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Erich S. Gruen, *Scriptural Tales Retold: The Inventiveness of Second Temple Jews* (Jewish and Christian Texts in Contexts and Related Studies 39) (London – New York – Oxford – New Delhi – Sydney: Clark 2024). Pp. IX+172. $ 82.80 E-book. $ 103.50 Hb. ISBN: 978-0-567-71517-3

Wojciech Bejda
Pomeranian University in Słupsk
wojciech.bejda@upsl.edu.pl
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1581-9628

Renowned scholar Erich Gruen returns with a third book that examines the 'rewritten Bible' genre typical of the Second Temple period.[1] In the Introduction (pp. 1–12), he outlines the book's theme, which is the 'rewritten Bible'. Despite the vast scholarship on this subject, there are some fundamental issues that still need clarifying. One of them is the problem of what exactly the rewritten Bible is, why it emerged, and what relationship it has to the writings that constitute the canon of the Bible. Apart from the issue of the final formation of the above-mentioned canon, which did not take place in the Hellenistic period, when the authors of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha were active, it can be said that the Septuagint itself was an example of a rewritten Bible due to the differences between it and the Hebrew text. As the author notes, the tradition of paraphrasing the sacred text has its roots in the distant past, as the Books of Chronicles can be considered rewritten compared to 2 Samuel and Books of Kings (p. 5). However, it may be noted that there were books that received more special treatment than others. We have examples of the rewritten Pentateuch, but not the *Book of Jubilees*.

Gruen also ponders how one can understand the assertion that a work rich in additions and omissions (e.g. Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities*) does not differ from the text of the biblical books on which it is based (pp. 3–5). Numerous explanations were presented, which did not remove doubts as to how one could treat the statement that the paraphrase does not differ from the source text. Gruen, based on an analysis of the approach of Jewish historians, poets, playwrights, philosophers, and novelists, comes to the conclusion that their activity resulted from the importance which they assigned to the paraphrased writings. He also

1 *Heritage and Hellenism. The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Hellenistic Culture and Society 30; Berkeley, CA – Los Angeles, CA – London: University of California Press 1998) XX+335; *The Construct of Identity in Hellenistic Judaism. Essays on Early Jewish Literature and History* (Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies 29; Berlin – Boston, MA: De Gruyter 2018) XIV+574. This second book is a collection of previously published articles except for one chapter ('Was There Judeophobia in Classical Antiquity?,' 313–332).

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tries to establish the reason for the creation of Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (pp. 10–11). The reasons usually indicated are exegesis for Jews and apology for gentile audiences.

In nineteen short chapters, typically ranging from two to eleven pages (only one has fifteen), the author analyses passages of the Bible that are problematic from an exegetical point of view: (1) 'The Tower of Babel' (why people decided to build it and what was God's reason for confusing the languages, pp. 13–19); (2) 'Abraham in Egypt' (Abraham's unethical behaviour towards Pharaoh, pp. 21–24); (3) 'Sarah and Hagar' (Sarah's cruel behaviour towards the Egyptian slave and Abraham's compliant attitude towards his wife, pp. 25–30); (4) 'The Aquedah' (God's lack of motives in testing Abraham, binding Isaac, pp. 31–38), (6) 'The Rape of Dinah' (the insidious and murderous character of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, pp. 43–52); (7) 'The Conflicting Character of Joseph' (the patriarch presented as a boastful, power-loving manipulator, but also an outstanding statesman, pp. 53–62); (8) 'Tamar and Judah' (a Canaanite woman more orthodox than Judah the Israelite, pp. 63–70); (12) 'Balaam and His Wayward Prophecy' (Why did Yahweh speak through a pagan prophet? How to explain the behaviour of the prophet who acts arbitrarily and is reprimanded by a donkey?, pp. 83–94); (13) 'Yael and Death of Sisera' (not very wise and brave Barak and treacherous Yael who killed Sisera, pp. 95–99); (14) 'Jephthah and His Daughter' (Jephthah's dramatically ill-considered oath and his daughter's attitude, pp. 101–105); (15) 'Samson as Superhero' (submissive to women, impulsive and cunning, but also a stupid hero, the role of God in Samson's adventures, pp. 107–114); (16) 'The Judean Monarchy and Saul' (God's inconsistency towards the idea of monarchy, His not entirely justified rejection of Saul, the dramatic rather than sinister character of Saul, pp. 115–129); (17) 'Solomon and the Building of the Temple' (the nature of Solomon's relations with neighbouring rulers, pp. 131–136); (18) 'The Travails of Job' (other highlights of Job's fate in the Hellenistic paraphrase, pp. 137–143); (19) 'The Additions to Esther' (theologising the narrative, pp. 145–148).

Four chapters do not rely on paraphrasing the biblical text or do so only to a limited extent. The first one discusses the patriarch's resistance and subterfuge before death, as he did not want to voluntarily give up his comforts and happy life ([5] 'The Testament of Abraham', pp. 39–41). The second one deals with the role of Moses as a judge and advisor, God's representative on earth in Ezekiel the Tragedian drama, or possibly as God's advisor in the work of Pseudo-Philo ([9] 'Moses and God', pp. 71–73). The next one is the narrative of Moses' military campaign in Ethiopia written by Josephus and Artapanos ([10] 'Moses in Ethiopia', pp. 75–77). The last one deals with the cultural role of Moses as an inventor of arts and technology, and a great leader according to Artapanos ([11] 'Moses as Universal Figure', pp. 79–81).

The choice of chapter topics is apt, as it focuses the analysis on those places that actually prompted Hellenistic authors to make efforts to interfere more deeply with the source text (a comprehensive analysis of the full narrative of each biblical character or theme is a task beyond the capabilities of a single researcher and the patience of the reader). This enables the reader to gain a more tangible and rapid insight into the nature of the Hellenistic-Jewish

attitude to the biblical text. Gruen seems to be especially interested in novice researchers, as they are the ones who find the chapter layout most useful. Experienced scholars do not need a summary of the biblical narrative, nor such basic information as the Testament of Levi is part of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (p. 48). The text also provides basic information on authorship and date of composition.

In a short conclusion (pp. 149–150), the author emphasises that 'there is no pattern or formula for the revisions.' This was partly because 'the *Scriptures* in general were fluid and shifting' (p. 149). Contrary to appearances, the pursuit of rewriting the biblical text 'maintained, even strengthened, the authority of those tales, but also found room for creativity, inventive, and frequently quite entertaining variations of their rich themes and unforgettable characters' (p. 150). The statement reveals a clearly articulated assumption that, apparently, all scholars of the literature of the Second Temple period could have sensed. However, it has not been expressed so clearly until now. The author's assumption is correct, because the enormous importance of the Scriptures stimulated the desire to give them a new meaning or to build on their authority narratives that were more in line with changing social realities, literary trends, and emotional needs.

Gruen tries to show the different reasons for the changes. The authors could have been trying to convey a more coherent and interesting narrative (the narrative of the Tower of Babel in the *Book of Jubilees*, the story of Baalam in Josephus and Pseudo-Philo, the fate of Sisera in Pseudo-Philo, the story of Saul in Josephus, Jephthah and his daughter in Pseudo-Philo and the *Testament of Job*). The quest for a coherent and convincing narrative was not always successful (Pseudo-Philo and his narrative of the Tower of Babel).

Less frequently, however, the story became impoverished and boring, as in the case of Samson or the beginnings of the monarchy in Pseudo-Philo. More specifically, the author could 'flesh out or sharpen the focus' (p. 16) as Pseudo-Eupolemos did in the narrative of the Tower of Babel. Sometimes, the story was dramatised (the Haggadah in the *Book of Jubilees* and in Josephus, the fate of Jephthah in Pseudo-Philo or Saul in Josephus). The authors also expressed their sense of humour (*Testament of Abraham*, Artapanos, *Testament of Job*) by treating the paraphrased biblical narrative as literary entertainment (e.g., the history of Moses according to Artapanos).

Surprisingly, even though the biblical text was rewritten, one can sometimes see a secularisation of the narrative (Artapanos on Joseph's career in Egypt) or a diminishing of God's role (the narrative of Samson in Josephus). However, the most common goal was to show more clearly the motives of God and/or people (the narrative of the Tower of Babel in the *Book of Jubilees*, *Oracula Sibillina* and Josephus; the fate of Samson in Pseudo-Philo), or to introduce God as the main agent (the Greek version of the *Book of Esther*). One can also note the omission of troublesome threads (e.g. the narrative of Judah and Tamar in Josephus).

Often, changes to the biblical text were intended to justify and sometimes idealise heroes, e.g. Abraham (*Book of Jubilees*, *Genesis Apocryphon*, Philo of Alexandria and Josephus), Sarah (*Book of Jubilees*, Josephus), Jacob (Josephus), Judah (*Book of Jubilees*, *Testament of*

Judah, Theodotus), Levi (*Testament of Levi*, Theodotus), Joseph (*Book of Jubilees*, Philo in *De Iosepho*, Josephus), Moses (Ezekiel the Tragedian, Pseudo-Philo, Josephus, Artapanos), Jephthah (Pseudo-Philo), Samson (Josephus). If an appropriate opportunity arose, they would elevate biblical heroes above pagan rulers (e.g. Solomon in Eupolemos).

On the other hand, for Philo in the treatise *De somniis*, Joseph was an example of a man overcome by pride, vanity and deceit. Occasionally in the Josephus narrative, he becomes an ambiguous figure, especially when it comes to the discussion of his behaviour toward the Egyptian Aseneth. In the novella *Joseph and Aseneth* this hero becomes an example of 'haughtiness, prudery, self-righteousness, authoritarianism, and contemptuousness' (p. 61), and furthermore of 'pomposity and arrogance' (p. 61). Perhaps the reason for the perception of Joseph's behaviour as unethical (which also applies to some other characters) is that modern sensibilities are influenced by conventions of politeness and tolerance.

Sometimes the presentation of biblical figures could be conditioned by the authors' own scholarly interests, as in the case of Philo of Alexandria, who was guided by the principles of allegorical interpretation. Gruen also points out that the description of Saul's reign served to present Josephus as a historian who is 'a serious and trustworthy researcher' (p. 135). Historians such as Pseudo-Eupolemos and Josephus also sought to weave the biblical narrative into Greek mythology and historiography. Not infrequently, authors tried to use paraphrases of biblical history for polemical/apologetic purposes (Philo of Alexandria and the Haggadah; the narrative of the murder of the Shechemites in Theodotus and the *Book of Jubilees*).

The merit of Gruen's book is the recognition of the various reasons for paraphrasing biblical texts. This is a reference to his earlier book, where he tried to show more extensively that Jews living in a Hellenistic culture sought to demonstrate their own military, cultural, and religious superiority over the peoples and cultures in which they lived. However, they did not do this out of hostility towards them or in an effort to convert pagans, but to satisfy the literary needs of their own community.[2] It also seems that in the previous book, the issue of humour contained in some texts was more emphasised (e.g. Artapanos, *Bel and Dragon*, *1 Esdras*, Greek additions to *Esther*, *Letter of Aristeas*, *3 Maccabees*).[3]

Erich S. Gruen's book serves as a vibrant introduction to the 'rewritten Bible' genre of the Second Temple period, offering an engaging alternative to the often dry, academic overviews that may not captivate readers new to this literature. Scholars and enthusiasts will appreciate the representative selection of sources in the footnotes, which reflect Gruen's deep

2 Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism*, 71, 108 ('[a] strong Jewish strain in Judaic culture pushed beyond accommodation and adjustment to stress Jewish advantage and superiority'); p. 188 ('[...] they underscored Jewish intellectual and ethical superiority over the Gentiles in whose midst they lived'); p. 244 ('[...] [s]uperior Jewish character, intelligence, and beliefs constitute recurrent refrains [...]'), cf. p. 245 and especially the chapter 7 'Pride and Precedence', pp. 246–291, where the author cites numerous examples of Hellenistic-Jewish authors striving to demonstrate the cultural superiority of patriarchs and other outstanding figures, as well as prevalence Judaism over paganism.

3 Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism*, 159–160, 166–168, 171–172, 175–177, 181–183, 186–188, 205–206, 218–222, 234–240, 244–245.

familiarity with the field. He cites relevant publications and discusses them judiciously, grounding his arguments in current scholarship. The chapters are concise, possibly reflecting an awareness of modern readers – particularly younger audiences – who favour brief, digestible content akin to what they encounter online.