



[Martial, Epigrams VII.55](#)

Circumcised Jews' liability to the Jewish tax.

Name of the author: Martial

Date: 92 CE Dec

Date: 1st CE

Place: Rome

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Poetry

Title of work: Epigrams

Reference: VII.55

Commentary:

The seventh book of Martial's *Epigrams* was probably published in December 92 CE, as it includes many epigrams celebrating the return of Domitian from his third campaign against the Sarmatians and alluding to the Saturnalia festivities. It is composed of epigrams dealing with various prosaic subjects, such as scenes of daily life in Rome, literary themes, personal attacks, patronal relationships and various jokes (see Galán Vioque, *Martial*, p. 9-12). In addition, it has to be noticed that book 7 has a great number of epigrams praising the ruling emperor Domitian (imperial praises reach a peak in books 8 and 9), and also the greater concentration of polemical poems against Jewish men, especially with sexual overtones (Zeichmann, "Martial," p. 115, n. 8).

Epigram VII.55 is made up of two parts. In the first one, from verses 1 to 3, Martial deals with the usual practice of exchanging worthless gifts between friends or network of peoples during the Saturnalia, a festival which was also characterized by the inversion of social norms. The poet imagines a fictive case in which a fictive character Chrestus who seems to be his patron, does not repay him as he thought he deserved (on Chrestus, see Galán Vioque, *Martial*, p. 330). The discussion becomes obscene in the second part of the epigram (from verses 4 to 8) as the poet imagines that if Chrestus does not fulfil his obligations towards him, a shameful sexual punishment shall be inflicted upon Chrestus as he shall be compelled to perform fellatio on a Jew (v. 6-8). According to Sara Mandell, the obscene nature of this second part of the epigram can not be perceived as a provocative statement only. The reference to the taxes (*tributa*) imposed upon the Jew means that this epigram is "fraught with political overtones" (Mandell, "Martial," p. 26; on the *tributa* see below). We will focus our commentary on the way the Jewish character is depicted by Martial in verses 6 to 8.

Firstly, Martial associates the figure of the Jew with sexual obscenity. The Jew is staged as the character who will bring shame upon Chrestus, as he will make of him a *fellator*. It has to be noticed that Chrestus is also presented in epigram IX.27 as an effeminate *fellator* totally opposed to the classical representations of the virile Roman citizen embodied by the most famous heroes of monarchical and republican Rome (Galán Vioque, *Martial*, p. 330). But in this epigram Martial goes further into the humiliation of Chrestus by using the motif of the forced *fellatio* (usually called *irrumatio*), an act perceived as the equivalent of a rape by mouth and which was considered as the most dishonouring punishment for a Roman citizen (Dupont and Elói, *L'érotisme masculin*, p. 164-172). The other interesting point is that Martial does not mention the Jew as a person, he puts him down by summing up his existence by his sexual organ, *mentula* (v. 8). Jews are commonly presented in Martial's epigrams by their sexual organs, in particular through the fact that they are circumcised (*recutitus*, [VII.30](#); *verpus*, [VII.82](#) and [XI.94](#)) and that they were said to have big penises (Martial's "tiny cock," *pusilla mentulla*, is presented as the opposite of a Jewish one; in epigram VII.35, Martial insists on the "weight," *pondus*, of the sex organ of a Jew). In addition, by using the crude name *mentula*, the poet offers a description that is both satirical and racist, representing Jews essentially through their apparently unnatural and dishonouring sexual practices.

With the expression *de Solymis perustis* (v. 7), Martial places his erotic and humiliating representation of the Jews in relation to an historical allusion. As Sara Mandell recalls, there is a play on words with the adjective *perustum*, which could both refer to the sexual desire of the "heated Jew" and to the destruction of Jerusalem by fire in 70 CE (Mandell, "Martial," p. 27; Galán Vioque, *Martial*, p. 332-333). The burnt Jerusalem was a very common motif in Flavian propaganda. For instance, it has been used already by Valerius Flaccus in [verse 14 of the proem](#) of his *Argonautica*, when he describes Titus "blackened with the dust of Jerusalem," *Solyo nigrantem pulvere* (Galán



Vioque, *Martial*, p. 332). The most important point is that this epic reference to the burnt Jerusalem happens twenty-two years after the siege of Jerusalem (Mandell, “Martial,” p. 27). As has been mentioned previously, books 7 to 9 of Martial’s *Epigrams* have the larger number of imperial praises. Thus, to gain the favour of Domitian may have been one of the major aims of Martial while he was gathering the epigrams of book 7. It is within this framework that we have to understand his reminder of the military successes of Vespasian and Titus in Judea. Even if Domitian did not take part personally in these operations which had occurred more than twenty years ago, Martial’s allusion shows that the praise of this victory in Judea was an element still used to boost the prestige of the Flavian dynasty and thus of Domitian as well.

Finally, it has to be noticed that Martial uses here a personification of the penis of the Jew, and writes that it is not the Jew but his penis, *mentula*, which is condemned to pay the *tributa*. As Jérôme France writes, the plural of the term *tributum* was commonly used at the beginning of the imperial period to refer to provincial taxes (France, “Le vocabulaire,” p. 349). The *tributa* mentioned by Martial must refer to the *phoros* ([Josephus, Jewish war VII.218](#)) or *didrachmon* ([Cassius Dio, Roman History LXV.7.2](#); Origen, *Ad Africanum* XX(14).7-9) (on the terminology, see Hadas-Lebel, “La fiscalité,” p. 6; France, “Le vocabulaire,” p. 353), that is, to the annual tax of two drachma per person which was previously offered by the Jews to the Jerusalem Temple, and which, after the defeat of 70 CE, continued to be claimed by Rome, and was assigned to a fund, the *fiscus Iudaicus*. This tax was not simply a financial burden for the Jews, it was also intended to mark the religious and cultural superiority of Rome over the Jews and their God (see Goodman, Martin, “The *Fiscus Iudaicus*,” p. 170-174). This epigram of Martial is thus one of the few sources – along with [Suetonius, Life of Domitian XII](#) – which proves that taxes supplying the *fiscus Iudaicus* and collected from the Jews of the Empire were still perceived under Domitian’s reign (Zeichmann, “Martial,” p. 114). More precisely, Suetonius writes that under Domitian, the *fiscus Iudaicus* was administrated in a stricter way (*acerbissime*), and that both the Jews “who were living a Jewish life without publicly acknowledging it” (*inprofessi Iudaicam viverent vitam*) and those who were “concealing their origins” (*dissimulata origine*) were prosecuted. Domitian’s hostility towards the Jews, especially the rigorous nature of his fiscal policy towards them – not attested by Martial (Cappelletti, *The Jewish Community of Rome*, p. 129) – has been put into perspective by various scholars arguing that Suetonius might have been excessively critical of Domitian (for a survey of the bibliography and counter-arguments, see Williams, *Jews*, p. 102-105). Despite our reliance on Suetonius’s point of view, there might well have been under Domitian a real intensification of the sanctions against evaders of the Jewish tax. The identity of these evaders, mentioned only by Suetonius, has been largely discussed. Firstly, for some scholars, the Jews “who were living a Jewish life without publicly acknowledging it” were not native Jews, but rather converts to Judaism (or “Judaizers”) and sympathizers (see Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, p. 113-116; Cohen, *The Beginnings*, p. 42). Following Lloyd Thompson, Martin Goodman identifies Suetonius’s first category of Jews in a different way, as he considers that they were “native Jews who lived a Jewish life secretly,” that is Jews who were not declared as members of the Jewish community. Following Martin Goodman’s interpretation these Jews would be different from Suetonius’s second category of Jews “concealing their origins,” who are identified as “native Jews who practiced openly but hoped to avoid the tax by denying their origins” (Goodman, “The *Fiscus Iudaicus*,” p. 169; Goodman, “Nerva,” p. 41; Thompson, “Domitian”). For the scholars considering that Suetonius’s first category of Jews refers to Judaizers or sympathizers, the Jews “denying their origins” would be “native Jews who did not lead a Jewish life,” that is Jews who might have concealed their origins and their circumcision (see Cohen, *The Beginnings*, p. 42; Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, p. 114; for an example see the case of Menophilus in [Martial, Epigrams VII.82](#)).

Contrary to Suetonius, who gives details – even if their interpretation is difficult – on the identity of the persons concerned by the broadening of the liability to the Jewish tax, Martial simply associates the liability to this tax with circumcision: *damnatam modo mentulam tributis*; “[a cock] lately condemned to pay taxes.” This personification of the Jewish penis cannot be interpreted simply as “poetic license” or as a coarse figure of speech (Galán Vioque, *Martial*, p. 333). At Martial’s time, it may have been something quite common in Roman legal practice and customs to classify Jews by the state of their penis, that is, by the fact that they were circumcised. For instance, in [Suetonius, Life of Domitian XII](#), the author explicitly mentions the fact that during an official meeting (*concilium*), a fiscal agent (*procurator*) asked an old man to show the officials if he was circumcised or not, a state which thus determined his tax liability (Mandell, “Martial,” p. 27; Thompson, “Domitian,” p. 339; Galán Vioque, *Martial*, p. 333). As Sara Mandell rightly remarks, Martial’s personification of the Jewish *mentula* gives the impression that “It is the penis, not parentage which brings liability” (Mandell, “Martial,” p. 27). Thus, the personification of the Jewish *mentula* by Martial cannot be strictly interpreted as a satirical process whose aim would have been to reduce the Jews to a sexual abnormality. By insisting on the fact that circumcision was the main means which could foil any person who wanted to avoid the Jewish tax, the poet may refer to a practice which was commonly used in the legal field at his time. Finally, with such a humiliating depiction of the Jews, Martial may have also wanted to assert the legitimacy of the Jewish tax to please the ruling emperor.



Keywords in the original language:

- [damnatus](#)
- [linguo](#)
- [mentula](#)
- [munus](#)
- [perustus](#)
- [probus](#)
- [pusillus](#)
- [Solyma](#)
- [tributum](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [circumcision](#)
- [Domitian](#)
- [Jerusalem](#)
- [Jewish tax](#)
- [Jewish war](#)
- [Jews](#)
- [lust](#)
- [priapism](#)

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