

THEME SECTION / SEZIONE MONOGRAFICA

*Jews and Christians under Imperial Rule*

*From Antiochus IV to Trajan*

Daniele Pevarello - Andrea Ravasco - Marco Settembrini

(eds.)



## INTRODUCTION

The present issue of *Henoah* opens with a theme section largely devoted to the study of empire and imperial ideology in Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity. At its heart is the question of how Hellenistic and Roman imperial rules contributed to the shaping of Jewish and Christian identities from the Seleucids to the Trajan era. The main lines of enquiry followed by the contributors centre around the effects of the interaction between ancient Judaism and Christianity and the cultural and socio-economic ideologies of the political systems and power structures in which they flourished. We are deeply grateful to Piero Capelli, editor-in-chief of *Henoah*, and to Paolo Lucca, chair of the editorial board of the journal, for their support and their guidance in the preparation of this theme section.

The contributions to the discussion found here approach the theme of political power and imperial ideology from different points of view and across a variety of primary sources. Claudio Balzaretto focuses on the peculiarities of the narrative of the death of Antiochus IV in First and Second Maccabees. Reflecting on the relationship between collective memory, literature and history, Balzaretto explores the ideological assumptions that have influenced the interpretation of political power as a negative force in ancient and modern readers of the books of the Maccabees. Marco Settembrini's contribution shifts the focus on the Old Greek text of Daniel 5, arguing that the Greek version preserves traces of a different attitude towards the Seleucid rulers of the time. Here, Settembrini contends, former kings are benevolently identified with early successful Persian emperors, while Antiochus IV is seen as the sacrilegious Balthasar *redivivus*. Daniele Pevarello turns instead to the nativity narrative in the Gospel of Matthew. Previous interpretations have read the Matthean birth of Christ as expressing the anti-imperial sentiments of the marginalised against King Herod, a client of Rome's rule. Examining examples from a number of Roman historians, Pevarello argues that marginality did not always convey anti-imperial views. It could rather be used to endorse the claim to power of rulers who were themselves perceived as outsiders, such as Herod and Vespasian. Finally, Mariapaola Bergomi analyses Philo's *Legatio ad Gaium*. Bergomi emphasises the crucial influence of Platonic political philosophy on Philo's views concerning political power and argues that Philo's portrayal of Gaius Caligula in the *Legatio* shows striking similarities with Platonic portrayals of tyrants, for example in the *Republic*, as well as with depictions of Claudius and Nero as devious and ruthless rulers in works of Latin authors such as Seneca and Lucan.

Collaboration between some of the contributors stems from a discussion panel on “Jewish and Christian Attitudes towards Imperial Rule” held at the 2019 Annual Conference of the EUARE, European Academy of Religion (Bologna, 4–7 March 2019). Among the panelists was Federicomaria Muccioli, chair of Greek History at the Alma Mater University of Bologna, who prematurely died on 14 May 2020 after a long illness. An expert in the representation of political power in the Hellenistic era, especially tyranny, he captivated the audience with his knowledge and humour. We especially owe to his expertise the publication of such seminal works as *Gli epiteti ufficiali dei re ellenistici* (Stuttgart, 2013), *Le orecchie lunghe di Alessandro Magno. Satira del potere nel mondo greco (IV-V secolo a.C.)* (Roma, 2018) and *Storia dell’Ellenismo* (Bologna, 2019).

As an ancient saying warns, “the heart of kings is unsearchable” (Prov. 25:3) and yet their actions were observed, weighed, and made available to the divine ruler who “turns [them] wherever he will” (Prov. 21:1).

Daniele Pevarello

Andrea Ravasco

Marco Settembrini