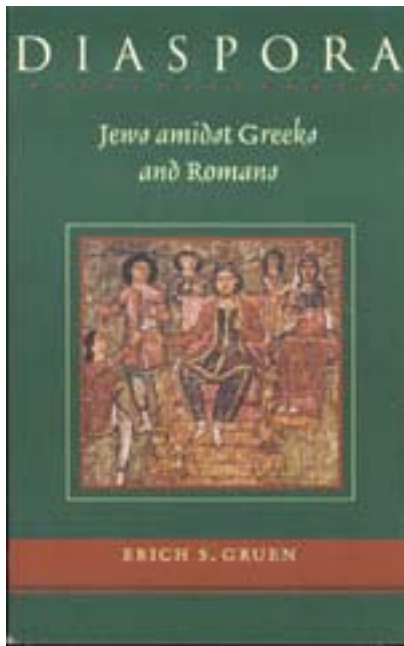


RBL 05/2005



Gruen, Erich S.

Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. Pp. ix +386. Paper. \$19.95. ISBN 0674016068.

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In part 1 of this two-part book Gruen reviews in four chapters the relevant evidence for understanding “Jewish Life in the Diaspora.” Chapter 1 looks at texts regarding Jewish life in Rome. The overwhelming data, according to him, suggests that Jews were targets for the Roman authorities, yet they were not singled out more than any other group. This is in spite of the evidence that Jews were expelled from Rome, an event Gruen considers small scale and brief. He concludes: “It would certainly be wrong to imagine that Roman Jews lived in perpetual insecurity, with bags packed and departure vehicles at the ready. Life in the city afforded them a stable existence” (53). Chapter 2 considers Jewish life in Alexandria, concluding that, in spite of the pogrom of 38 C.E. against Jews the experience of Jews in Alexandria was a predominantly positive one (83). He believes the pogrom was marginalized Egyptians lashing out against the envied and privileged Jews. In chapter 3 again the evidence for Jews in Asia is examined, suggesting that Greeks persecuted Jews and Romans protected them. Chapter 4 is concerned with the variety of ways in which Jews organized themselves for religious and civic purposes around the Mediterranean. Gruen points out that “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). However,

later in the chapter Gruen is more circumspect, pointing out that the picture is incomplete due to the silence of sources regarding Jews dwelling in the Diaspora (131). The general picture that Gruen gives is that, in spite of the lack of evidence, the impression is more positive than negative.

The key concern of part 2 is “Jewish Constructs of Diaspora Life.” In three chapters (i.e., chs. 5–7) he considers the literary manifestations of Jewish responses to Diaspora life. The numerous primary texts relevant to these chapters mean that Gruen has been selective in his choice. Chapter 5 considers humor in the historical fiction, while chapter 6 deals with it in literary recreations of biblical accounts. In preliminary discussion in chapter 5 Gruen points out that Second Temple Jewish literature from the Diaspora does not reflect a Jewish plight; rather, much of the literature is witty and upbeat. This he suggests points toward a mood of contentment (135) that Gruen believes corroborates the conclusions inferred from his examination in part 1. In chapters 5–6 he anticipates the Freudian retort that humor permits a release of social aggression by the powerless. By ridiculing the “other,” mirth can suppress fear (137). However, Gruen points out, regarding the texts he looks at, that “much of the humor comes with a light touch, commonly against both [Gentile and Jew]” (137).

In chapter 5 Gruen reviews Esther, Tobit, Judith, Susanna, and 2 Maccabees. He is particularly concerned with humor, which he detects as a recurrent theme in each text. Gruen points out that authors of these texts expose both the blemishes of the Jewish leaders and populace, while lampooning the flaws of their enemies. There is nothing in them to suggest a firm hostility of the authors for Gentiles (181).

Chapter 6 reviews the *Testament of Abraham*, *Testament of Job*, and Artapanus. These texts retell scriptural stories while injecting them with humor. Significantly for Gruen these texts give no hint of conflict between Jew and Gentile, or even between the “chosen people” and their enemies. In fact, he points out the reverse seems to hold. These texts, he concludes, “suggest self-assurance and comfort in the Greek-speaking lands of the Mediterranean, and a secure confidence in their traditions that allowed for manipulation, merriment, and mockery” (212).

In chapter 7 Gruen considers how the success of Hellenism was perceived or conceived by Jews. From his examination of key texts (e.g., 2, 3, and 4 Maccabees, the *Letter of Aristaeas*, Philo, and the apocalyptic visions of the Third Sibyl) he observes that Greeks are constructed as aliens to set off the virtues and qualities of the Jewish people (219). However, Gruen does not see this as the whole picture. Much of the evidence gleaned from these same texts and others indicates, rather, antithesis and hostility. Philo, for example, highly regards the Greeks for intelligence and sagacity (220). Gruen, attempting

to hold together this tension, concludes that “Jews managed to buy into Hellenic conventions and twist them to Jewish ends” (231).

In chapter 8, the concluding chapter, Gruen addresses in particular the validity of privileging homeland over Diaspora or vice versa. He comments that upon initial examination Hellenistic texts appear to support a view that Jews believed that their exiled state was a consequence of divine disfavor. However, Gruen believes “the assumption is shaky and vulnerable” (235). The texts support rather that misery and exile recall the biblical era under the Assyrians and Babylonians. The lamentation in the texts does not apply to their place in the Greco-Roman period. However, this does not mean that Jews did not value or dwell upon their homeland. Gruen believes that Diaspora Jews did not see themselves as being cut off from Jerusalem; “they felt no need to construct a theory of Diaspora (243).

This book is a great resource and addition to scholarly research regarding Jewish identity in the Diaspora. It is likely that it will provide much thought for scholarly debate. It is a clearly argued case that identifies critical texts that arose from the Diaspora Jews. As well as providing a thoughtful, clear, and challenging overall thesis, the detailed examination of texts is also important for those dealing with Jewish literature during the Greco-Roman period.

However, while recognizing this work as significant, I am disappointed that a better index was not provided. It contains no primary text index and only a subject index, albeit detailed. While I find the book very readable, the lack of subtitles and detailed contents page mitigates against easy use. But these are only minor points.

In terms of the main content of the book, I have some critical points to raise. I am not persuaded that Jews were, on the whole, prospering and that they did not see themselves as either exiled or longing for the return to the Holy Land. I wonder to what extent we can read out of the texts the reality for ordinary Jews. Surely for many Jews the idea of a return to Israel was fundamental to their faith, as communicated through the stories that they remembered such as the Passover. Further, there is no reason given for the prioritizing of primary sources. Why, for example, is there no discussion of Suetonius’s *Domitian* 12.2, which tells us that Domitian extended the Jewish tax, thus leading to attacks on at least one Jew. Also, the discussion of the primary texts was biased in favor of an overall thesis. For example, Gruen plays down the passion for Jerusalem and there being no sense of Diaspora, yet does not account for Tob 13:11 and 14:4–5, which speak of the hope of Jews for their return to Jerusalem as well as many Gentiles. Moreover, Gruen seems to suggest Jewish hopes of restoration from their exiled state is not strong, arguing that the evidence speaks of suffering during the Assyrian and Babylonian periods

and not the Greco-Roman period. Yet many of the Bible writers used the sufferings of their ancestors as ways of making a connection with the plight of their present situation. Babylon becomes a pejorative term representing all that is against the Lord and suggestive of exile. Why should we not expect Diaspora Jews in the Greco-Roman period to do the same thing? Surely the identity of Diaspora Jews was formed by their own knowledge of the suffering of their ancestors, of whom they knew from the Hebrew Scriptures.

Regarding Gruen's reading humor out of some key texts, while I appreciate that Gruen acknowledges that identifying humor and its significance is not easy, still he does so and from it draws a central conclusion to his whole thesis. For example, in his discussion of Tobit he accepts without criticism that the work is comedy, accepting therefore the work of McCracken. However, he does not acknowledge the argument of J. R. C. Cousland ("Tobit: A Comedy in Error?" *CBQ* 65 (2001): 535–53), which takes issue with McCracken, suggesting the things we might find humorous, the ancient reader might not have done so. I would imagine that many of us have said something we think is humorous and the listener does not even know we are being humorous. Perhaps we should be cautious in reading significances out of what we see as humorous in ancient texts.

Overall, I enjoyed and have been provoked by this learned work. Its conclusions are certainly challenging and need to be considered. For example, the enterprise of N. T. Wright based on exile and restoration needs to engage with this work. However, I am reminded of John Barclay's work (*Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*), which urged that it is impossible to generalize about Jews' reaction to their Diaspora environments and that reaction can vary from total assimilation to near total isolation. Gruen has attempted not to generalize and observes on the whole different levels of assimilation. Yet his overall thesis remains that Jews were doing very nicely away from their homeland.