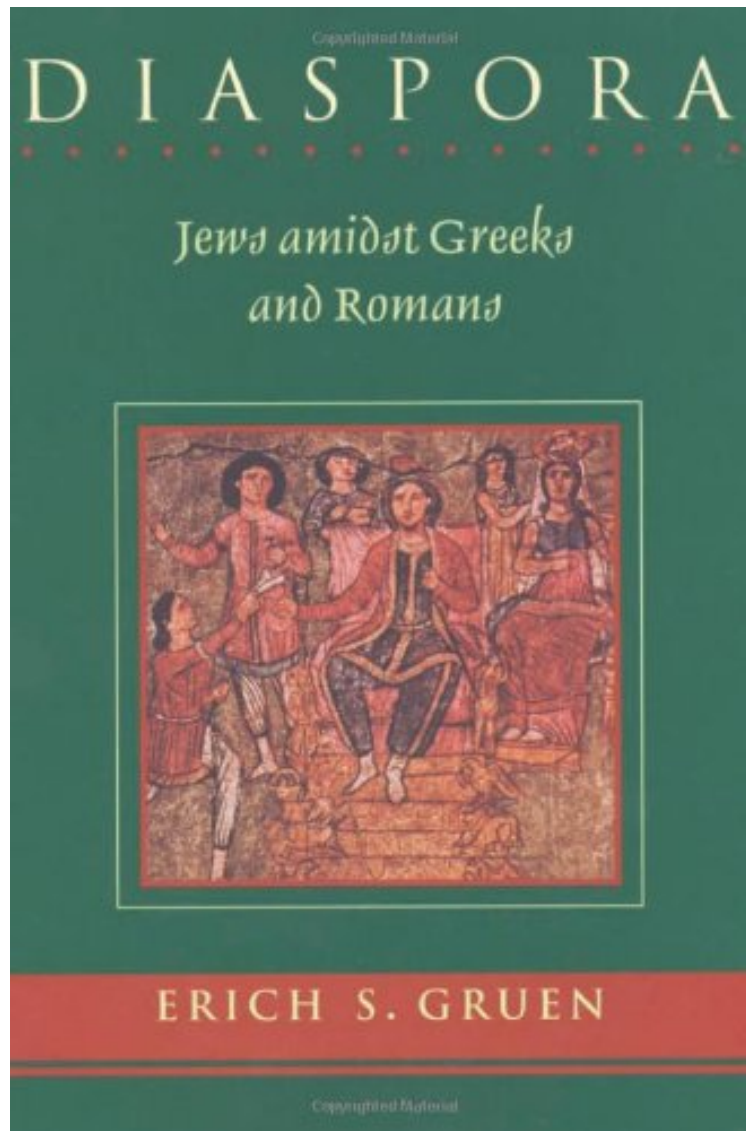


(Read ebook) Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans

Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans

Erich S. Gruen

*ebooks / Download PDF / *ePub / DOC / audiobook*



DOWNLOAD



READ ONLINE

#1848072 in Books Harvard University Press 2004-10-25 2004-08-30 Original language: English PDF # 1
9.25 x .94 x 6.13l, 1.16 #File Name: 0674016068400 pages | File size: 34.Mb

Erich S. Gruen : Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans:

26 of 29 people found the following review helpful. 3.4 stars; Exile can be fun By pnotley@hotmail.com Erich Gruen's book on the Diaspora offers a major new reinterpretation of the Jewish experiences from Alexander the Great to the Jewish rebellion of 66 CE. Historically, both Orthodox and Zionist Jews view the diaspora as a curse, whose denizens are perennially threatened by anti-Semitism. Gruen argues a rather different case. Jews, the vast majority of whom lived

outside of Palestine, thrived in the diaspora. While taking advantages of the symposiums and civic institutions of the Hellenic and Roman worlds, they also established a plethora of synagogues and regularly paid the half-shekel temple tax to Jerusalem. By examining certain deuterocanonical and apocryphal works of literature, Gruen finds a confident sense of humor. There was no contemporary angst and agony over the diaspora. It is important to contrast this book with Seth Schwartz's recent "Imperialism and Jewish Society," which argued for the weakness of Judaism in Palestine. Schwartz's book was based mostly on archaeological evidence, and said little about the diaspora. Except for a discussion of the plentiful archaeological evidence for synagogues, much of Gruen's work is based on analysis and interpretation of texts. These consist of the limited number of comments made by Romans on the Jews; Philo's account of the pogroms in Alexandria c. 40 CE; Josephus' collection of historical materials on Jewish defense of their rights, and discussions of books such as Esther, Judith, Tobit and other books. It is important to point out the limitations of such evidence. It tells us little about what the majority of Jews in the diaspora actually did for a living. We have mentions of the orthodoxy of Jews by Josephus and Philo, virtually the only two Jewish sources we know by name, and we have confirming mention when Romans noted Jewish customs and found them risible. But Romans and Greeks would not normally find Jewish apostasy worthy of mention, and Jewish sources might not draw attention to it. Some of Gruen's evidence is convincing. It probably is anachronistic to describe Roman society as "Anti-Semitic." To use an analogy Romans viewed Jews the way many Americans view Jehovah's Witness or the Amish; with some contempt and as fundamentally amusing, but not with malice. Gruen is also interesting on Josephus' collection of materials on Asian Jews. The frequent missives and pleas for support reflect less a constant fear of persecution, than the civil strife of first century BCE Rome, where constant shifts of power led Jews to ask the new rulers to respect their privileges. There are also interesting insights about sacral and civic institutions: Surprisingly enough, Philo was a considerable fan of the Alexandrian games. Gruen's chapters on Jewish humor are less successful. He starts off well, with a discussion of the many comedic elements in the Book of Esther. But then Esther is not that important a book, and Purim has always been more of a holiday than a holy day. But Gruen's discussion of other books, Tobit, Judith, and II Maccabees shows a certain tendentiousness, as he clearly strains to find humor. In his discussion of Susanna, he makes much of the silences of the text to try to bring humorous ambiguity into the text. But this ignores a key element of Biblical literature; its terseness. And when Gruen seeks to find a humorous element in Sarah's rudeness towards her maid in Tobit, he may simply be ignoring the general callousness towards servants and slaves in Hellenic times. If not well known to Protestants, Judith and Tobit have been considered holy scripture for millenia. It is one thing to argue that Jews and Christians have misinterpreted scriptures because of their theological biases. It is another to argue that they can't tell the difference between a didactic tale, and humorous anecdotes. Gruen also has a tendency to argue from silences and ambiguities in the text. But the books were not written by modernist authors; indeed they may not have been written by a single author at all, but has gone through a complex series of authors and editings, while working with legendary material. This leads to a larger problem: it is not simply that Gruen's portrait of a benign diaspora ends before the brutal suppression of the Jewish revolt, and several other revolts until the 130s. There is the problem that Gruen portrays a diaspora that is surprisingly similar to the one we have today. In both times Jews are clearly and distinctively Jewish, supportive and sympathetic of Israel, but at the same time they are also loyal citizens of their countries and active members of the community. Perhaps. But there are good reasons to be suspicious of such coincidences; I don't think this is a case of *deja vu* all over again.

What was life like for Jews settled throughout the Mediterranean world of Classical antiquity--and what place did Jewish communities have in the diverse civilization dominated by Greeks and Romans? In a probing account of the Jewish diaspora in the four centuries from Alexander the Great's conquest of the Near East to the Roman destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 C.E., Erich Gruen reaches often surprising conclusions. By the first century of our era, Jews living abroad far outnumbered those living in Palestine and had done so for generations. Substantial Jewish communities were found throughout the Greek mainland and Aegean islands, Asia Minor, the Tigris-Euphrates valley, Egypt, and Italy. Focusing especially on Alexandria, Greek cities in Asia Minor, and Rome, Gruen explores the lives of these Jews: the obstacles they encountered, the institutions they established, and their strategies for adjustment. He also delves into Jewish writing in this period, teasing out how Jews in the diaspora saw themselves. There emerges a picture of a Jewish minority that was at home in Greco-Roman cities: subject to only sporadic harassment; its intellectuals immersed in Greco-Roman culture while refashioning it for their own purposes; exhibiting little sign of insecurity in an alien society; and demonstrating both a respect for the Holy Land and a commitment to the local community and Gentile government. Gruen's innovative analysis of the historical and literary record alters our understanding of the way this vibrant minority culture engaged with the dominant Classical civilization.

From *Library Journal* Gruen (history and classics, Berkeley) explores four centuries of Jewish life within the dominant classical civilization, from Alexander the Great's conquest of the Near East to the Roman destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 C.E. He begins with an investigation of "the conspicuous absence of a philosophy of Diaspora" and attempts very capably to identify the traces of the concept among Jews under Roman rule. He looks at the cultures of

the Jews living in Rome, Asia, and Alexandria, finding very vibrant communities in all three places. In exploring Jewish views of the Diaspora, Gruen offers up two chapters on Diaspora humor, one about the way biblical tales were retold and the lessons they could convey and the other about creating fanciful yet didactic stories. Then the author looks at the evidence about the Jewish image of the Greeks and Romans, a subject usually investigated from the opposite viewpoint. This leads into his final chapter on the Jewish view of the homeland during the period, a view not much different from today's. Gruen admits that his work is far from exhaustive, but it is certainly substantial, fascinating, and scholarly. Recommend for all large academic libraries. Clay Williams, Hunter Coll. Lib., New York Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. Erich Gruen is a fresh, creative, and arresting voice, whose work is truly paradigm-shifting. The prevailing scholarly paradigm has viewed the Jews as on the defensive, nervous in their cultural engagement with Hellenistic culture. This book powerfully challenges that scholarship: I expect it to be discussed for years to come. Gruen's expertise shines through on every page. This is a major intellectual achievement. (John M. G. Barclay, University of Glasgow) Eloquently, learnedly, persuasively, Gruen invites the reader of his new book to consider familiar evidence from the Jewish past from a new--one might say a non-diaspora--perspective. His point is simple, but its historical implications are profound. As he observes, in the nearly four hundred years that stretch between Alexander the Great...and the emperor Nero...Jews could be found in large numbers, and in well-established communities, throughout the Mediterranean. Neither military compulsion nor the vicissitudes of captivity had brought most of them to those places. To state the point a little differently: the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in 70 C.E. did not cause the second diaspora. Many ancient Jews--probably most ancient Jews--had by that point lived outside the land of Israel for centuries. They did so, evidently, because they wanted to do so. (Paula Fredriksen New Republic 2002-07-15) Mr. Gruen, a specialist in the history of the Hellenistic period and author of the magisterial volume *The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome*, explores the complex and often ambiguous place of Jewish communities in the classical world and the ways in which Jewish literary culture grew and flourished in this diaspora. He argues forcefully that Greece and Rome were not the unrelenting oppressors that Jewish tradition makes them out to be. (Mark Miller Washington Times 2002-06-16) Rather than seeing Jews as passive or as mere victims of hostile forces, Gruen presents a complex picture of large and dynamic communities unafraid to assert their Jewish identity while interacting with other groups in Rome, Alexandria, and Asia Minor...This is a rich, novel, and accessible approach to the realities of one of history's most important diasporas. (B. Weinstein Choice 2002-12-01) [Gruen's] book reminds us that, remarkably, there was a time in history when there was no anti-Semitism. Its virulent strain only broke out in the terrible race riot in Alexandria of 38 CE, when the Romans were already ruling the city and the Jews and the Egyptians were vying for their favor--and their jobs. Gruen's fine book is obviously the labor of a lifetime. (Erich Segal Times Literary Supplement 2002-12-06) Gruen's greatest contribution is that he sees the events...of Jewish history and the literature produced by Hellenistic Jews against the backdrop of events of contemporary non-Jewish history and culture...I have seldom read a book on such a controversial topic that is so full of common sense--and so readable. (Louis Feldman American Journal of Philology) Erich Gruen is a fresh, creative, and arresting voice, whose work is truly paradigm-shifting. The prevailing scholarly paradigm has viewed the Jews as on the defensive, nervous in their cultural engagement with Hellenistic culture. This book powerfully challenges that scholarship: I expect it to be discussed for years to come. Gruen's expertise shines through on every page. This is a major intellectual achievement. (John M. G. Barclay, University of Glasgow)