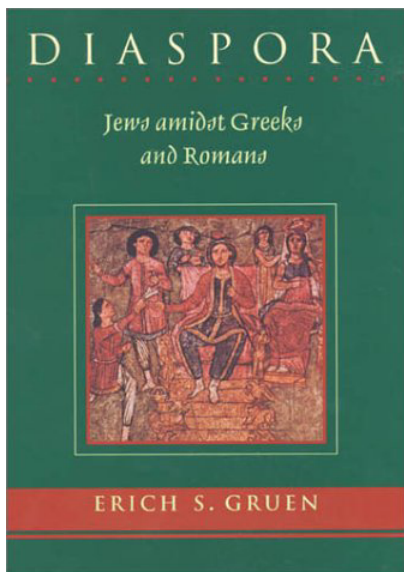


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**Gruen, Erich S.**

***Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans***

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The thesis of Erich Gruen's highly readable and thoughtful study *Diaspora* is easily, and frequently, stated: "Jews of the Second Temple period did not perceive themselves as victims of a diaspora" (135; see similar statements on 6, 53, 69, 131, 158, 193, 243). The traumatic shadow of the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., Gruen claims, has skewed perceptions of the ancient Jewish Diaspora, leading scholars to view the preceding centuries as the tense build-up to an inevitable, and devastating, conflict between ethnically and cognitively displaced Jews and hostile and ferociously displacing Gentile powers. Gruen refuses to read the momentous Jewish War backward into the centuries-long Diaspora that preceded it, instead preferring to read evidence of the pre-70 Diaspora "on its own terms" (7). The result, for Gruen, is a portrait of Hellenistic Jewish life outside of Palestine characterized by "self-assurance and comfort in the Greek-speaking lands of the Mediterranean" (212).

The work is divided into two parts. The first part, "Jewish Life in the Diaspora," analyzes "realities of diaspora existence" (7) in the major centers of Hellenistic Jewish life (Rome, Alexandria, and Asia Minor) and concludes with a chapter treating evidence for Jewish communal life and participation in ancient cities. The second part, "Jewish Constructs of Diaspora Life" treats "diaspora as a concept" (7) through the use of humor in several Hellenistic biblical and postbiblical Jewish texts. This second part concludes with a more

general chapter on the construction of “Hellenism” in a variety of Jewish texts, and the book concludes with a brief survey of constructions of “the Land” from a Diaspora perspective. More than one hundred pages of endnotes and bibliography at the end attest to the scholarly heft of the book. The two approaches in this study, “realia and constructs” (9), are designed to function together toward Gruen’s central goal of reconceiving the internal understanding of Diaspora existence on the part of Hellenistic Jews from Alexander the Great to Nero.

The first three chapters—on Jewish life in Rome, Alexandria, and Asia Minor—share a common concern: to demonstrate that Jews constituted a distinctive, but not distinctively oppressed or detested, group in the Hellenistic urban landscape. While each chapter does treat “Jewish Life” in these cities in a more general sense (with special attention in each chapter to settlement patterns and demographics), the determined focus in this section is to disabuse historians of the scholarly misperception of pervasive ancient “anti-Judaism.” Jews were not, Gruen insists, particularly hated by Romans, Alexandrians, or Greeks in Asia Minor despite their ethnoreligious visibility. Gruen closely examines several notorious incidents of “anti-Jewish” activity in these particular urban landscapes: the recorded expulsion of Roman Jews under Tiberius and then Claudius (29–41), the violent attacks on Alexandrian Jews in 38 C.E. (58–68), and the purported systematic social mistreatment of Jews by Ionian Greeks adjudicated by Marcus Agrippa (96–102). In each of these cases, as well as in other textbook examples of routine “anti-Judaism” on the part of Greeks and Romans around the turn of the eras, Gruen employs the skills of a seasoned classicist to identify the particular, contingent circumstances that engendered such isolated Jewish-Gentile conflicts: Roman shoring up of “traditional” religious values in straitened times (33–34); resentment of indigenous Egyptians against Alexandrian elites (65–69); or “pragmatic” concerns on the part of Ionian Greeks in a period of economic uncertainty (99–102). Instead of viewing these incidents as symptomatic of a long-standing, simmering tension between Jews and Gentiles in the Diaspora, Gruen finds these to be exceptional occasions in which Jews were caught up in broader civic and social conflicts.

Even as Gruen argues in this first section that Jews were not singled out for opprobrium by Greeks and Romans—“Rome did not have a ‘Jewish problem,’ ” he characteristically notes (29)—he insists that Jews did stand out in their various Hellenistic settings: that is, Jews were recognizable as Jews but not routinely harassed or persecuted for it. He details this most successfully in the chapter on Rome (in which he addresses infamous Roman satirical stereotypes of Jews) and the section’s concluding chapter on “Civic and Sacral Institutions in the Diaspora.” Here he challenges the idea that Jews either “assimilated” (that is, presumably adapted to their Hellenistic contexts to the extent that they were unrecognizable as Jews, although the term is generally used without further definition) or

stood resolutely apart from their Hellenistic cultural contexts: “[It is not] likely that many Jews resorted either to isolationist purity or to outright apostasy” (5). Such a concern to break down fallacious dichotomies of ancient Jewish life strikes a salutary note throughout the book. Institutions such as the synagogue, Gruen points out, defy narrow, socioreligious categorization in the Hellenistic Diaspora before 70 C.E. precisely because of the mediating function they served for these Jewish communities, as mutable sites of identifiable, “traditional” identity but also as conduits for broader Jewish participation in the urban landscape. The overall portrait throughout this first section of the book is of Jews comfortable in their civic “skins,” religiously distinct yet culturally embedded: “Jews strove to engender circumstances that would enable them to maintain their ancient heritage while engaging comfortably and productively in the lands of the classical world wherein they dwelled” (105). This adaptability to Hellenistic surroundings, Gruen insists, served to reinforce rather than detract from a sense of distinct Jewish identity: this was “symbiosis, not syncretism” (70), “not assimilation, but appropriation” (122).

Readers looking for a comprehensive survey of Jewish life in the Diaspora will not find it in these first chapters (this is determined, in part, by the variegated nature of extant literary, documentary, and epigraphic sources). Rather, Gruen lays out a suggestive series of portraits and analyses that work toward his broader thesis. Issues treated and questions analyzed will not surprise the student of Hellenistic Judaism (or the reader of Gruen’s previous books and articles). In pursuit of this broader argument, Gruen often executes some welcome clearing of the historiographic brush that has grown steadily in the literature on Hellenistic Jews. In the chapter on “Jews in Rome,” for instance, he works to dispel the persistent theory that Jews in the capital city were formally organized into *collegia* (24–26); in the chapter on civic institutions he quickly surveys the various theories on the “origins” on the Diaspora synagogue and concludes that, as an institution, it was “sui generis” (119–23). While readers may dispute some of these more minute historical arguments (that Suetonius’s *Chrestus* does not refer to Christ [38–39], that certain “scheming Greeks” bear responsibility for the Alexandrian riots against Jews [60–63], that Josephus’s documentary record of Asian Jews should be considered authentic precisely for their confused nature [85–86]), such distracted nitpicking would be to miss the larger point of these chapters: to pull apart the tapestry of alleged ancient Greek and Roman “anti-Semitism” that has portrayed the pre-70 Diaspora as a relentlessly cruel and oppressive environment for Hellenistic Jews.

If the first part, on “realia,” homes in on numerous precise moments of Jewish life in the Hellenistic world, the second part, on “constructs,” takes a much broader view of Jewish literary production in order to discern some sort of “diaspora mentality” (135; Gruen makes much of the fact throughout the book that Hellenistic Jews never “constructed a theory of the diaspora” [11]). Gruen’s method for accessing this “mentality” is at once

creative and provocative: “the recourse to humor” (136) in historical fictions (ch. 5) and biblical re-creations (ch. 6). These chapters are the longest and by far the most inventive and rewarding of the entire book. Through close readings of biblical “fictions” (Esther, Tobit, Judith, Susanna, and 2 Maccabees) and biblical “re-creations” (*Testament of Abraham*, *Testament of Job*, and Artapanus) Gruen infers a “diaspora mentality” that is at once playful and relaxed, on the part of both authors and readers, possessed of a “secure confidence in their own traditions that allowed for manipulation, merriment, and mockery” (212).

As Gruen points out, “humor” as a transhistorical concept defies secure definition (“What is a joke for one reader will fall flat with another” [136], as anyone who has slogged through the *Philogelos*, a late antique collection of “jokes,” can attest). The manner in which Gruen himself gleans humor from Second Temple literature coheres with his analysis of Jewish “realities.” The presence of humor, whether embedded in the heart of a literary production or in “equally revealing” asides (136), does not constitute a Freudian (or, perhaps, Woody Allenesque) “‘smiling through tears’ by oppressed people laboring to make the most of a grim situation. If anything, the reverse is true. . . . The texts leave an impression of amused observation and sardonic detachment. Above all, they reveal a self-esteem among diaspora Jews and a sufficiently satisfying life-style that allowed for irony without rancor and burlesque without bitterness” (181). For Gruen, this positive evaluation of the literary function of Diaspora humor becomes most evident at those points where these texts turn the satirical or mocking gaze back on the Jews themselves: Mordecai and Esther, he argues, are as much the objects of ridicule and lampoon as Haman and Ahasuerus (141–42), and, while it is “going too far to characterize [the *Testament of Abraham*] as a parody of the pious Abraham” (187), nonetheless “the image of the august patriarch bustling to suppress divine evidence leaves a decidedly comic impression” (188). That Jews in the Hellenistic Diaspora should feel so comfortable as to make fun of their own upright number (Abraham, Moses, Job, Tobit) precisely for their celebrated rectitude demonstrates, for Gruen, the truly independent and free-spirited nature of the Diaspora audience. Even when stumbling or villainous Gentiles are the object of Jewish mockery (such as Artapanus’s depiction of the anti-Jewish pharaoh Chenephres), Gruen finds in this humor “not so much polemics as playfulness” (210).

Much like the specific incidents analyzed in the first part of the book, this series of close readings derives its impact more in its totality than when taken piecemeal. Some of Gruen’s examples of “humor” in these biblical fictions and re-creations are more persuasive than others, and a reader too wedded to one reading of Esther or Tobit will not likely be swayed by Gruen’s literary analyses. The humorous reading of the year-long beautification regime of Ahasuerus’s prospective queens as a “spoof of the seraglio” (141) somehow seems easier to swallow than the interpretation of the Jewish massacre of

75,000 willing Persian victims as “more slapstick than solemnity” (147). At times, Gruen’s definition of what constitutes “humor” becomes notably expansive: from outright “parody” (as in his reading of Tobit’s excessive righteousness as “pompous sanctimoniousness” [151–52] or scenes between Death and God in the *Testament of Abraham* [190]) to more subtle “irony” (166, 179), “incongruity” (169), “jocularity” (173, 176), “whimsicality” (180, 189, 210), “light-heartedness” (191), “frivolity” (193), and “amusing theatricality” (198). Gruen’s reading of Judith (which itself merits special pleading as a “diasporic” text [see 159]) perhaps demonstrates most pertinently the degree to which the author extends himself to find “humor”: “it is hard . . . to take seriously” the image of repentant Jews draping even their livestock in sackcloth and ashes (164; although the same thing occurs in Jonah 3:8, perhaps also there to humorous effect?); “there may be mischievousness as well” in the fact that Judith, who has been fasting for years, is nonetheless strong enough to “whack off Holofernes’ head with no difficulty” (165); and surely we can all recognize the incongruous fact that the most righteous of Jews, Judith, effects the salvation of her people through duplicity and deceit (165, 169). Such touches are described as “ironic” or “cynical,” suggesting to Gruen a different, less somber reading of the text as a whole that draws it into the orbit of “diaspora humor.” To be sure, Gruen is careful to point out that finding “humor” in these various texts does not transform them wholesale into broad comedies devoid of serious content: he says of 2 Maccabees that this “work, as whole, of course, did not aim for laughs” (180). Gruen also acknowledges the possibility that his own perspective “shapes, perhaps misshapes, understanding of the texts” (although he immediately adds: “Pure projection seems unlikely” [136]; perhaps more explicit attention to classical genres of humor, particularly ancient comedy, might have served as a useful barometer). Taken as a whole, however, there is a certain alluring quality to Gruen’s insistent reading of “humor” in Hellenistic Jewish literature. One must approach these texts as Gruen does: with a willingness to find the surprising note of lightness in them that, even if it is not “funny,” nonetheless perceptibly alters the mood of the texts and the readers among whom they circulated.

The final two chapters of the book, respectively on Jewish constructions of “Hellenism” and diasporic relations to “the homeland” (Palestine), serve fittingly to reformulate the central theses of the study. In chapter 7, “Jewish Constructs of Greeks and Hellenism,” Gruen examines texts such as the *Letter of Aristeas* and the *Third Sibylline Oracle* (along with authors such as Aristobulus and Philo) in order to reiterate his point that Jews in the Diaspora of the Second Temple period were at once comfortable and adaptive in their Hellenistic surroundings, without ever ceding a traditional sense of Jewish identity: “Jews deliberately eschewed blending, syncretism, or assimilation. They molded Hellenism to their own design” (227). The final chapter, “Diaspora and Homeland,” elegantly succeeds

in dislocating the reality of Jewish dispersion in the Hellenistic period from any ancient ideology of “exile”: ancient Jews outside the Land, Gruen argues, did not “pine away for the homeland” (252). Even as they understood Palestine to be their *patris*, they conceived of their own existence in good Hellenistic fashion as *apoikiai* (colonies), not signs of disruption of the natural order of Jewish life but rather signs of its global success, intimately connected to but not in cognitive distinction from “homeland”: “The whole idea of privileging homeland over diaspora, or diaspora over homeland, derives from a modern rather than an ancient obsession” (234).

In this last chapter, as throughout the book, Gruen draws on arguments of common sense and historical plausibility: “It is not easy to imagine that millions of ancient Jews dwelled in foreign parts for generations mired in misery and obsessed with a longing for Jerusalem that had little change of fulfillment” (234). Gruen often resorts to such arguments—“one can hardly imagine...”; “one can well imagine...”; and similar formulations (see 36, 42, 63, 67, 126)—even as he proceeds into sophisticated historical and literary analyses. On the one hand, such casual invocation of “common sense” seems fraught with peril: much as in our modern understandings of “humor,” surely our perception of what “makes sense” are to some significant degree conditioned by our own perspectives. In the overall framework of the book, however, such a rhetorical strategy is both clever and adroit, for it is precisely centuries of previous historiographic “common sense” that Gruen seeks to dislodge throughout the study. For most of the modern period, the deeply ingrained perception of ancient Jewish life as the gloomy and despairing endurance of Diaspora-as-exile, *galut*, has conditioned our normal “common sense” approach to Hellenistic Judaism, what Salo Baron famously described as “the lachrymose conception of Jewish history.” To be sure, Gruen follows somewhat in Baron’s footsteps by moving self-consciously and resolutely in the diametrically opposite direction: from tears to laughter. In his preface Gruen notes, perhaps with his own touch of “whimsicality” and tongue-in-cheek: “Many readers will find [my] conclusion too sunny or upbeat, or even counterintuitive and implausible. But if it can stimulate a spirited discussion, it will have served its purpose” (vii–viii). As noted, it is possible that some of Gruen’s individual analyses—of historical events or of literary shades of meaning—could be contested or disputed, but the great boon of this study, in its totality, is to provide, however seemingly debatable or “implausible” in our present context, a new mode of seeing and reading and understanding that takes us out of what we have known so long to be “true” of the ancient Jewish Diaspora and to view it from an entirely new, and even “sunny and upbeat,” vantage point.