*War* 1.146; 2.392). See also Cassius Dio, *Hist. Rom.* 37.16.2-4, who likewise dates Pompey's conquest to a Saturday, with comments in Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, II, pp. 352-53. As both historians evidently sought to correct Strabo, their accounts must not be mistaken for more accurate retellings of the events in question. To wit, Josephus's subsequent assertion that that the date of Pompey's attack was Yom Kippur suggests a more critical design on his part to explain Strabo's confusion. See, however, Nadav Sharon, 'The Conquests of Jerusalem by Pompey and Herod: On Sabbath or "Sabbath of Sabbaths"?', *JSQ* 21 (2014), pp. 193-220, who defends Josephus's correction on the plausible premise that Pompey attacked Jerusalem on Yom Kippur following a four-month siege of the city.

7. I exclude from the following tally of witnesses Fronto, *Ep. Caes.* 2.9, who refers to the Jewish custom of fasting albeit without reference to the Sabbath. For comments, see Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, II, p. 176. I furthermore will not consider reports of early Christians alleged to have fasted on Saturdays. That practice evidently originated in an expression of contempt toward Judaism, that is, it was a mockery of the Sabbath rather than a continuation or appropriation of an established mode of its observance. See Gerard Rouwhorst, 'The Reception of the Jewish Sabbath in Early Christianity', in Paulus Gijssbertus Johannes Post *et al.* (eds.), *Christian Feast and Festival: The Dynamics of Western Liturgy and Culture* (Liturgia Condenda, 12; Leuven: Peeters, 2001), pp. 223-66 (255-56).

8. Pompeius Trogus, *Hist. Phil.* 36, in Justinus, *Epit.* 2.14. For comments, see Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, I, p. 341. Though evidently misinformed, Pompeius's account of the Exodus does not appear to exhibit animosity toward Jews. For discussion to that effect, see Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 26-27.

asserts that ‘frequent fasts’ of the Jews bear everlasting witness to their ancestors’ weeklong trek through the desert.⁹ The satirist Petronius insists that Sabbath fasts were cruelly imposed by the harsh law of the Jews.¹⁰ His contemporary Martial drolly bemoans the bad breath of ‘fasting Sabbatarian women’.¹¹ The imperial biographer Suetonius quotes a quip by no less an authority than Caesar Augustus to the effect that Jews habitually went hungry on their Sabbaths.¹²

Ranging from the late first century BCE through the early second century CE, these Latin witnesses suggest that Rome’s literati entertained the notion that Jews fasted on the Sabbath for quite some time. That impression has elicited much speculation among modern commentators as to whether the Jews with whom the Roman authors were acquainted actually did fast on the Sabbath, abstaining from food and drink on their day of rest in accordance with a long-standing local custom otherwise lost to history.¹³ Variations of that theory abound. Some scholars infer that it was an antiquated sectarian practice imported from Judea.¹⁴ Another detects traces of an early rabbinic

9. Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.4.3: *crebris* [...] *ieiuniis*. For comments, see Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, II, p. 37.

10. Petronius, *Fr.* 37. For comments, see Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, I, p. 444.

11. Martial, *Epigr.* 4.4: *ieiunia sabbatariarum*. Although Martial does not identify the subjects of his barb as Jews, his use of the Hebrew term clearly evokes the Jewish rite. For comments, see Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, I, p. 524.

12. Suetonius, *Aug.* 76.2. For comments, see Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, II, p. 110.

13. This empirical premise appears to have originated with J. Hugh Michael, ‘The Jewish Sabbath in the Latin Classical Writers’, *AJSL* 40 (1924), pp. 117-24 (124).

14. Yitzhak D. Gilat, ‘Fasting on the Sabbath’, in Yitzhak D. Gilat, *Studies in the Development of the Halakha* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1992), pp. 109-22 (117-18) [Hebrew]; William Horbury, ‘*Cena Pura* and Lord’s Supper’, in Jack Pastor and Menachem Mor (eds.), *The Beginnings of Christianity: A Collection of Articles* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2005), pp. 219-65 (236-37). See also Herold Weiss, *A Day of Gladness: The Sabbath among Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), p. 56, who infers a connection to Samaritan ascetic practices. The text ostensibly supporting this theory, *Jub.* 50.12, actually forbids fasting on the Sabbath, which may indicate the occurrence of Sabbath fasting during the second century BCE but does not perforce speak to its

debate over the somberness of the Sabbath day likewise brought to Rome by unknown parties.¹⁵ Others tenuously associate the purported Roman practice with ascetic practices attested among the rabbinic sages of late ancient Palestine and Babylonia.¹⁶ One scholar looks further into the future, connecting it to Jewish penitential rites and liturgies attested elsewhere in Europe during the Middle Ages.¹⁷ Yet another dubiously proposes that the practice of fasting on the Sabbath originated among the Jews of Rome as an act of communal mourning over Pompey's conquest of Jerusalem.¹⁸ Perhaps most outlandishly of all, one scholar casts Jews throughout the Mediterranean Diaspora as converted pagans who retained elements of the austere cult of

social location or frequency. See Lutz Doering, *Schabbat: Sabbathalacha und -praxis im antiken Judentum und Urchristentum* (TSAJ, 78; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), pp. 105-106, who notes that the rabbinic sages also discouraged fasting on the Sabbath as a matter of principle rather than of corrective practice.

15. Ranon Katzoff, 'On Fasting on the Sabbath', *Sinai* 119 (1997), pp. 185-86 [Hebrew]; *idem*, 'The Laws of Rabbi Eliezer in Ancient Rome', in David Golinkin *et al.* (eds.), *Torah Lishma: Essays in Jewish Studies in Honor of Professor Shamma Friedman* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2007), pp. 344-57 (350-52) [Hebrew].

16. Gilat, 'Fasting on the Sabbath', pp. 110-11 and *passim*; Jodi Magness, *Stone and Dung, Oil and Spit: Jewish Daily Life in the Time of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 93-94. Compare Doering, *Schabbat*, pp. 106-107, who duly points out that the rabbinic texts attesting to Sabbath fasting long postdate the Roman witnesses. See also Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 121-25, who stresses that the rabbinic sages permitted fasting on the Sabbath only on rare and dire occasions, not as matter of routine practice.

17. Robert Goldenberg, 'The Jewish Sabbath in the Roman World up to the Time of Constantine the Great', in Wolfgang Haase (ed.), *ANRW* 2.19.1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979), pp. 414-47 (440-41). See also Shaye J.D. Cohen, 'Common Judaism in Greek and Latin Authors', in Fabian E. Udoh *et al.* (eds.), *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities: Essays in Honor of Ed Parish Sanders* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), pp. 69-87 (74, 82), who suggests that the ascetic Sabbath fast coexisted in the Diaspora with the more familiar festive Sabbath.

18. Margaret H. Williams, 'Being a Jew in Rome: Sabbath Fasting as an Expression of Romano-Jewish Identity', in John M.G. Barclay (ed.), *Negotiating Diaspora: Jewish Strategies in the Roman Empire* (LSTS, 45; London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), pp. 8-18.

Saturn, sloppily combining them with the Jewish rite on the day of the week customarily given to the worship of that Roman deity.¹⁹

These theories fail to convince. Each demands the conjecture of facts regarding the history and ritual predilections of Rome's Jewish community not supported by the evidence at hand. A simpler and, to my mind, more plausible explanation is that those Romans who believed Jews fasted on the Sabbath were wrong. We have plenty of evidence to support that deduction. The poet Ovid alludes to the 'seventh-day feasts' of the Jews.²⁰ Juvenal likewise alludes to 'festal Sabbaths' observed by the kings of Judea.²¹ Referring specifically to the Jews of Rome, the satirist Persius associates the Sabbath with the consumption of fish and wine.²² Beyond Rome, the Greek philosopher Plutarch also knew that Jews drank wine on the Sabbath, sometimes to excess.²³ The North African Christian writers Tertullian and Augustine knew

19. F.H. Colson, *The Week: An Essay on the Origin and Development of the Seven-Day Cycle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), pp. 97-98, 100. Colson does not address the alleged Jewish practice per se but, rather, seeks to explain the Sabbath fasts of certain early Christians, on which see note 7 above.

20. Ovid, *Ars* 1.416: *Palaestino septima festa Syro*. On 'Syrian of Palestine' as a poetic byword for Jew, see comments in Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, I, p. 239, and cf. Ovid, *Ars* 1.76.

21. Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.159: *fasta [...] sabbata*. See comments in Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, II, p. 100.

22. Persius, *Sat.* 5.176-84. See comments in Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, I, pp. 436-37. Although he mentions the Sabbath in line 184, Persius's snarky allusion to the 'day of Herod' (*Herodes [...] dies*) in line 180 has led some to question whether he refers to another holiday. Moshe Benovitz, 'Herod and Hanukkah', *Zion* 68 (2003), pp. 5-40 (35-37) [Hebrew], sees an allusion to the celebration of the Jewish festival of lights. William Horbury, 'Herod's Temple and "Herod's Days"', in William Horbury (ed.), *Templum Amicitiae: Essays on the Second Temple Presented to Ernst Bammel* (JSNTSup, 48; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), pp. 103-49 (123-46), and Clemens Leonhard, "'Herod's Days" and the Development of Jewish and Christian Festivals', in Benedikt Eckhardt (ed.), *Jewish Identity and Politics between the Maccabees and Bar Kokhba: Groups, Normativity, and Rituals* (JSJSup, 155; Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 189-208 (190-200), surmise a long forgotten Roman Jewish holiday commemorating Herod's accession to the throne of Judea. I find these theories lacking for necessity and credibility.

23. Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* 4.6.2. See comments in Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, I, p. 562.

of the *cena pura*, or ‘pure dinner’, a festive Sabbath meal celebrated by Latin-speaking Jews on Friday evenings.²⁴ These witnesses evoke the joyful and gastronomically bounteous spirit of Sabbath observance attested in contemporary Jewish literature.²⁵ I therefore find them more credible than those suggesting that Roman Jews considered their day of rest a sullen occasion.

Of course, to conclude that those Romans who believed Jews fasted on the Sabbath were mistaken does not acquit us of the need to explain how that error came about. A common approach to that question has been to follow Josephus’s lead and infer confusion among the Roman commentators between the Sabbath and Yom Kippur.²⁶ I find that explanation implausible. One

24. Tertullian, *Marc.* 5.4; *Nat.* 1.13.4; Augustine, *Serm.* 221.4; *Tract. Ev. Jo.* 120.5. On these and related Christian witnesses to the *cena pura*, see Horbury, ‘*Cena pura*’, pp. 219-65 (224-28). The rabbinic sages of Roman Palestine likewise welcomed the Sabbath with rich Friday evening meals, upholding a tradition from Jewish generations past. See Lutz Doering, ‘The Beginning of Sabbath and Festivals in Ancient Jewish Sources’, in Jonathan Ben-Dov and Lutz Doering (eds.), *The Construction of Time in Antiquity: Ritual, Art, and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 205-26 (220-23).

25. Classical rabbinic texts alluding to the celebratory intake of food and wine on the Sabbath are far too numerous to list here. For general comments and illustrations, see Goldenberg, ‘The Jewish Sabbath’, pp. 422-23; Jordan D. Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 174-78. Of note here is a relatively late rabbinic anecdote wherein a Roman emperor, a Gentile *par excellence*, declares a Sabbath meal superior to others. See *Gen. R.* 11.4 and *b. Šab.* 119a, with discussion in Sarit Kattan Gribetz, ‘Between Narrative and Polemic: The Sabbath in *Genesis Rabbah* and the Babylonian Talmud’, in Sarit Kattan Gribetz *et al.* (eds.), *Genesis Rabbah in Text and Context* (TSAJ, 166; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), pp. 33-61 (41-44).

26. See, e.g., Abraham Berliner, *Geschichte der Juden in Rom, von der ältesten Zeit bis zur Gegenwart (2050 Jahre)* (2 vols.; Frankfurt: J. Kauffmann, 1893), I, p. 102; Zecharias Frankel, ‘Schutzschrift des Josephus Flavius gegen Apion’, *MGWJ* 1 (1851), pp. 7-21, 41-56, 81-98, 121-45 (88 n. 3); Ludwig Geiger, ‘Juden und Judenthum nach der Auffassung der Schriftsteller des Alterthums’, *Illustrierte Monatshefte für die gesammten Interessen des Judenthums* 2 (1865–66), pp. 12-25 (20-22); Jacob Mann, ‘The Observance of the Sabbath and the Festivals in the First Two Centuries of the Current Era according to Philo, Josephus, the New Testament, and the Rabbinic Sources’, *Jewish Review* 4 (1914), pp. 433-56, 498-532 (516); Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, p. 90. Slightly less implausible but still improbable is the

of those holidays occurs every week and the other only once a year. One would have to be extremely calendrically challenged to confuse the two.²⁷ Others suggest that Romans confused Jews' avoidance of cooking on the Sabbath for their avoidance of eating.²⁸ Yet one would think that Gentile observers familiar enough with their culinary habits to have known that their Jewish neighbors did not cook on the Sabbath also would have known that they could eat precooked or uncooked foods without moral compunction. Some scholars assign the notion of the Sabbath fast to rote prejudice, characterizing it as baseless mockery of Rome's Jews.²⁹ I find that explanation unsatisfying. While the notion that Jews fasted on the Sabbath is bewildering, it is not

argument that Romans were misled by Strabo's tendentious account of Ptolemy's siege of Jerusalem and similar tales of Jewish strategic ineptitude. See, e.g., Levi Herzfeld, 'Wann war die Eroberung Jerusalems durch Pompejus, und wann die durch Herodes?', *MGWJ* 4 (1855), pp. 109-15 (111-13); Max Radin, *The Jews among the Greeks and Romans* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1915), pp. 399-402 n. 14.

27. Harry J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1960), p. 245, suggests that the error arose from the Jewish calendar's abundance of fast days. That is unlikely. Aside from the scripturally mandated Yom Kippur fast, the other fast days now populating the Jewish liturgical year were rabbinic innovations and therefore unknown in the Diaspora prior to the rise of rabbinic culture as the dominant model of religious expression during the late ancient period. See Joseph Tabory, 'Jewish Festivals in Late Antiquity', in Steven T. Katz (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Judaism. IV. The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 556-72 (569-70).

28. This theory reasonably assumes that Roman Jews adhered to Exod. 33.1-3, which prohibits lighting a fire on the Sabbath and, hence, cooking food. See, e.g. Berliner, *Geschichte der Juden*, I, p. 102; Frankel, 'Schutzschrift', p. 88 n. 3; Heather A. McKay, *Sabbath and Synagogue: The Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism* (RGRW, 122; Leiden: Brill, 1994), p. 96.

29. See, e.g., Louis H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 162-63; Isaac, *The Invention of Racism*, p. 471; Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, p. 90; Shlomo Simonsohn, *The Jews of Italy: Antiquity* (BSJS, 58; Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 4, 229. Some argue that the mockery was meant to caricature the Jewish holiday as a bore; see Dora Askowith, *The Toleration of the Jews under Julius Caesar and Augustus* (New York: Bloch, 1915), p. 86; J.-A. Hild, 'Les juifs à Rome devant l'opinion et dans la littérature', *REJ* 8 (1884), pp. 1-37 (34).

especially mean-spirited. Others still suggest that the confusion arose from the fact that Jews did not eat on the morning of Sabbath, waiting until midday and the conclusion of their prayers to begin eating and drinking.³⁰ That would require that their Gentile observers stopped paying attention just as the Jews started their lunchtime festivities. That scenario beggars common sense. One scholar speculates that the Jews of Rome, impoverished as they were, always fed frugally, thereby feeding the misperception that they regularly went without nourishment at all.³¹ Setting aside the unfounded notion that all Roman Jews were poor, one wonders why they would have chosen their divinely ordained day of leisure to punish their bodies with hunger.

Assuming that the notion of the Sabbath fast was indeed misbegotten, that multiple authors made the same error over a long span of time suggests the working of some manner of mimetic or stereotypical thinking.³² Whatever its origin, the idea was deemed credible by those apt to repeat it. A better question, therefore, than why certain Romans believed Jews fasted on the Sabbath would be, what about their encounters with the Sabbath informed that belief? In other words, we should not read the words of our confused Gentile commentators as reliable witnesses of how their Jewish neighbors actually observed their day of rest. Rather, we should read them as witnesses to how they or their informants experienced the Jewish holiday. To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that those Romans who mistook the Sabbath for a day of fasting participated in its observance as devotees of the God of the Jews or as guests in Jewish homes and synagogues.³³ Rather, I mean that the behaviors of

30. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, p. 163; Horbury, 'Cena pura', p. 236. Based on a passing comment in Josephus, *Life* 279, this suggestion is wanting for support with respect to the Sabbath-day habits of Roman Jews.

31. Paul Lejay, 'Le Sabbat juif et les poètes latins', *Revue d'histoire et de littérature religieuses* 8 (1903), pp. 305-35 (311-12). See Goldenberg, 'The Jewish Sabbath', pp. 439-40, for appropriately incredulous comments.

32. For a complementary assessment, see Erich S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 48.

33. Although Roman Jews are known to have entertained Gentiles genuinely interested in exploring their customs, the misinformation exhibited in the sources under consideration makes it unlikely that their authors were so inclined. On dalliances with the Sabbath among non-Jews in Rome, see Wolf Liebeschuetz, 'The Influence of Judaism among Non-Jews in the Imperial Period', *JJS* 52 (2001), pp. 235-52 (235-

Rome's Jews on the Sabbath informed the perceptions of their neighbors regarding the holiday's ritual significance. By removing themselves every Saturday from their regular daily routines, the Jews left a noticeable void in the city's urban landscape. It was that void, I submit, that planted and nourished the idea that they abstained from food and drink on their sacred day.

The Food Trade in Ancient Rome

To appreciate how their Sabbath-day routines might have been taken to imply irregularity in their dietary habits, it will be instructive to consider how the Jews of ancient Rome shopped for food. To that end, let us first consider how everyone in ancient Rome shopped for food.³⁴ We should begin by noting that the paved and crowded alleyways of the city were not ideal places for its residents to grow their own produce, much less to raise livestock. Rome's urban elite had access to such amenities at their country estates, although their supply was limited to what their slaves could cart into the city. In fact, both the rich and the poor relied on the local retail trade. Rome's economy encompassed hordes of vendors who made their livings procuring foodstuffs from farmers, vintners and fishermen and preparing them for resale.

Understanding how the city's food trade looked on the ground level is essential for appreciating the visibility of its Jewish participants. Claire Holleran describes three primary points of contact between vendors and consumers.³⁵ The most common place to procure foods in the city was the

38). Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, p. 356, probably goes too far in submitting this phenomenon as evidence of a concerted Jewish efforts to win sympathizers.

34. For the following, see Paul Erdkamp, 'Supplying Cities', in John Wilkins and Robin Nadeau (eds.), *A Companion to Food in the Ancient World* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 183–92 (188–89); Claire Holleran, *Shopping in Ancient Rome: The Retail Trade in the Late Republic and the Principate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 2-3.

35. For the following, see in general Holleran, *Shopping in Ancient Rome*. The points of contact denoted here are not exhaustive. I exclude from the discussion the *caupona*, the *popina* and the *thermopolium*, places where lower-class patrons dined on prepared food and drink among other, less salubrious activities. Although Sabbath-observant Jews might have frequented such establishments, dining out was a more private and less conspicuous activity than shopping for food. Their weekly

taberna, a small business comparable to the modern store-front shop. Foods sold at *tabernae* included staples such as bread and produce, sausages, mixed wine and snacks such as dried fruit and nuts.³⁶ Some *tabernae* offered prepared hot dishes, a convenience for customers lacking the facilities to cook in their own homes. That was an amenity rare for those who lived in the city's crowded, poorly ventilated apartment blocks.

For those who had their own kitchens, a more upscale option was the *macellum*. The *macellum* resembled a modern farmer's market. It convened in an open-air enclosure featuring an interior space where vendors would set up tables to display their goods. That space was surrounded by a ring of indoor stalls used by butchers and others in need of permanent kitchen fixtures. The *macellum* was the place to buy raw produce, unprocessed meat, poultry, fish, sausages and cured meats, unmixed wine, dairy products, dry goods and other comestibles.³⁷ Though shopping there could be expensive, the *macellum* was popular among consumers in need of large quantities of foods as well as specialty items not available at the local *taberna*.

Finally, there were what Holleran calls the street traders, or to use more familiar terms, the hawkers or peddlers. These were enterprising individuals who sold their goods from baskets, carts, collapsible wooden stalls and other such mobile apparatuses. Street traders who dealt in foodstuffs offered the same variety of goods to be found at the *macellum*, albeit in smaller quantities and of inferior quality.³⁸ Their clientele generally were lower class persons who sought them out as they made their daily rounds through the city's poorer neighborhoods.

Rome's food trade was lively and never-ending. In the age before refrigeration, people had to buy food constantly. Of course, some foods, such as crusty bread, cured meats, and wine, could be kept for a few days. But for the most part, what people purchased on a given day they consumed on the same day, a pattern repeated the next day and the day after that and so on. Whether it was a quick visit to the *taberna*, a leisurely stroll through the *macellum* with one's servants in tow or a streetside haggling session with an ambulatory

withdrawal from the restaurant scene therefore presumably would have been less noticeable to onlookers than their withdrawal from the retail food trade.

36. Holleran, *Shopping in Ancient Rome*, pp. 131-50.

37. Holleran, *Shopping in Ancient Rome*, pp. 171-80.

38. Holleran, *Shopping in Ancient Rome*, pp. 205-208.

vendor, food shopping was a social event. It was one of the many constant requirements of life in the city for all its inhabitants.

Naturally, shopping for food in Rome also meant to be seen shopping for food. Therein, I submit, lies the root of the misperception that Jews did not eat on the Sabbath. Among the most venerable customs of observance associated with the Jewish day of rest was refraining from commercial exchange. In what follows, I shall argue that Roman Jews by and large kept to that custom. The consequent disappearance of the Jews from Rome's food trade each Saturday left a conspicuous void in the streets and shops of the neighborhoods where they went about their daily routine. That void, I shall contend, led some of their Gentile observers naturally, if erroneously, to deduce that Jews went hungry on that day.

Shopping on the Sabbath

The ritual specifications of Sabbath observance evolved over hundreds of years and wide geographical expanses. Though framed in positive terms, the Torah's injunction to rest on the seventh day is essentially a negative commandment, that is, an order not to work (Exod. 20.7-10; Deut. 5.11-14). The precise practical implications of the scriptural concept of work were open to interpretation in antiquity and remain subject to debate to this day.³⁹

Although the Torah does not expressly forbid conducting commercial exchange on the Sabbath, the taboo against it has an exceptionally long pedigree. Among our very earliest witnesses to Sabbath observance is a warning from the eighth-century BCE prophet Amos, who chided his fellow Israelites for pining for the end of the Sabbath to resume selling their wheat (Amos 8.5). Amos thereby acknowledges that the subjects of his censure abstained from commercial exchange on their sacred day, even if, to his mind,

39. On early Jewish sensibilities pertaining to Sabbath observance, see in general Doering, *Schabbat*. The system of thirty-nine restricted types of labor traditionally known as the Sabbath laws was an innovation of the rabbinic sages, although it was likely based in part on popular practice. On its development, see David Kraemer, 'Interpreting the Rabbinic Sabbath: The "Forty Minus One" Forbidden Labors of Mishnah Shabbat 7:2', in Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, Tzvi Novick and Christine Hayes (eds.), *The Faces of Torah: Studies in the Texts and Contexts of Ancient Judaism in Honor of Steven Fraade* (Journal of Ancient Judaism Supplements, 22; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), pp. 385-93.

insincerely.⁴⁰ Another early notice appears in the fifth-century BCE book of Nehemiah, who included express instructions to avoid commerce on the Sabbath in the contract he claims to have signed with the leaders of Judea upon his initial arrival from Persia (Neh. 10.32). The pious governor expresses shock at having found upon his subsequent visit Jews conducting all sorts of commercial activity on the Sabbath, including the preparation and sale of food. Nehemiah proudly states that he took immediate and decisive action to stop it, barring the gates of Jerusalem to prevent merchants and traders from entering the city on the day of rest (Neh. 13.15-22).⁴¹

Naturally, these scriptural notices do not speak to the behaviors of Roman Jews during the period under consideration. But others are more suggestive of those tendencies. A number of Roman authors contemptuously describe the Sabbath as a day of idleness, an excuse to waste time while others busied themselves with work.⁴² Less disparagingly, Ovid advises one looking for love not to rest on the Sabbath of the Jews despite the day's reputation as one

40. See Göran Eidevall, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB, 24G; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 218. It is possible that the prophet's allusion to the Sabbath is a later emendation to a warning that originally referred only to the New Moon festival mentioned earlier in the verse; so, e.g. Timo Veijola, 'Die Propheten und das Alter des Sabbatgebots', in Volkmar Fritz, Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann and Hans-Christoph Schmitt (eds.), *Prophet und Prophetenbuch: Festschrift für Otto Kaiser zum 65. Geburtstag* (BZAW, 185; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989), pp. 246-64 (252-55). That intimation is predicated on the assumption that the weekly holiday was an invention of the Babylonian exile, a controversial position that I do not wish to entertain here.

41. On the background of these notices, see Anne Fitzpatrick-McKinley, *Empire, Power and Indigenous Elites: A Case Study of the Nehemiah Memoir* (JSJSup, 169; Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 242-45. Of related interest here is the account of the manna in Exodus, which was evidently embellished in the post-exilic period to indicate that the Israelites did not have to collect their heavenly rations on the Sabbath (Exod. 16.22-23). For discussion, see Stephen Geller, 'Manna and Sabbath: A Literary-Theological Reading of Exodus 16', *Int* 59 (2005), pp. 5-16.

42. E.g., Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.105-106; Seneca in Augustine, *Civ.* 6.11; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.4.3; Rutilius Namatianus, *De Red.* 1.391. On the invidious implications of this rhetorical trope, see Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, p. 166; Gruen, *Diaspora*, pp. 48-50; Isaac, *The Invention of Racism*, p. 471; Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, pp. 86-88.

unsuited for business.⁴³ Beyond the capital city, avoidance of financial transactions on the Sabbath appears to have been common among Jews throughout the Roman Empire. Philo of Alexandria states that Augustus allowed needy Jewish citizens to collect their monthly allotments of free grains on Sunday when the regular date of disbursement happened to fall on the Sabbath.⁴⁴ Josephus reports that the same emperor exempted Jews from having to participate in legal proceedings on the Sabbath to avoid implicating them in pecuniary matters.⁴⁵ The beneficiaries of those permissions evidently took advantage of them. A cache of first- and second-century receipts from the city of Apollinopolis Magna in Egypt (modern-day Edfu) indicates that its Jews avoided financial transactions on the Sabbath when given the option.⁴⁶

These witnesses do not indicate whether all self-professed Jews in the city of Rome avoided commercial exchange on the Sabbath. The patchwork record of evidence does not allow for such far-reaching conclusions. But impressions of the Jewish day of rest preserved in ancient sources both Jewish

43. Ovid, *Ars* 1.415-16. See comments in Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, I, p. 349. See also John M.G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora, from Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), pp. 296-97, who seems to overestimate the poet's sense of the city's social and economic debts to the Jews.

44. Philo, *Leg. Gai.* 158. On the commercial dimension of the grain dole, see Doering, *Schabbat*, pp. 349-50. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, p. 296 n. 37, keenly points out that Jews' avoidance of the grain dole would have made their Sabbath observance conspicuous to others.

45. Josephus, *Ant.* 16.163. For comments, see Miriam Pucci Ben Zeev, *Jewish Rights in the Roman World: The Greek and Roman Documents Quoted by Josephus Flavius* (TSAJ, 74; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), p. 242. The same exemption is cited in a letter by the consul Marcus Agrippa, Augustus's son-in-law, sent to leaders of the city of Ephesus. See Josephus, *Ant.* 16.168, with comments in Pucci Ben Zeev, *Jewish Rights*, p. 265. See also Doering, *Schabbat*, pp. 299-302, on the financial implications of the edict.

46. Willy Clarysse, Sofie Remijnsen and Mark Depauw, 'Observing the Sabbath in the Roman Empire: A Case Study', *Scripta Classica Israelica* 29 (2010), pp. 51-57. The authors observe that the city's Jews generally paid their taxes when the regular collector came around on Saturday but avoided paying the *fiscus iudaicus* on that day. As the Jews themselves were responsible for the collecting the latter, their deference to the Sabbath is patent.

and Gentile suggest a common mode of its traditional observance.⁴⁷ It therefore stands to reason that many Roman Jews chose to avoid commerce on their sacred day in deference to their people's ancient custom. That choice would have dictated their weekly withdrawal from the city's food trade. Outside observers oblivious to the reason for the Jews' periodic absence would have been left to their own devices to explain it.

But would their neighbors have noticed the disappearance of Jews from the crowded Roman marketplace? A more fundamental question is whether Jews were visible as such at all. How, in other words, would an uninformed observer have recognized an individual shopping for food as a Jew to begin with? Only if the outside observer could distinguish the Jewish stake in the city's food trade could he or she be expected to notice its absence.

It would be attractive to suppose that Roman Jews distinguished themselves by the foods they purchased. It is reasonable to surmise that they kept to certain dietary restrictions, another curiosity of their ilk attested in the Latin sources. But those sources tell us little about how Roman Jews observed the laws of food purity or *kashrut* beyond their avoidance of pork.⁴⁸ As for other foods, we are on less certain grounds. Assuming that Rome's Jews generally adhered to the instructions of the Torah, they could have bought most of their food from the same vendors as their Gentile neighbors. Fruits, vegetables, bread and wine were not regulated by their laws. Meat, however, would have been more difficult to obtain. To avoid the flesh of animals that the Torah deems unclean, observant Jews would have shunned meat from ritually acceptable animals containing blood or animals that were slaughtered in conjunction with what they considered illicit worship. They therefore would have had either to exercise caution when shopping for meat or to buy only from trusted vendors acquainted with their special needs.

Unfortunately, what Roman Jews ate and how they procured their food are not well documented. A funerary inscription from the Subura district of Rome

47. For similar assessments, see Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, pp. 441-42; Doering, *Sabbat*, pp. 560-63. Cohen, 'Common Judaism', pp. 73-76, largely agrees, although he maintains the possibility that the Sabbath fast was an actual phenomenon.

48. On the limited, stereotypical knowledge of Greek and Roman authors about Jewish dietary habits, see Cohen, 'Common Judaism', pp. 76-77; Jordan D. Rosenblum, *The Jewish Dietary Laws in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 30-38.

attests to a fruit seller who maintained a shop near a synagogue, which presumably served a Jewish clientele.⁴⁹ Another found in the Jewish catacomb of Vigna Randanini commemorates one Alexander, ‘sausage-maker of the market’.⁵⁰ It seems as though this man had a stall in a *macellum*, where he likely sold meat fit for Jewish consumption.⁵¹ A kitchen in the synagogue of Ostia featured an oven and butcher’s block evidently meant for the preparation of food for local Jews and those passing through the port city on the way to Rome.⁵² Pliny the Elder offers a confused allusion to the availability of

49. David Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe. II. The City of Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 487 (no. 602). Although the subject of the inscription was not a Jew, its use of the Greek term *proseucha* for synagogue suggests his association with a Jewish community of Egyptian origin. On the Subura district as a magnet for Jewish immigrants, see Ramsay MacMullen, ‘The Unromanized in Rome’, in Shaye J.D. Cohen and Ernest S. Frerichs (eds.), *Diasporas in Antiquity* (BJS, 288; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), pp. 47-64 (54).

50. Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions*, II, p. 288 (no. 343). The phrase *butularus de macello* has elicited interest from commentators perplexed by the implication that Alexander sold *botulus*, which the ancient Roman cookbook Apicius describes as a blood sausage; see discussion in Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions*, II, p. 289, and, more extensively, Margaret H. Williams, ‘Alexander, *bubularus de macello*: Humble Sausage-Seller or Europe’s First Identifiable Purveyor of Kosher Beef?’, *Latomus* 61 (2002), pp. 122-33 (126-30), who emends the term to *bubularus*, or butcher of beef. That is not necessary. Although Apicius’s recipe includes blood, *botulus* was a generic term for sausage and therefore does not implicate Alexander as a seller of goods not sanctioned by the laws of the Torah. See Susan Weingarten, ‘Ancient Jewish Sausages’, in Helen Saberi (ed.), *Cured, Fermented and Smoked Foods: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2010* (Devon: Prospect, 2011), pp. 365-75 (371-72).

51. Or so one would surmise from the impetus of his survivors to commemorate his trade as a witness to his righteousness. See Williams, ‘Alexander’, pp. 123-26. Although I find it credible to deduce that Alexander sold kosher meat, I demur from Williams’s anachronistic characterization of the man a kosher butcher, that is, a practitioner of the rabbinic rite of *šehitah*, or ritual slaughter (pp. 130-31).

52. Douglas Boin, *Ostia in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 120; L. Michael White, ‘Synagogue and Society in Imperial Ostia: Archaeological and Epigraphic Evidence’, *HTR* 90 (1997), pp. 23-58 (31). I describe the kitchen’s marble table as a butcher’s block in view of butchered bovine remains recently discovered at the site. I am grateful to L. Michael White for informing me of those finds.

garum, a ubiquitous fish sauce, specially prepared to Jewish specifications.⁵³ Beyond Rome, the apostle Paul advised his followers in Corinth not to worry about the provenance of food sold at the *macellum*, about whether its meats were cut from sacrifices to false gods (1 Cor. 10.25). Echoing what would have been a common concern for local Jews, he seems to suggest that ritually acceptable meat was available for purchase there.⁵⁴

Although these glimpses into Jewish consumption habits do not add up to a complete picture of how Roman Jews staked their claim in the city's food trade, they suggest that Jews shopped for food just as conspicuously as their Gentile neighbors, if not more so on account of their special dietary needs. If, therefore, we are to assume that the same Jews who observed *kashrut* also observed the Sabbath, it stands to reason that their weekly withdrawal from Rome's food trade left a noticeable void.⁵⁵ In neighborhoods with large Jewish populations, Jewish vendors would have shuttered their *tabernae* and *macellum* stalls. Jewish street traders would have desisted from their daily rounds. Gentile vendors in those areas who served Jewish clients would have seen their businesses lag on Saturdays. The recurring absence of their Jewish neighbors from the marketplace would have signaled to other shoppers something unusual about the Jews' feeding habits on the day they called *šabbat*.⁵⁶

53. Pliny, *Nat.* 31.95. Pliny refers here to garum made of fish without scales, which is expressly forbidden in Lev. 11.10. For comments, see Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, I, p. 500. See also Robert I. Curtis, *Garum and Salsamenta: Production and Commerce in Materia Medica* (Studies in Ancient Medicine, 3; Leiden: Brill, 1991), p. 145, and further, pp. 165-66, on amphorae from Pompeii evidently used to transport this specialty item.

54. For comments, see Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles* (CRINT, 3.1; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1990), pp. 189-90.

55. Compare Goldenberg, 'The Jewish Sabbath', p. 441, who does not link this void to the alleged Sabbath fast.

56. Sten Hidal, 'The Jews as the Roman Authors Saw Them', in Birger Olsson, Dieter Mitternacht and Olaf Brandt (eds.), *The Synagogue of Ancient Ostia and the Jews of Rome: Interdisciplinary Studies* (Skrifter utgivna av Svenska institutet i Rom 4°, 62; Stockholm: Åströms, 2001), pp. 141-44 (143), suggests that Jewish avoidance of the *thermopolium* on the Sabbath might have suggested to others that they fasted on that day. Hidal's brief comment is the only explanation of the Sabbath fast I have found that approaches my own.

In short, to withdraw from the city's food trade every seventh day was to defy Rome's culture of constant consumption. For casual Gentile observers not inclined to investigate why Jews appeared not to eat on their sacred day, that they actually did not eat would have been a reasonable deduction. It was also convenient. Although Rome's Jews sought to integrate into the social and economic fabrics of the city, many outside their community preferred to see them eternally as strangers. Rumors about Jews reinforcing popular perceptions of their otherness were easy for those unsympathetic outsiders to believe.

Conclusions

The foregoing argument is by no means conclusive. I have produced no concrete evidence to the effect that the Roman writers who knew the Sabbath as a fast day based that supposition on fact, misconception or otherwise. For all we know, there was no empirical basis to the belief whatsoever. Yet its persistence as a rhetorical topos suggests otherwise. Despite the posturing of the city's literati, Jews were no strangers to Rome. They settled there in large numbers during the late Republican age and through the early centuries of the Principate. Though given to stereotypical thinking, Romans knew about Jews. Many knew actual Jews. Nevertheless, misunderstandings of those aspects of their culture that distinguished the Jews from native Romans and other immigrant populations were bound to occur. That, I believe, is the most plausible source of the rumor about the Sabbath fast carelessly told by generations of misinformed Romans and occasionally committed to writing by members of their intellectual class.

Though arguably an effect of casual indifference to their mores, the notion that Jews fast on the Sabbath is hardly offensive. To my mind, it speaks to an admirable trait of its subjects, namely their willingness to wear their Jewish identities in public. Maintaining the ways of their ancestors continually put Roman Jews at risk of exposing themselves as outliers with respect to the tightly regulated spatial and temporal patterns of their urban environs. It made them stand out. It is therefore little wonder that Sabbath observance was debated by early Christians in Rome and other localities where Jews had set the

precedent for its observance.⁵⁷ Beyond the question of whether they were bound to the Torah's legislation, Christians could not rely on the legal concessions historically granted to the Jews to practice their Sabbath rite. Marching to the daily rhythm of the city without interruption would have helped them avoid unwanted attention. Not until the fourth century CE, when the legal empowerment of the Church was to rewrite the very concept of Roman time, would Christians achieve the freedom to observe a Sabbath of their own as openly and as joyously as the Jews once had.

57. On Saturday Sabbath observance and its critics in early Christian culture, see Doering, *Schabbat*, pp. 398-478; *idem*, 'Sabbath Laws in the New Testament Gospels', in Reimund Bieringer *et al.* (eds.), *The New Testament and Rabbinic Literature* (JSJSup, 136; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 207-53; Rouwhorst, 'The Reception of the Jewish Sabbath', pp. 247-61.