LOREN R. SPIELMAN

Jews and Entertainment in the Ancient World

Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism
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Jews and Entertainment in the Ancient World

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations used throughout this book for all ancient texts, reference works, periodicals and serials are according to those given in P. H. Alexander *et al* (eds.), *The SBL Handbook of Style: for Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical and Early Christian Studies* (Peabody, Hendrickson, 1999). Any exceptions are clarified in individual bibliographic notes.

Introduction

The theaters, amphitheaters and other public entertainment buildings of Roman Palestine bear witness to the impact of roughly seven centuries of Roman domination on the rhythms of daily life. The first few entertainment structures were constructed in the first century B.C.E. by Herod the Great, the Jewish client king of Rome, just a few decades after the introduction of Roman rule in 63 B.C.E. Within two centuries after the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 C.E. and the incorporation of Palestine as a province of the Roman Empire, monumental entertainment buildings could be found in almost every major city. The cities of the province and its surrounding areas were home to more than 30 theater buildings.[1] Five or six amphitheaters in the region provided space for beast fights and gladiatorial combat,[2] while more than seven hippodromes housed horse races and perhaps a host of athletic events.[3] Though built largely during the late second and third centuries C.E., these structures lasted in some cases until the fifth or sixth centuries C.E., falling out of use near the end of Roman political control in the region. Along with a number of other small finds, these buildings demonstrate beyond a doubt that the theater, gladiatorial combats, and horse racing were as popular in the cities of Roman Palestine as they were throughout the Roman Empire.[4]

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[1] For a survey of theaters in Palestine and environs see E. Frézouls, "Les Théâtres romains de Syrie," *Les Annales archéologiques de Syrie* 2 (1952): 46–100; idem, "Recherches sur les théâtres de l'Orient syrien," *Syria* 38, no. 1 (1961): 54–86; A. Segal, *Theatres in Roman Palestine and Provincia Arabia* (Leiden: Brill, 1995). See also Z. Weiss, *Public Spectacles in Roman and Late Antique Palestine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); idem, "Games and Spectacles in Roman Palestine and their Reflection in Talmudic Literature [Hebrew]" (Ph.D. diss, Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1994); idem, "Adopting a Novelty: The Jews and the Roman Games in Palestine," in *The Roman and Byzantine Near East: Some Recent Archaeological Research*, ed. J. H. Humphrey, JRA Supplementary Series 31 (Ann Arbor, MI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1999), 23–50; idem, "Roman Leisure Culture and its Influence upon the Jewish Population in the Land of Israel," *Qadmoniot* 28 (1995): 2–19.

[2] See Weiss, "Games and Spectacles," 180–214; idem, "Adopting a Novelty," 23, 39–41; idem, *Public Spectacles,* 108–113.

[3] J. H. Humphrey, *Roman Circuses: Arenas for Chariot Racing* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1986), 528–33; Weiss, "Games and Spectacles," 129–179; idem, "Adopting a Novelty," 34–6; idem, *Public Spectacles,* 101–118.

[4] Weiss, "Adopting a Novelty;" idem, *Public Spectacles*, 195–226.

The most useful tools for explaining the popularity and significance of Roman entertainments in other provinces in the Empire are generally epigraphic remains.[5] Some inscriptions commemorate the donors who were responsible for financing games, competitions, and furnishing prizes. Others were dedicated by local communities to celebrate the impressive achievements of a range of performers, including mimes, dancers, athletes, and gladiators. These dedications and epitaphs have helped to demonstrate that Roman entertainments played a central role in civic life not only in the West, in places like Gaul and Iberia, but also in the Eastern Empire, where games and festivals had been essential features of the Greek and Hellenistic *polis* long before the introduction of Roman rule.[6]

The epigraphic record in pre-Christian Roman Palestine, however, is extraordinarily thin.[7] Only a handful of Palestinian inscriptions exist which might be used to contextualize the spread of Roman entertainments in the region.[8] In the place of epigraphic evidence, however, there exists a good deal of literary material to draw upon. The writings of Jews living in Palestine during the first through the fourth century C.E. make frequent, though often critical, mention of Greek and Roman style games. The works of the Jewish historian Josephus provide some of the richest descriptions of the events held in hippodromes, theaters and amphitheaters of any Roman

[5] E.g., L. Robert, *Les gladiateurs dans l'Orient grec* (Paris: Champion, 1940); M. J. D. Carter, "The Presentation of Gladiatorial Spectacles in the Greek East: Roman Culture and Greek Identity" (Ph.D. diss., McMaster University, 1999). C. Roueché, *Performers and Partisans at Aphrodisias in the Roman and Late Roman Periods: A Study Based on Inscriptions from the Current Excavations at Aphrodisias in Caria* (London: Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 1993).

[6] See Robert, *Gladiatuers*; Carter, "The Presentation of Gladiator Spectacles;" and O. van Nijf, "Local Heroes: Athletics, Festivals and Elite Self-Fashioning in the Roman Near East," in *Being Greek under Rome: Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic, and the Development of Empire*, ed. S. Goldhill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 306–304.

[7] Cf. L. Di Segni, "Epigraphic Documentation on Building in the Provinces of Palaestina and Arabia, 4th-7th C.," in *The Roman and Byzantine Near East: Some Recent Archaeological Research*, ed. J. H. Humphrey, JRA Supplementary Series 31 (Ann Arbor, MI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1999), 149–178.

[8] E.g., Welles #192–194 in C. H. Kraeling et al., *Gerasa, City of the Decapolis; An Account Embodying the Record of a Joint Excavation Conducted by Yale University and the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem (1928–1930), and Yale University and the American Schools of Oriental Research (1930–1931, 1933–1934)* (New Haven, CT: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1938); D. Adamesteanu and A. Frova, *Scavi di Caesarea Maritima*, (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1965), 224 #11= B. Lifshitz, "Inscriptions de Césarée en Palestine," *Rbi* 74 (1965): 57; H. C. Butler, E. Littmann, and W. K. Prentice, *Syria: Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria in 1904–1905 and 1909* (Leiden: Brill, 1907), vol. 3 #549.= M. Sartre *IGLS* XIII #9407; CIL XIV suppl. 4624; an inscription in the theater at Beth She'an/Scythopolis mentions Zadok Absalom, who may be of Jewish or Samaritan origin, see A. Negev, "Beth She'an: The Roman Theater," *Hadashot Archeologiyot* 2 (1962): 14.

province. Josephus describes the establishment and reception of the earliest spectacles held in Roman Palestine during the first century B.C.E. and offers invaluable evidence about the first Jewish encounters with Roman forms of entertainment in the first century C.E.[9] The major works of classical Rabbinic literature – the Mishnah, the Tosefta, the Palestinian Talmud and midrash collections – furnish scattered references and reactions to the theatrical performances, gladiatorial combats, mimes and chariot races held in Roman Palestine from the second through the early fifth century C.E.[10] These texts provide a valuable context through which, with the application of great care and a healthy dose of skepticism, we can interpret the physical evidence and view the spectrum of Jewish attitudes towards Roman spectacle.

Most of the literature written by Jews from Roman Palestine shows a critical bias against Roman spectacles and entertainment. In a few passages, Josephus describes Roman entertainments as a foreign corruption of the traditional Jewish way of life and a violation of Jewish religious and ethical norms. The Jewish historian relates a number of incidents that appear to attest to Jewish antagonism towards Roman entertainments and the rulers who attempted to promote them, most notably a protest against Herod the Great's foundation of Greek and Roman style games in Jerusalem.[11] A few centuries later, the early rabbis forbade Jewish attendance at theaters, amphitheaters, and other entertainment buildings.[12] They developed a whole range of strategies designed to discourage Jews, except under dire circumstances, from becoming spectators. They considered Roman spectacles to be religiously circumspect, morally degenerate, and ultimately a useless waste of time and resources. Both Josephus and the works of Palestinian rabbinic literature, then, provide some evidence for Jewish opposition to the culture of Roman spectacle.

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[9] H. A. Harris, *Greek Athletics and the Jews* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976); M. Lämmer, "Griechische Wettkämpfe in Jerusalem und ihre politischen Hintergründe," *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Sporthochschule Köln* (1973): 182–227; idem, "Griechische Wettkämpfe in Galiläa unter der Herrschaft des Herodes Antipas," *Kölner Beiträge zur Sportwissenschaft* (1981): 37–67; idem, "The Attitude of King Agrippa I Towards Greek Contests and Roman Games," in *Physical Education and Sports in Jewish History and Culture*, ed. U. Simri (Netanya: Wingate Institute, 7–17; idem, "The Introduction of Greek Sports into Jerusalem Through Herod the Great and its Political Significance," in *Physical Education and Sports in Jewish History and Culture,* ed. U. Simri (Netanya: Wingate Institute, 1973), 18–38.

[10] See Weiss, *Public Spectacles* esp. 117–69; M. Jacobs, "Theatres and Performances as Reflected in the Talmud Yerushalmi," in *Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*, ed. P. Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 1.327–47.

[11] *AJ* 15.267–90.

[12] *t. Avod. Zar.* 2:5–7.

Traditional scholarship has tended to accept the testimony of these two main literary sources uncritically as evidence for native Jewish aversion to the culture of the theater and the games. M. Lämmer, G. Alon, M. Smallwood, J. Juster, M. Goodman, L. Levine, and a host of other scholars consider Josephus's accounts of Jewish resistance to Herod's games as trustworthy evidence for an "orthodox" or typical Jewish attitude towards Roman spectacle.[13] This view imagines that Jews were predisposed to resist this culture, either on religious or nationalistic grounds. Jewish particularism and separatism, this view argues, were diametrically opposed to the sorts of values that guaranteed success of the games and entertainments in other areas of the Roman Empire. Jews were exposed to these entertainments largely because of foreign influence, either early on under the aegis of the client king Herod the Great, or, later, as a result of living under a pagan empire that sought to assert not only political, but also cultural, domination over its subjects. Jews had to struggle against outside pressure to remain culturally distinct from their neighbors. This struggle took the form of either resistance, avoidance, or harsh criticism of Roman entertainments as a detestable form of foreign influence.

One notable exception to this trend in early scholarship on the relationship between Jews and spectacle deserves special mention. In an impressive monograph entitled *Greek Athletics and the Jews*, H. A. Harris, a classicist who wrote extensively on Greek and Roman sport, argued that Hellenistic Jewry, far from avoiding Greek sport and athletics, actually participated in and promoted games of all kinds.[14] As evidence, Harris presented numerous instances from the writings of the Alexandrian Jew Philo where this Jewish philosopher reveals a detailed knowledge and a somewhat passionate personal fascination with certain forms of sport, particularly foot-races and other forms of athletics. Examining athletic language in *I* and *II Macc*, as well as in the writings of Josephus, Harris came to the conclusion that

[13] Lämmer, "The Attitude of King Agrippa I towards Greek Contests and Roman Games;" idem, "Griechische Weltkämpfe in Jerusalem und ihre politischen Hintergründe;" idem, "The Introduction of Greek Sports into Jerusalem through Herod the Great and its Political Significance;" G. Alon, "Me'Halakhot Rishonim," in *Meḥḳarim Be-Toldot Yiśrael Bi-Yeme Bayit Sheni Uvi-Teḳufat Ha-Mishnah Veha-Talmud* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hotsa'at ha-Kibuts ha-Me'uchad, 1970); E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews Under Roman Rule: From Pompey to Diocletian* (Leiden: Brill, 1976); J. Juster, *Les Juifs dans l'Empire Romain; leur condition juridique, économique et sociale* (Paris: Geuthner, 1914); L. H. Feldman, "The Orthodoxy of the Jews in Hellenistic Egypt," *Jewish Social Studies* 22, no. 4 (1960): 215–237; M. Goodman, *State and Society in Roman Galilee, A. D. 132–212* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2000); idem, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations* (London: Allen Lane, 2007); L. I. Levine, *Jerusalem: Portrait of the City in the Second Temple Period (538 B.C.E.–70 C.E.)* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002).

[14] H. A. Harris, *Greek Athletics and the Jews.*

Jews were thoroughly acculturated and not overwhelmingly resistant to Greek athletics. A few Jews, like Josephus and the authors of *I* and *II Macc*, may have held more critical views about the acceptability of Jewish participation in Greek sport, but their familiarity with the phenomenon betrays the fact that athletics played a significant role in Second Temple Jewish society. Harris's argument is largely overstated. He has been criticized for underestimating the cultural differences between Diaspora Jews like Philo, an Alexandrian Jewish philosopher with an elite background and a Platonic education, and Jews living in Jerusalem or elsewhere in Palestine.[15] For this reason, his ideas about Jewish familiarity with Greek sport have been largely ignored. Modern scholarship tends to take the opposite view, that Jews on the whole avoided Greek and Roman entertainments during the Second Temple Period.

The basic premise that Jews were predominantly resistant to Greek and Roman entertainments colors much of the scholarship on the rabbinic evidence as well. Several passages from the Tosefta, early rabbinic midrash, and the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds forbid going to theaters, stadiums, or circuses. Early scholarship on the issue of Jewish attitudes towards Roman entertainment tends to treat rabbinic laws against attending Roman entertainments as a reflection of actual Jewish behavior, mistaking these rabbinic prescriptions for descriptive evidence.[16] S. Krauss, for example, considered rabbinic hostility towards Roman entertainment proof that Jews were totally averse to the presentation of gladiatorial combat, theatrical productions, athletic competitions and horse racing. Krauss claims that "the Jews, following their spiritual leaders, the sages, looked upon these games as a detestable abomination and distanced themselves from them as much as was possible."[17] Krauss and others were working under the assumption that most Palestinian Jews considered the rabbinic sages their spiritual, and perhaps even political, leaders.[18] If the rabbis considered Roman spectacles to be a form of pagan worship, immoral self-indulgence or a simple waste of time, then likely the rest of Jewish society, whose

[15] T. Rajak, "The One Great Scorer," *The Classical Review* 29, no. 1 (1979): 127–128.

[16] For a collection of the relevant rabbinic evidence see S. Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie*, 3 vols. (Leipzig: Gustav Fock, 1910–12; repr. Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1966), I. 113–122.

[17] S. Krauss, *Paras Ve-Romi Ba-Talmud Uva-Midrashim* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk, 1947), 220. [The translation from the Hebrew is my own].

[18] For a correction of this view, see S. Schwartz and M. Goodman, "Historiography on the Jews in the 'Talmudic Period' (70–640 CE)," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 79–114; S. Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C. E* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); C. Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997); L. I. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine in Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1989).

behavior did not significantly differ from rabbinic norms, did so as well. The theaters and amphitheaters of Roman Palestine, according to Krauss and others, are explainable as pagan phenomena, imposed upon the Jews by their neighbors. Though they existed in close proximity to the Jews, and touched almost every aspect of civic life, Jews largely avoided them.

The notion that rabbinic laws against attending the theater furnish evidence for overwhelming Jewish resistance to Roman spectacle has been successfully challenged by Z. Weiss. His interdisciplinary approach to the study of Roman entertainment in Palestine combines a survey of the Talmudic evidence with serious archaeological inquiry. Weiss demonstrates that the archaeological evidence does not support the notion that Roman entertainments were strictly pagan phenomena. Theaters, amphitheaters and other monumental buildings for Roman entertainment were constructed not only in pagan cities in Roman Palestine, but also in cities that were populated mostly by Jews, such as Tiberias and Sepphoris. These structures, Weiss argues, must have been constructed with more than the scattered pagan population in mind. The existence of theaters in largely Jewish areas of Roman Palestine suggests that Jews participated in Roman entertainments despite rabbinic prohibitions. Moreover, Weiss suggests that the rabbinic texts should be interpreted as indirect evidence for Jewish involvement in Roman spectacle. The Jewish community did participate in these games, and the rabbis were forced to repeatedly prohibit Jewish attendance. The rabbinic dicta represent practical attempts to control and regulate what the rabbis saw as unacceptable Jewish behavior. Ultimately, Weiss argues that the archaeological and literary evidence, not only just rabbinic prohibitions against attending the theater or the circus but also the many rabbinic parables that are infused with details from the world of public entertainment, argue quite strongly that Jewish interaction with Roman spectacle was widespread.[19]

All of these previous approaches, from Krauss to Harris, and to a more limited extent Weiss, have concentrated on the issue of whether or not the Jews predominantly resisted or assimilated themselves to the culture of Roman spectacle. For the most part, the division between those who consider Jews to have been predominantly resistant to Greek and Roman entertainments and those who criticize this premise reflects the nature of the available evidence. The literary evidence provides much information to support the notion that Jews traditionally opposed public games and shows. Smallwood, Juster, Krauss, and most general accounts of Jewish society and culture under Greek and Roman rule take for granted Jew-

[19] Weiss, *Public Spectacles*, esp. 6, 195–227; idem, "Adopting a Novelty"; idem, "Roman Leisure Culture."

ish resistance or distaste for foreign entertainments. On the other hand, the physical evidence irrefutably demonstrates Jewish support and interest in these very same entertainments. Following Weiss, a number of scholars take seriously the notion that the majority of Jewish society differed with the rabbis on the issue of Roman entertainments and deviated from rabbinic norms.[20] Weiss argues that the rabbis were forced to deal with Jewish interest in Roman entertainments as a social reality and fought repeatedly to counter it.

Attempts to determine a "Jewish" attitude towards spectacle entertainment will inevitably fall prey to historical reductionism. As with most discussions of the ancient Jewish relationship to Hellenization or Romanization, a focus on Jewish assimilation or resistance towards Roman entertainment overlooks the fact that Jewish culture largely emerged in the context of, rather than in strict opposition to, imperial cultures.[21] It has been far more useful, in most cases, to discuss the ways that Jews developed different strategies of accommodation and resistance to these cultures than to define a typical Jewish response.[22] There clearly existed a spectrum

[20] See e. g., Jacobs, "Theatres and Performances;" C. Hezser, "Toward the Study of Jewish Popular Culture in Roman Palestine," in *"The Words of a Wise Man's Mouth Are Gracious"* (*Qoh* 10, 12): *Festschrift for Günter Stemberger on the occasion of his 65th birthday*, ed. M. Perani (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 267–297.

[21] See the helpful bibliography in L. L. Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992). 147–70. The idea that all forms of late antique Judaism were influenced by Hellenic culture was introduced in large part by M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974); idem, *The "Hellenization" of Judaea in the First Century After Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1989). See also E. S. Gruen, "Hellenistic Judaism," in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. D. Biale, vol. 3 (New York: Schocken, 2002), I. 77–135; J. J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000); L. I. Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity: Conflict or Confluence* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998); G. Boccacini, "Hellenistic Judaism: Myth or Reality," in *Jewish Literatures and Cultures: Context and Intertext*, ed. A. Norich and Y. Z. Eliav (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2008), 55–77.

[22] J. M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE – 117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996); S. Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society?: Reciprocity and Solidarity in Ancient Judaism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), esp. 21–45, 161–5; B. A. Berkowitz, *Execution and Invention Death Penalty Discourse in Early Rabbinic and Christian Cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); idem, "'The Limits of Their Laws': Ancient Rabbinic Controversies about Jewishness (and Non-Jewishness)," *JQR* 99, no. 1 (2009): 121–157; J. Levinson, "The Athlete of Piety: Fatal Fictions in Rabbinic Literature [Hebrew]," *Tarbiz* 68 (1999): 61–86; R. L. Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia Between Persia and Roman Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); idem, "Problems in the use of the Bavli for the History of Late-Roman Palestine: The Example of Astrology," in *Rabbinic Texts and the History of Roman Palestine*, ed. M. Goodman and P. Alexander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 165–83.

of Jewish attitudes and behaviors towards spectacle entertainment. These ranged from violent opposition to uncritical acceptance and included a host of intermediate positions. Not all modes of Jewish resistance or acculturation were similar. They varied from individual to individual, from context to context, and likely evolved and shifted over time. Each of these attitudes, strategies and contexts deserve ample attention and recommend caution against over-generalization.

Previous investigations of Roman spectacle have also tended to concentrate on the external forms of popular entertainment. Theaters and amphitheaters are sometimes dismissed as mere conveniences. Since they housed entertainments for the urban masses, cavalier accounts of the spread of Roman entertainment view these structures as little more than "luxurious additions to the Roman lifestyle."[23] Because of this assumption, one frequently encounters the suggestion that Jews picked up the spectacular habit simply because Roman entertainments provided pleasant diversions. Jews who attended the theater succumbed to the sorts of mild social pressures and influences, mostly as a result of contact with Roman elites, that could be avoided, should these Jews wish. Occasionally, Jewish abstinence from Roman spectacle is cast as an esthetic choice with little real societal implications. Accordingly, if Jews refused to go to the theater, they perhaps missed out on the latest bit of satire, but little else. These Jews may have marked themselves off as different, but the loss in social capital could perhaps be easily made up for in other ways.

But the spread of theaters and amphitheaters in the provinces represents far more than the diffusion of Roman tastes. Throughout the Roman world, the presentation of theater performances, gladiatorial combats, athletic competitions, chariot races and a host of other public entertainments went hand in hand with the process of Romanization, as different groups of people absorbed aspects of Roman culture and a sense of Roman identity.[24] Games and spectacles played a more complex social function than mere entertainment. They served as the most conspicuous displays of *Romanitas,* the very essence of being Roman. Theaters and amphitheaters were often the first public buildings constructed in a new or resettled Roman city.[25] The extent of their diffusion went far beyond any expectations based on population or need, stretching even beyond the urban network in some cases.[26]

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[23] For criticism of this tendency, see A. Futrell, *Blood in the Arena: The Spectacle of Roman Power* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001), 75–6.

[24] Carter, "The Presentation of Gladiatorial Spectacles," iii and passim.

[25] G. Woolf, *Becoming Roman: The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 121–2.

[26] Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 53–76.

Spectacle entertainments also transcend categorization as purely political or religious phenomena. In the wake of K. Coleman's work on "Fatal Charades," and D. Potter's "Performance, Power and Justice in the High Empire," a great deal of attention has been placed on the theater and amphitheater as a site of Roman disciplinary control.[27] Since theaters, amphitheaters, and stadiums could be used as settings for trials and punishments, Roman games served as an important locus for the demonstration of Roman power. There were strong links between these games and the imperial cult.[28] Some theaters and stadia were connected to temples or local festivals. Altars and statuary were common architectural features in monumental Roman circuses, and it may be assumed that many events began with some sort of dedicatory sacrifice. The presence of theaters and amphitheaters in the provinces to some extent represents the influence of imperial concerns from the center and the reproduction of Roman power in the periphery. But at the same time, provincials often imported these entertainments on their own terms and imbued them with local significance.[29] More often than not, theaters represented points of communication between the center and the periphery, rather than a one-sided imposition of values and expectations.[30]

Games and spectacles were part and parcel of Roman life and could scarcely be avoided. K. Hopkins explained the popularity of gladiatorial combat by describing these spectacles as a sort of safety valve for the anxieties caused by living in a highly disciplinary and controlled society.[31] Since seating in entertainment structures was divided according to status, and

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[27] D. Potter, "Performance, Power and Justice in the High Empire," in *Roman Theater and Society: E. Togo Salmon Papers I*, ed. W. J. Slater (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 129–161; K. M. Coleman, "Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments," *JRS* 80 (1990): 44–73.

[28] See S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Carter, "The Presentation of Gladiatorial Spectacles" 144–238, 286–92; Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 79–92.

[29] Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 75–6.

[30] H. Dodge, "Amusing the Masses: Buildings for Entertainment and Leisure in the Roman World," in *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire*, ed. D. J. Mattingly and D. Potter (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 205–255.

[31] K. Hopkins, *Death and Renewal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–30; T. E. J. Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators* (London: Routledge, 1992); D. G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1998); idem, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007); R. Beacham, *Spectacle Entertainments of Early Imperial Rome* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); R. Auguet, *Cruelty and Civilization: The Roman Games* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972); C. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans: The Gladiator and the Monster* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); P. Plass, *The Game of Death in Ancient Rome: Arena Sport and Political Suicide* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

tickets were often provided by patrons and voluntary organizations rather than by means of purchase, attending games and other spectacles also provided an unparalleled opportunity to express sub-group identities, whether as a client of a particular patron, a member of a guild or a constituent of an ethnic or religious minority.[32] Festivals and games served as an arena to express rivalries between cities and to promote civic solidarity. Attending the games and spectacles hosted by prominent citizens demonstrated a willingness to be counted among the Roman crowd. Provincial spectators displayed not only the outward forms of Rome, but a whole set of accompanying meanings and assumptions as well.[33]

Because of the important roles that popular entertainments played in Roman society, they provide an interesting lens to examine the relationship between Jewish and Roman culture and identity. These entertainments and the values they represented were practically unavoidable, and inexorably linked to the political, social, and religious life of Greco-Roman cities.[34] Jewish attitudes towards these spectacles, then, reflect the willingness of Jews to identify themselves as Romans and to participate, either out of interest or out of necessity, in the political and social life of the city. Jews could have expressed this willingness in a number of ways. The civic nature of Roman entertainment may have enabled some Jewish accommodation to Roman norms, rather than complete avoidance. These spectacles provided at least some opportunities for other provincials to express their own tastes and showcase local practices. This was always done in a way that was recognizably Greco-Roman, but under limited and fortunate circumstances games and festivals might be adapted to regional, local, or religious practices and beliefs. At the same time, the rejection of the values that lay at the heart of these games would have been a statement that reflected far more than personal taste and might have considerable consequences.

The present study is directed towards the task of examining this variety of Jewish attitudes towards Roman spectacle and understanding the different strategies for accommodation and resistance to this culture that emerged during the period of Roman domination of Palestine. Rather than dwell on the issue of Jewish acceptance or avoidance of the popular entertainments of the Roman world, I work from the assumption that Jews did not respond to these spectacles in a unified or easily predictable fashion.

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[32] G. Fagan, *The Lure of the Arena* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Robert, *Gladiateurs* #48 mentions, for example, a Dionysiac association while #97 mentions a corporation of launderers.

[33] Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 75.

[34] Dodge, "Amusing the Masses: Buildings for Entertainment and Leisure in the Roman World;" B. Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives: John Chrysostom's Attack on Spiritual Marriage* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 13–41.

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