Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition (Hellenistic Culture and Society) by Erich S. Gruen

A Different Way Of Seeing

The interaction of Jew and Greek in antiquity intrigues the imagination. Both civilizations boasted great traditions, their roots stretching back to legendary ancestors and divine sanction. In the wake of Alexander the Great's triumphant successes, Greeks and Macedonians came as conquerors and settled as ruling classes in the lands of the eastern Mediterranean. Hellenic culture, the culture of the ascendant classes in many of the cities of the Near East, held widespread attraction and appeal. Jews were certainly not immune. In this thoroughly researched, lucidly written work, Erich Gruen draws on a wide variety of literary and historical texts of the period to explore a central question: How did the Jews accommodate themselves to the larger cultural world of the Mediterranean while at the same time reasserting the character of their own heritage within it? Erich Gruen's work highlights Jewish creativity, ingenuity, and inventiveness, as the Jews engaged actively with the traditions of Hellas, adapting genres and transforming legends to articulate their own legacy in modes congenial to a Hellenistic setting. Drawing on a diverse array of texts composed in Greek by Jews over a broad period of time, Gruen explores works by Jewish historians, epic poets, tragic dramatists, writers of romance and novels, exegetes, philosophers, apocalyptic visionaries, and composers of fanciful fables—not to mention pseudonymous forgers and fabricators. In these works, Jewish writers reinvented their own past, offering us the best insights into Jewish self-perception in that era.

My Personal Review:
Erich Gruen a Classicist and historian of the Roman Republic and Empire has gone somewhat far afield here to review the Greek language literature authored by Jews during the Hellenistic period. Literary criticism of the traditional nature is the chosen vehicle for his investigation. The text and
what it says is Gruen's predominate concern. Only after such an analysis has been employed, and its gleanings well explicated is the author willing to deal with other concerns. By so doing, he arrives at a number of conclusions or lack of conclusions somewhat unique among scholars who have appraised these works.

He does not see the tension between Jews and Hellenism often highlighted by others. With rare exception he finds Jews accepting Greek authority while asserting Jewish superiority and precedence. No particular "setz in leben" is found for much of the literature. It may have been generated in the diaspora or Israel. And, it is proposed that it really does not matter. Furthermore, Gruen finds that most of the works do not have any ascertainable specific intent with regard to individual historical occurrences. The primary function of this literature is the maintenance of group cohesion and superiority while accommodating or co-opting both Hellenistic culture and accomplishment.

Gruen finds amazing liberties taken in the adaptation of both the Biblical and non-Biblical corpus to the advance this project. Broad humor is often present and much of it at the expense of the Greek dynasts of the period. From Macabees 1 to the Jewish Sybilline Oracles, most everything is covered. While short of proposing any earth-shaking historical revisions, this book should serve as tempering corrective to much previous scholarship on the topic. Any future account of Jewish responses to Hellenism that disregard this study do so at their own peril.