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How do a conquered people with a proud heritage of their own deal with the dramatic changes of the Hellenistic world? How do they fit in while maintaining their own character and unique culture? Erich Gruen presents a tremendous amount of background material to enhance our understanding of the Hellenistic world in which the Jews lived. This in turn sheds light on the development of Judaism, the New Testament Jewish world and our own thinking that has developed from that world.

Drawing on an extensive variety of ancient texts Gruen delves into Jewish culture and its attempts to deal with the question of the Jewish place in a Hellenistic world. A people with a proud history of their own find themselves in a unique world composed of both their ancient, traditional enemies and neighbours as well as the extensive, ever expanding cultural world of the Greeks. How does a minor nation of little political or military status retain (or build) a positive self image? The answer, as is often the case, is to creatively enhance their own history and heritage, to reinvent that history to match the thinking and attitudes of their Hellenistic world.

Gruen begins by examining the world of the Hasmonaeans and noting that the Maccabaean rebellion was directed at their traditional enemies such as the Canaanites, Ammonites, Edomites and Philistines of the surrounding nations, rather than the Greeks, as such. Gruen documents the various alliances with the Seleucids while noting the lack of any anti-Hellenic crusades. He also notes that, ‘Greek historians of the Hellenistic period rarely have an unkind word for Hasmonaeans.’ While much of the argument is persuasive and Gruen’s documentation extensive, some questions and problems arise. Is it perhaps a bit dangerous (if not conceited) to analyse the thoughts and intentions of others, especially those with whom we have little contact outside of their somewhat fragmentary literature? After all, there are many inconsistencies in our own culture such that we might be said to be, technically, morally against practices that we nevertheless accept. Thus Gruen may be over arguing his case that ‘acceptance’ (or even some degree of adoption) of many
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Hellenistic practices implies no negative response to Hellenism. As with much of human relations, the reality is probably somewhere between the two extremes of total anti-Hellenism espoused by others and Gruen's vision of virtually complete acceptance of Hellenism.

A number of historical sources are often labelled as pro- or anti-Jewish, but Gruen argues that such labels are too simplistic and often overly dependent on Josephus. This proposition is explored in the examination of the use and abuse of the Exodus story. Josephus is said to have misunderstood the seemingly hostile histories of the Jewish people by Lysimachus and Manetho. (They and others relate stories that associate the Jews of the Exodus with leprous, sick, poor and otherwise lower class polluted Egyptians who were led by an Egyptian priest named Moses. These afflicted and unwanted people plundered Egypt, were then led to their ‘promised land’ to found or restore a pure religion, set up their own kingdom in Jerusalem, build the Temple and have Moses reign as their king.) In contrast to Josephus, Gruen sees these stories as resulting from Jews incorporating Egyptian myth into their own Exodus story to enhance Jewish religious superiority and military triumphs. Obviously there is danger here in laying the blame for all Greek versions or perversions of the histories of other people onto the people themselves. Somehow that theory seems to create more problems than it solves. In spite of this obvious difficulty, Gruen’s underlying premise of the Jewish incorporation of other cultures’ beliefs and stories of their Hellenistic world into their own traditions rings true with both human nature and with much of the historical evidence he presents.

In the other chapters, Gruen offers more convincing illustrations of Jewish retelling, modifications and embellishments of Biblical characters as fitting their traditions into their Hellenistic world. The various versions of the story of Joseph make an excellent example. The Biblical account of Joseph portrays a complex person who is both noble and naive, magnanimous and calculating. Hellenistic versions such as that found in Jubilees both sanitize him so that no possible character flaws remain and then extend his deeds as an idealized hero. Other versions like Philo’s De Josepho also remove all possible character flaws and portray Joseph as the ideal Hellenistic statesman. Yet another example is that of Artapanus, a Hellenized Jew in Egypt who portrays a Joseph of constant surpassing knowledge and intelligence, so much so that Artapanus’ Joseph engineers his own escape from his brothers, arrives in Egypt, meets Pharaoh and is
immediately elevated to his lofty post with no divine intervention needed. Here once more is the ideal Hellenistic leader, possessing all the admirable values, as an example of the superior attainments of the Jews. Gruen extends this line of evidence to other Scriptural stories and characters in Jewish history.

Hellenistic Jewish historians, poets and authors of virtually all other forms of literature carefully moulded and remoulded their history, not as a simplistic apology, but rather as a positive attempt to build a sense of identity and superiority in the culture in which they lived. Greek culture was not alien to Hellenistic Jews but rather was the culture of their world in which they made every effort to thrive.

This reinvention does not end with modifying and embellishing but also extends to outright inventions. One example is found in the stories that enhance the status of Abraham. As the ultimate Hebrew patriarch, he is also linked through the children of his second wife Keturah to Heracles. More recent historical events are also reworked as subjects suitable to further enhance their claim to status. Alexander the Great serves as further evidence of this rewriting of the facts with the presentation of extensive stories of his great esteem for the Jews, their culture and their God. Even Ptolemy I Soter, ruler of Egypt is remoulded from a great Jewish oppressor assaulting Israel with the full whitewash that transforms him into a Jew in pagan guise who kindly invites the Jews to help colonize Egypt.

Like anyone attempting to make sense of a broad sweep of people and the clash/integration of cultures, certainly some of Gruen’s conclusions are questionable. However, that does not detract from the value of this work. The extensive evidence presented provides a valuable insight into the Hellenistic Jews as they met their world head on and thrived within it. Here were a people proud of their heritage but also imaginative and even light-hearted in presenting it to themselves. It is this conclusion that Gruen presents with such care and detail. The result is a fresh appreciation of culture, attitude and thought of the people and world that form the background to the New Testament.

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