Back to a Monolithic Jewish World?

Sylvie Honigman

Erich S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism. The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition*, Hellenistic Culture and Society XXX. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1998. xx + 333 pp. ISBN 520 21052 2.

Gruen's book is an enquiry into cultural constructs and self-identity, based almost exclusively on the analysis of literary sources. This kind of subject has been occupying his interest for some time, as his previous studies on Roman culture and identity show.[1] This time the author turns to investigating the Jews in their encounter with Greek culture, both in Palestine and in the Diaspora. The question at issue is how the Jews, more accurately those belonging to a hellenized milieu, adapted to their new cultural and political environment. G. tracks the process of adjustment through an impressive array of literary works stemming from that period, whose aim it was, as he sees it, to explore and define the Jews' place in the new world. The thesis argued throughout the book is that these texts show no polarisation between pleas for assimilation on the one side and hostility toward Hellenism on the other, but must be read as an on-going and multifaceted attempt to enhance Jewish self-identity by asserting Jewish superiority within the Hellenistic world. This superiority was clearly attributed to their stubborn adherence to their own ways and traditional values, but it also accorded with the values and criteria of the Greek cultural referents. How can G. find such a boasting stance devoid of polemics? By the concomitant claim that the intended readership of these writings was internal, that is, Jewish. In other words, if the Jewish literary output of the time is instructive about something, it is first and foremost the self-perception of hellenized Jews. The book is full of stimulating insights, both at the level of the author's analysis of individual texts and in his general methodological reassessments. G. renews the

1 In particular his *Culture and National Identity in Republican Rome* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1992).

approach of the texts by appealing to the methodological tools current in the Humanities in recent years. Most often, he relies on arguments of common sense coupled with a careful scrutiny of the historical and cultural background of the time and place considered. The thesis is interesting, the approach stimulating, the demonstration convincing in some aspects and less so in others.

The arrangement of the book is topical. The index will prove useful for the reader interested in a particular work or literary tradition, since some are examined in different chapters under various headings.

Chapter 1, 'Hellenism and the Hasmonaeans', appropriately sets the historical background against which, according to G., the literary works which are studied in the following chapters are to be read. In line with the main concern of the book, the chapter focuses on the cultural dimension of the Maccabaean uprising and the relationship between Hasmonaean leaders and Seleucid rulers. G.'s claim, based on a careful scrutiny of I and II Maccabees, is that there was no cultural antagonism against Hellenism and the 'Hellenic ways' as such, either during the uprising or in the succeeding era. The defence of Judaism elicited a struggle against the king's policy, not a crusade against Greek culture *per se.* G. goes on to examine the deeds of the successive rulers of Judaea, only to stress that the sources make clear that they themselves saw neither contradiction nor incompatibility between their deep Hellenization (betokened by their adoption of Hellenistic symbols and practices) and their faithfulness to 'Jewish ways'.

In its general outline the argument is in keeping with the most recent scholarly trends. One point may not be absolutely consistent: G. does not question the traditional interpretation of Antiochus IV's policy which led to the uprising, still labelling it 'aberrant and abhorrent' (p. 28). It is, however, definitely easier to account for the lack of aggressive stance towards Hellenism and its cultural as well as political symbols if it can be shown that Antiochus Epiphanes' policy did not amount to a deliberate religious persecution. Such reappraisals have indeed already been undertaken, and it is somewhat surprising that G. does not make any use of them, or provide a new analysis of his own.[2] Notwithstanding this minor qualification, the

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2 One of the most convincing reassessments of the whole affair was made by Christiane Saulnier. It unfortunately appears only as a chapter of a rather inconspicuous textbook published in French that, not surprisingly, remains completely unnoticed. See Chr. Saulnier, *Histoire d'Israël* III. *De la conquête d'Alexandre à la destruction du Temple (321 a.C. – 135 a.D.)* (Paris, 1985), pp. 110-21.

chapter provides many innovative and detailed analyses. Especially notable is the reassessment of Simon's era (pp. 18ff.).

Chapter 2, 'The Use and Abuse of the Exodus Story', examines the various versions of Jews' origins reminiscent of the Exodus story which are encountered in the works of (non-Jewish) Graeco-Roman writers. G. has no difficulty in showing that reading anti- or philo-Semitic reports into these texts is simply anachronistic and misses their real import. Restoring them to their proper historical setting, that of the cultural and mental referents of the Graeco-Roman writers who produced them, G. convincingly argues that the Exodus story could by no means have for non-Jews the same emotional impact it had for Jews. The compelling conclusion is that Jews themselves are responsible for the forming of the alternative versions which circulated in Egypt from the earliest times of the Hellenistic era. This means that Jewish traditions must be at the core of the malevolent versions of the Exodus which Josephus ascribes to Manetho and Lysimachus in his *Against Apion*.

The three following chapters deal with the reshaping of biblical texts, legends, and characters by hellenized Jewish writers. G. underlines the 'creativity' and 'inventiveness' the Hellenistic writers displayed in refashioning biblical figures or stories for their own (multifaceted) purposes, using for this the most variegated literary forms. But, he insists, the liberties taken with the sacred text do not point to 'irreverence or creeping secularism' (p. 109). At a time when the Bible had not yet been fixed into a 'canon', no one would question the creation of alternative versions. These did not pretend to replace the original tradition, but only to provide comments and interpretations for it, in order to convey new messages more appealing to the contemporary Jewish readership. Far from pretending to replace the original, they prove the will to use it to convey updated messages and tackle relevant issues of the new age.

Chapter 3, 'The Hellenistic Images of Joseph', tracks the varied portraits that the Hellenistic Jewish writers created out of the biblical character. Chapter 4, 'Scriptural Stories in New Guise', explores the works which recast biblical tales in various contemporary literary genres liable to appeal to a hellenized Jewish readership: history, epic, tragedy, and romance. Beyond the recasting of biblical stories into new literary forms, G. stresses in these two chapters that the authors reworked the stories in order to make them more palatable to their learned readership immersed in Greek culture. For instance, a shift in emphasis (from an ethical message to a success story of a man rising to the highest level of power) is largely responsible for the ongoing appeal of the biblical tale of Joseph (chapter 4). Chapter 5, 'Embellishments and Inventions', focuses on the stories inserted in or expanding on

biblical writings. The first part of the chapter deals with writings expanding on biblical texts, and focuses on biblical characters: David and Solomon (pp. 138-46), Abraham (pp. 146-153), Moses (pp. 153-160). The second part is dedicated to the tales inserted into the Greek versions of several biblical books (I Esdras, Book of Daniel, Book of Esther). One common feature G. dwells upon: the recourse to humour and irony, to which I shall return below.

Chapter 6, 'Kings and Jews', approaches writings which, by tackling the relationship between Jews and Hellenistic kings, seek to define the Jews' place more openly at a political level. The chapter progresses from one king to another, beginning with Alexander and continuing through the Ptolemies I to VI. As G. notes: after the rewritten Bible came history. G.'s contention is that the authors of stories taking historical events as their background cared as much about accuracy in relating historical facts as in retelling biblical tales: 'readers welcomed edifying fictions in a quasi-historical context' (p. 199). Therefore, trying to assess their historical core just misses the point, because these stories are not concerned with commemorating an event, but first and foremost with conveying a message. To make his point clear, G. begins with one case of historical impossibility: that Jews participated in Alexander's campaign against the Egyptians, as Josephus would have us believe, is proven impossible by the indisputable fact that no such campaign ever took place. But if we accept (and how could we not?) that the *raison d'être* of Josephus' story lies elsewhere than in a straightforward concern for saving from oblivion an historical fact which did not exist, it is still hard to accept as hard fact Josephus' claim that the Jews in Alexandria received civic privileges which 'put them on a par with Greeks and Macedonians' (p. 199). With plain consistency G. targets the statement by the author of the *Letter of Aristeas* that the translation of the Torah into Greek was initiated at the king's request — a claim which has gained support in recent scholarship (pp. 208f.). Needless to say, not much is left of a possible historical core for the events told in III Maccabees, or of the quarrel which purportedly was brought for arbitration before Ptolemy VI by Jews and Samaritans living in Alexandria, a story recorded again by Josephus in his *Jewish Antiquities.* As to the message conveyed by these stories: they aimed at reassuring the Jews that they not only were integrated into the Hellenistic world but enjoyed a privileged position therein. Hence the motif of the king acknowledging the superiority of Jewish laws and principles, paying reverence to the Jewish God, or, in the secular counterpart, relying on Jews to secure his power (p. 218). Hence also the consistent correction of reality into a conciliatory version when needed. G.'s point is well illustrated in his comment on the

treatment of the character of Ptolemy Soter. Even III Maccabees is shown to be in keeping with the same line: G. insists that the dark episode of the preparation for the mass-murder of Jews is due to a moment of madness of the king. In the work, it is carefully bracketed between two episodes of much more serene mood, which aim at underscoring its 'abnormal' character.

Chapter 7, 'Pride and Precedence', brings together various items whose common point is a claim by Jews to their primacy over Greeks — but, G. insists, in a mood devoid of any hint of hostility: Aristobulus' portrait of Moses as the wellspring for Greek philosophy and poetry, the (wholly spurious) story of the diplomatic relationship between Jews and Spartans, and the Third Sibylline Oracle.

G. deals with an impressive array of sources. The comments on individual works teem with sharp insights and innovative readings. But the interest of the book lies also in its comprehensive scope. The central line of argument is buttressed by a range of methodological approaches which recur throughout. They contribute greatly to the innovative and stimulating character of the book, and to its interest. But not all of them are fully convincing. The remainder of the review will take up some of the more debatable points of G.'s analysis.

— *Attitude toward issues of the* Quellenforschung *type.* In all the cognate fields of history, literature, classical studies, biblical studies, the once-dominating concerns of the *Quellenforschung* type have given way to queries about the meanings, purposes, *raison d'être* and audience of works considered in their extant form and as accomplished literary products. Enquiries into origins, *Sitz im Leben,* influences, layers of redaction, place and time of composition, etc., are now being reconsidered from completely new standpoints, when they are not altogether ignored.[3] G.'s book provides a

3 In Homeric studies, the reaction of the 'neo-analysts' is anything but a return to the 'analytic' approach which prevailed at the beginning of the twentieth century. See W. Kullmann, 'Oral Poetry Theory and Neoanalysis in Homeric Research', in I.J.F. de Jong (ed.), *Homer. Critical Assessments*, vol. 1 (London, 1999), pp. 145-60 (first publ. 1984); F. Turner's and M. Willcock's papers in I. Morris, B. Powell (eds.), *The New Companion to Homer* (Leiden, 1997), pp. 123-45 and 174-91. In Biblical studies, alternative voices are gaining ground in their assault on the 'Wellhausen school'. See the papers gathered in A. De Pury (ed.), *Le Pentateuque en question* (Geneva, 1989). In New Testament studies, see S.E. Porter, D. Tombs, *Approaches to New Testament Study* (Sheffield, 1995). As to works whose authorship does not constitute a problem in itself, the issues revolving around problems of composition have been rejuvenated in

welcome attempt to systematise the now commonly accepted methodological approach to the field of hellenized Jewish literature in a large-scale investigation.

G.'s stance throughout the book is to treat the questions of the *Quellenforschung* type as secondary and even dispensable. Not only does this method seem to have reached a dead end, but G. even questions the underlying basic assumption: that these texts are responses to immediate historical circumstances. The historicizing approach sees it as the scholars' main task to chase down allusions in the texts which might allow us to identify these events, and hence to date the literary works with the utmost precision. G.'s position is made clear by his choice to dedicate the first chapter of his book to the uprising of the Maccabees and the ensuing establishment of the Hasmonaean kingdom. In his eyes, these are the only events relevant for the understanding of the literary output of the hellenized Jewish circles — that is, events of wide scope, whose impact is inscribed in something close to the *longue durée.* If indeed broad cultural issues are at stake in these texts, there is no need whatsoever to look for a historical event which elicited the writing. Conversely, these works have for the most part nothing to disclose about historical events — but a great deal about Jewish self-perception.

A typical illustration of G.'s stance on this issue is his comment on III Maccabees, mentioned above (p. 227). The same shift from historical event to cultural concerns leads to a complete reassessment of the issue of the relationship between the Hasmonaean state and Sparta: G. argues convincingly against the authenticity of the three letters in I Maccabees, only to state that 'inventions often have more to reveal than genuine documents' (p. 259). Consistent with his approach, G. explains away most of the historicizing interpretations of passages of the Third Sibylline Oracle (pp. 273-85), after conceding some 'ostensible historical pointers' (pp. 271f.). This preliminary step enables him to take a new look at the whole composition and bring

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various ways: Herodotean studies have followed a path rather parallel to those affecting Homer or the Bible: from F. Jacoby's contention of layers of redaction, involving a progressive shift of interest from ethnography to enquiry into the Persian wars, to studies underscoring the basic unity of the work, such as H.R. Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus* (Cleveland, 1966). R. Lattimore even contended that the text is mainly an unrevised draft ('The Composition of the History of Herodotus', *CP* 53 [1958], pp. 9-21). The revised treatment of Thucydides provides a better parallel to Gruen's present stance: as W.R. Connor put it, 'The problem of Thucydides' attitudes and judgments appears to have replaced the composition problem as *the* Thucydidean questions' ('A Post Modern Thucydides?', *CJ* 72 [1977], p. 295).

forward a new (and admittedly tentative) interpretation: while the work displays hostility towards Rome, Greeks, through repentance and acknowledgement of the true God, will be able to share 'blissful peace to come' alongside the Jews (pp. 287-90). In the same vein, G. dismisses the 'whole construct of a political agenda for Eupolemus' (p. 141), the author of *On the Kings in Judaea*, a construct which explained the vast discrepancies between Eupolemus' account of David's territorial conquests and the biblical one by supposing that he sought to supply 'Davidic precedents for Maccabaean expansionism' (p. 139). The examples just given illustrate the interest of G.'s approach.

However, refusing to address questions of date and place of composition brings its own pitfalls. There still remain a few cases where the determination of date and place of composition *does* make a difference. There is one issue in particular, among those central to G.'s book, for which the determination of these parameters becomes critical: the use of Hellenistic literature in order to assess the relationship between Jews and Gentiles.

— *Assessing the way learned hellenized Jews appreciated the relationship between Jews and Gentiles.* G. develops two different but related points in this matter. First, he adamantly denies the polarisation between hostility or at least reaction against assimilation on the one side, and pleas for it on the other, a polarisation which has long constituted the most common reading-key for hellenized Jewish literature and even now is dying hard.[4] On the one hand, he dismisses the hints of 'syncretism' or pleas for 'assimilation' even in the works where they are most commonly read, such as Eupolemus' historical work (p. 146), or the *Letter of Aristeas* (pp. 215f.). On the other hand, it is obvious that reading wit instead of apology as G. does (see below) into Judaeo-Hellenistic literature implies a complete shift in the emotional background involved: throughout his detailed studies of the works, G. explains away, one by one, the alleged cases of a hostile stance toward Greeks and Hellenic culture. The claim is central to chapters 1 and 6, which examine the relations between Jews and kings both at historical and at literary levels. Thus, there is no crusade against Hellenism and 'Hellenic ways' as such in I and II Maccabees (chapter 1). We saw above that G. softens the import of the tragic events related in III Maccabees by stressing that they are carefully bracketed between scenes of peaceful relationships between the Jews (both in Judaea and in Alexandria) and the king (pp. 231-3). All other instances

4 See review of L.H. Feldman's *Jews and Gentiles in the Ancient World* (Princeton, 1993) by T. Rajak in *TLS*, May 6, 1994.

implying a tense background — such as the reappraisal of Artapanus' portrait of Moses as seen above — are explained away.

Even though the detailed analyses are not all equally convincing, the general line is interesting. In a time when historical studies tend to stress the influence of Graeco-Roman culture on Jewish life and thinking as well as the social interaction between local Jewish communities and the surrounding world, G. puts forward a reappraisal of the literary output of the period which can be seen as the logical complement of these studies. The former reading of Judaeo-Hellenistic literature as polarised was the logical by-product of the then-prevailing view that Jews had the choice between living a secluded life in their ghettos (whatever the Graeco-Roman organisational pattern equated with the medieval institution) or assimilating.

Alongside this first line, G. repeatedly endeavours to stress the hints of self-confidence displayed by these works. When commenting upon comic trends in 'Susanna and the Elders', G. observes that, in this particular case, the 'barbed shafts' of the author do not 'come... at the expense of the Gentile' (p. 172), but target Jews themselves, and come to denounce flaws detected inside the Jewish society. A remarkable trend, that G. explains as 'a striking sense of the self-confidence of their communities' (p. 172). In itself, this reading of the text is unobjectionable. Much more questionable however is the generalisation from these conclusions. 'Self-confidence' is thereby demonstrated for 'Jewish communities' without further qualification, implicitly all of them. But what is a reasonable probability for Judaea may be more problematic in the case of Egypt, where Artapanus and the author of III Maccabees wrote.

As far as Egypt is concerned, it all depends on the chronology. Self-confidence among Jews is arguable for the beginning of the Hellenistic era — especially if we accept that not all Jews arrived in Egypt as prisoners of war, but perhaps even against this social background. Concomitantly, G.'s contention that only Jews could be responsible for the primitive re-writing of the Exodus which lay at the core of the later hostile versions appearing in works of non-Jewish authorship has indeed a strong case for it. All the more so because his further argument of a basic lack of interest in this story outside Jewish circles is definitely compelling. In this particular case, it seems to me that the analysis of the literary text stands by itself with no difficulty. However, it seems much more difficult to rule out entirely the existence of tensions between Jews and non-Jews in Egypt at later stages of the Ptolemaic era. In the reverse case, one has to present a plausible interpretation of Josephus' *Against Apion*. G. does not tackle the problem. As to the riots against Jews which broke out in 38 AD, no one doubts that the

take-over by the Roman administration and its devastating effects on the society of Egypt are chiefly responsible for the outburst, but there are still scholars who believe that older tensions also played their part. And if there were tensions, one cannot rule out the possibility that they found reflection in some of the literary sources. In other words, the analysis of literary works cannot stand by itself.

— *Readership.* The same restriction of *problématique* recurs in the approach to other topics. When it comes to readership, G.'s enquiry into both motivation and purpose leads him to an emphatic assertion: all the works examined were aimed at a Jewish readership. More precisely, the local one: as a whole, G. does not support the view of cross-dialogue between the Diaspora and Judaea (e.g. p. 213) — except, of course, for the well-known letters in II Maccabees which explicitly state the case. The target of the discussion is clear: the old controversy as to whether Jewish literature was aimed at insiders or outsiders. The solution G. promotes is, of course crucial to his thesis that some hints at both apologetics and hostility towards non-Jews are to be read in these texts. Seen in this perspective, the boasting messages turn out to be 'not an irritant for the Greeks but a source of gratification for knowledgeable Hellenistic Jews' (p. 154).

Since this is his main focus, G. does not refine further his determination of the readership. No further attempt is made to pin down time and place, for fear lest he be led to enter the controversies of *Quellenforschung*. This in turn obliges him to keep the discussion at a general level. Paradoxically, the reader eager to translate the notion of 'local readership' into more concrete terms may find him/herself forced back into a tacit acceptance of common knowledge on the matter — a knowledge established by works belonging to the *Quellenforschung* generation.

To be sure, such a contradiction is hardly avoidable, since the writer could not have reasonably tackled all the pertinent questions in one book. More questionable is the fact that G.'s main argument in pinning down the works' readership is repeatedly one of common sense: e.g., 'Gentile readers, if there were any, would hardly be persuaded' (p. 154). As long as the issue at stake is differentiating between Jews and outsiders, the appeal to common sense is persuasive. I wonder whether the method is as successful when the issue becomes more complex. That is, when G. comes to check the nature of the response to the texts expected from the Jewish readership. The problem is particularly acute when it comes to another Leitmotiv of the book: the pointing out of humour and irony in the texts studied.

— *Humour and irony.* Such a heading provides us with one more item of the postmodernist panoply of methodological tools. G. starts with the

contention that 'the irony and wit, indeed the playfulness that marked several of these productions, the mockery that not only targeted Greeks but occasionally even deflated Jews' is a dimension of Jewish Hellenistic literature too often missed by modern scholarship (p. 137). 'That dimension of Jewish inventiveness has been undervalued' (*ibid.*). G. identifies these elements particularly, though not exclusively, in the reshaping of biblical tales. Before turning to G.'s use of these concepts, it may be useful to broaden the perspective about their use in recent scholarship and the current debate this has elicited.

One may note first that G. does not wish to distinguish between humour and irony. In the same mood as in the above quotation, both terms are clustered in one single entry in the index (p. 327). This is somewhat surprising, since the post-modern focus of interest on irony has usually accustomed us to just such a distinction.[5]

Now, the archaeological artefact known as 'Nestor's cup', with its inscription echoing in a parodic way the description of Nestor's cup in the *Iliad*, connects playfulness in Greek literature with the very beginning of the Greeks' use of writing.[6] Reading irony and a distancing gaze into Greek literary works is a different matter altogether. The appeal to the concept of irony in the approach to Greek and Latin literature is currently undergoing a thorough re-mapping.

Polemics begin with Homer. Scholars reacting against the growing trend to read irony into archaic epic have argued that recourse to irony as an explanatory tool relies on flawed basic assumptions 'about the nature and functions of this genre.'[7] In modern perception Herodotus' personality has long oscillated between two poles: naïve and gullible reporter of unbelievable tales, and a cynic suffused with indifference to the truth (a charge first articulated by Plutarch). As Carol Dewald put it in 1987, 'we now recognise that as a thinker Herodotus is a member of the generation of Sophocles and Protagoras', which saves Herodotus from the former alternative. Herodotus is now taken seriously, his undertaking is understood as a serious enquiry

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5 D.C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic* (rev. ed., London, 1982); W. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago, 1974).

6 See P.A. Hansen, 'Pithecusan Humour. The Interpretation of 'Nestor's Cup' Reconsidered', *Glotta* 54 (1976), pp. 25-43.

7 See H. Parry, 'The Apologos of Odysseus: lies, all lies?' *Phoenix* 48 (1994), pp. 1-20. The controversy over irony in relation to Odysseus' character is part of the wider issue concerning the relevance of the notion of 'fiction' in Homeric studies.

into truth. Irony is fading away from the 'father of history'.[8] As for Thucydides, he was and remains an ironic contemplator of his own time. However, the perception of his irony is changing to fit new historiographical concerns.[9] At the other end of the chronological spectrum, thorough reappraisal of the degree of sophistication underlying the composition of Greek novels has led scholars to be more sensitive to the presence of humour (rather than irony) in some of them.[10]

As for the Hellenistic period, the evolution of a highly sophisticated trend in Alexandrian art and poetry, displaying a distancing from tradition, recourse to playfulness and even irony, hardly needs proof. G. indeed supports his reading by referring to parallels in contemporary (non-Jewish) Greek literature (p. 160, n. 97), again with the same blurring between humour and irony. Still, the question remains how far such reading should be systematised.

Some cases are undeniable. For instance, those in which irony targets the villains of the story: comic elements are easily arguable in III Maccabees or Susanna and the Elders. But G. further identifies mischief in the story of the (cheap) philosophical contest held between the three bodyguards at Darius' court interpolated in LXX I Esdras (pp. 160-7). If accepted, the reading would have the advantage of making sense at last out of the many inconsistencies and implausibilities of the tale. But the question at issue is whether humour/irony is the only way to account for such inconsistencies or even whether inconsistencies, or what appears as such to the modern reader, must always be accounted for. Once again, the new concerns promoted by G. rejoin concerns for issues of the old kind — 'place of writing'. Refined Alexandrian readers might not have found appeal in an oversimplified plot. Mildly hellenized sectors of Judaean society, on the contrary, might still be satisfied with more traditional patterns of folktale, allowing for more naiveté. After all, the dreams interpreted by Joseph in the Pentateuch are not so elaborate as to justify, on a (modern) rational level, the fact that Egyptian seers had failed before him. But the plot demanded the failure of the latter in

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8 See C. Dewald, 'Narrative Surface and Authorial Voice in Herodotus' *Histories*', *Arethusa* 20 (1987), pp. 147-70. Citation p. 152. Actually Dewald makes Herodotus a 'warrior' struggling with true reports of *logoi* rather than with truth *per se*. On Herodotus' intellectual background, see now R. Thomas, *Herodotus in Context* (Cambridge, 2000).

9 See Connor (n. 3), p. 291.

10 See B.P. Reardon, 'Achilles Tatius and Ego-Narrative', in J.R. Morgan, R. Stoneman (eds.), *Greek Fiction. The Greek Novel in Context* (London, 1994), pp. 80f., 92, with relevant earlier bibliography.

order to compel the king to call for Joseph. Readers familiar with the traditional Joseph story might have been delighted to meet the same kind of trick again and again in more recent stories. Put in a more theoretical way, humour should not take over, in a post-modern age, the role assumed by interpolations in the studies of the *Quellenforschung* generation. Scholars identified with *Quellenforschung* always had the option, when confronted with a difficulty in a text, such as verses or passages in a text liable to disprove their case, of explaining these away as interpolations. Scholarly fashions pass, textual obscurities sometimes remain. And with them, the temptation to find a panacea.

As mentioned above, one argument G. relies on in several instances in order to support his reading of humour is common sense. Commenting upon Artapanus' portrait of Moses, G. argues that it is unthinkable that Jews, let alone Egyptians, might have taken seriously the deeds Artapanus ascribed to Moses, such as his initiating of animal worship by Egyptians (p. 158). Only 'playful mockery and toppling of convention' is able to account for it. If we follow him, the traditional reading of the work as 'apologetic, patriotic, and nationalistic, a piece of "competitive historiography" or "romantic national history"' becomes obsolete (p. 156). A very tempting solution, especially for the growing number of scholars convinced that the relationship between Jews and their surrounding world in Hellenistic Egypt was not made up *only* of tensions and suspicions. This topic has been considered above.

Let us dwell here on the question of common sense. G.'s remark quoted above, that no one would have taken seriously Moses' institution of animal worship in Egypt, may conflict with another analysis which appears elsewhere in the book. The story of Mosollamus the Jew making fun of Greek seers by killing the bird whose movement they were observing is well known (*Against Apion* 1.200-4). G. readily admits the story is contrived, since Greek divination was not so naïve as to be content with such a superficial interpretation of bird flight as is allegedly shown by the story (pp. 205f.). Now, certainly the Jewish author knew that, and he knew his Jewish readers knew no less than he. Obviously, a realistic rendering is not his main concern, nor is a common sense presentation. As this story shows, common sense may not have been a systematic prerequisite for the writers or for their readers. After all, in the surrounding world, if Eratosthenes had readers, Diodorus and the authors he compiles in Books II-VI of his *Historical Library* had theirs also. Admittedly, distancing irony is one way of accounting

for lack of common sense in story-telling. But irony implies rational readers. Were they all thus?[11]

At the same time, G. makes much of the stance of the naïve modern reader guided by straight literary pleasure, '*le plaisir du texte*'.[12] But he may not always have avoided the danger of being carried too far by the modernising glance. One wonders whether his standpoint has not misled him into an overly severe assessment of Joseph's character in *Joseph and Aseneth*: 'by no means an unmixed blessing' (p. 96), as it were, replete with 'pomposity and arrogance' (p. 99), capable of excessive behaviour offensive both to his Egyptian hosts and to Aseneth herself. However, it seems to me that G.'s cynical reading does not allow enough for Hellenistic taste, one fond of overstatements which, by modern standards, undoubtedly display the utmost lack of taste. *Mutatis mutandis,* one may recall the overstated tones of the tragic historians whose style was sharply ridiculed by Polybius in Book 12 of his *Histories.*[13] But for one ancient reader putting on Polybius' spectacles, how many will there have been who indulged themselves with the strong imaginative appeal of the overblown descriptions drawn by the tragic historians? One might rather guess that the readership fond of this kind of rhetoric was not critical of the flaws G. reads into *Joseph and Aseneth.* Actually, G. is fully aware of the risks of anachronism or misreading involved in confronting the humour of a mentality alien to ours, and he tackles the issue in the most balanced terms (pp. 186-8). Nevertheless, in dealing with individual texts, he may have indulged occasionally in the flaws he himself denounces.

I said above that the analysis of literary works cannot stand by itself. It has to be sustained by a concomitant analysis of the historical background. The first chapter of the book, entitled 'Hellenism and the Hasmonaeans', is based only on the analysis of literary texts, I and II Maccabees. It nevertheless gains credibility, because its conclusions are consistent with those achieved by parallel studies based on other kinds of evidence (such as archaeology), or conducted at a more general level.[14] It convinces also because the older

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11 See E. Gabba, 'True History and False History in Classical Antiquity', *JRS* 71 (1981), pp. 50-62.

12 See R. Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris, 1973).

13 On Hellenistic literature, see now S. Rebenich, 'Historical Prose', in S.E. Porter (ed.), *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period. 330 B.C. – A.D. 400* (Leiden, 1997), pp. 265-96.

14 Beginning with E.J. Bickerman, *Institutions des Séleucides* (Paris, 1938), who uses Jonathan's career as depicted in II Maccabees to exemplify the hierarchy

contrary views which read the Maccabaean uprising and the establishment of an independent kingdom in Judaea as a hostile reaction against Hellenism were essentially based on a given interpretation of military and diplomatic history — that is, in the last resort, on more or less the same literary evidence as G. is using to revise them. Conversely, in the case of the Egyptian Jewish diaspora, G.'s endeavour to stress universal self-confidence runs much ahead of what general studies are currently ready to admit. Therefore, unsupported as it is by a historical analysis provided by G. himself to buttress his view, the reappraisal of the literary texts remains unevenly persuasive.

However, the argument seems to lie at another level. The fact that the book opens with an analysis of the Maccabaean uprising strongly suggests that G. sees this event as the founding one, not only for Judaean history and literature, but indeed for the whole of the Jewish literary output of Hellenistic times. When combined with G.'s avoidance of the issue of place of composition of the literary works he deals with, a stance that occasionally goes so far as to blur the distinction between Judaea and the Diaspora, one gains the impression that G. is depicting a very unified and homogeneous Jewish world in which one political event universally affected the Jews, both in Judaea and in the whole of the Hellenistic diaspora, while local events are ignored, suggesting that none of them had enough importance to be worth mentioning. Ignoring chronological issues further conveys the impression of a rather static Jewish world. Universal and unabated self-confidence, uniform reaction to the surrounding world, complete the picture. Admittedly, the picture as adumbrated here exaggerates G.'s intention. But it underscores the fact that G.'s systematic refusal to address the traditional issues of time and place is strained beyond the desirable limit. At a time when the new awareness of positive interaction between Jews and their surrounding world is prompting scholars to insist on differences and peculiarities not only between Judaea and the Diaspora, but between the various Diaspora centres, this results in restricting his analyses to a rather unsatisfying degree. This is all the more paradoxical because, as stressed above, G. is fully dedicated to

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of honorific titles linked to the Seleucid court. T. Rajak, 'The Jews under Hasmonean Rule', in *Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd ed., vol. 9, *The Last Age of the Roman Republic* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 274-309; *eadem*, 'Hasmonean Kingship and the Invention of Tradition', in P. Bilde *et al.* (eds.), *Aspects of Hellenistic Kingship* (Aarhus, 1996), pp. 99-115; on the use of archaeological sources, although the bulk of the papers bear on the following period, see K. Fittschen, G. Foerster (eds.), *Judaea and the Greco-Roman World in the Time of Herod in the Light of Archaeological Evidence* (Göttingen, 1996).

promoting the notion of positive interaction. Over a decade ago, Oswyn Murray underlined the need to distinguish between *Quellenforschung*'s methodology and questions addressed in the field of Herodotaean studies. The dismissal of the former must encourage the implementation of new methodological tools of enquiry in the latter — and not lead to the disregard of the traditional questions.[15] The fact that the field of Judaeo-Hellenistic literature, as of Jewish studies in general, is still rather conservative as compared to certain areas of classical studies probably explains G.'s choice to concentrate on the rejection of *Quellenforschung*'s approach, without distinguishing between method and issues at stake. Chance had it that in the same year that G.'s book was published, another study appeared which may retrospectively be seen as a rejoinder to it on that point. In her study on *Joseph and Aseneth*, Ross Kraemer argues that the work would perfectly fit the literary context of the late second and early third centuries AD. The text's provenance could be Syria no less, and perhaps even more, than Egypt. And the method implemented broadens the comparative literary material to include works of imperial times reflecting the fascination with an imaginary Egypt.[16]

The present review has taken up what the reviewer saw as disputable aspects of the book. But even if one may disagree with some of its conclusions, it remains true that G.'s book is a very suggestive and stimulating attempt to tackle basic issues of interpretation. His call to re-examine old assumptions anew is thoughtful and thought-provoking indeed. The study teems with innovative analyses and insights, which more than once are completely at odds with traditional premises. One might guess that the hint of provocation is not always unintentional — which does not mean it is gratuitous. On the contrary: most cases are well-argued and convincing, and it will be hard to go on with the old premises any more.

For all these questionable aspects, it may well be that G.'s insistence on Jewish self-confidence paradoxically constitutes one important contribution of the book. If not at a practical level, then as a trigger for 'the informing of the imagination.'[17] In the last two or three decades a growing trend in Jewish

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15 O. Murray, 'Herodotus and Oral History', in *Achaemenid History* II. *The Greek Sources*, edited by H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg and A. Kuhrt (Leiden, 1987), pp. 93-115. See esp. his methodological remarks p. 93.

16 R.S. Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph. A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and His Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered* (Oxford, 1998).

17 I borrow the phrase from R.S. Bagnall, 'Decolonizing Hellenistic Egypt', in P. Cartledge, P. Garnsey, E.S. Gruen, *Hellenistic Constructs. Essays in Culture,*

studies of the Graeco-Roman period has been the insistence on the fact that attitudes of hostility towards Jews well known from the Christian or Muslim worlds cannot be cast back onto the pre-Christian world without further qualification — with further distinctions between the (pre-Roman) Hellenistic world and imperial times. In this context, G.'s study invites the reader to draw the full consequences of a situation where Jews still had no idea of what anti-Semitism, or even religiously motivated anti-Judaism, was. Self-confidence, and even arrogance, are after all in their place in such a picture. This is the main lesson of the second chapter of the book, re-examining the Exodus story, and perhaps, in my view, of the book in general.

Tel Aviv University

History and Historiography (Berkeley, 1997), p. 238. I use it in a sense slightly different from that intended by its original author.