

Jews and Drama

Introducing the Special Issue*

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“Jews and Drama” – this special issue of the *Journal of Ancient Judaism* contains both essays addressing ancient Jewish attitudes to the theatre and those looking at the engagement of Jews with drama and performativity in ancient literary works. This collection of essays has its origins in a session of the Hellenistic Judaism program unit at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) in San Diego in November 2014; this session was entitled “Jews on the Stage / Jews and the Stage.” Following the fruitful discussion at San Diego we, as the chairs of the Hellenistic Judaism program unit at the SBL Annual Meeting, have also invited other scholars to contribute additional essays to this issue. We are grateful to the editors of the journal for giving us the opportunity to guest-edit this collection of essays.

Theatrical performance, a landmark of Athenian contribution to cultural history, since its heyday in the early fifth century B.C.E., defined the polis perhaps more than any other cultural form. Yet, throughout the Hellenistic and Roman periods, theatre, an architectural typology, and drama, its literary genre, moved beyond the boundaries of Athenian distinctiveness to become one of the most popular forms of the Greek cultural heritage.

Jews,¹ as part of the wider Greco-Roman world from its early days, naturally had to confront this initially foreign form. Whether living in Judea and the surrounding Levant, or in diasporic communities across the Hellenistic and Roman world, evidence shows that Jews were to a considerable degree familiar with theatrical performances. They were not only aware of, but also attended the theatre. This conclusion emerges clearly from the two essays by René Bloch and Zeev Weiss that bookend this collection. What Jews made of this experience was, according to the available evidence, much of that which is treated in this theme issue, as diversified as it could be. Judging from Jewish behavior, cognition, and emotional reaction to theatrical performances, an ambiguous relationship transpired, one that brooks a spectrum of attitudes between the poles of the acceptance and use of theatrical tropes on the one hand and the outright refusal of theatrical content on the other.

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1 It is not here the place to take up the debate on appropriate terms: we speak of “Jews” in order to keep the account straightforward, but we are conscious that some aspects are equally or even better captured by the term “Judeans.”

In the end, the attitude of Jews towards the theatre at large, from performance on the stage to its literary extensions on the page, shows once again that Jews of the Second Temple Period adopted, absorbed or confronted, either willingly or subconsciously, the most visible codes of communication that Hellenistic political transformations exported from the Greek region – in this case, the theatricality of fictional action and language that an Athenian endeavor of the Classical period introduced and popularized, and that the Hellenistic fusion/confusion/diffusion of culture made available to them.

Jews appropriated the theatrical medium, but not the message: the extant literary evidence of theatre writing or of the use of theatrical language was applied to specific Jewish subjects, both Palestinian and diasporic; drama and dramatic language were employed to popularize and discuss issues at the heart of the Jewish experience of the time, openly accessible to the gentile world when written in Greek, or restricted to a Jewish Palestinian audience when written in Hebrew. Jews of the Greco-Roman period demonstrated an appreciation for the range of expressive possibility that the dramatic cultural experience had to offer no matter how they reacted to it, and they often adapted it to their own tastes. In this, as in many other aspects of their collective life, Jews of the Second Temple period show themselves to be a truly Mediterranean society.

The essays in this collection map out the territory of the Jewish relationship with drama and theatre in antiquity and provide significant probes of this ambivalence. While some essays focus on drama as staged in theatres, others analyze the deployment of dramatic tropes and motifs in literary works or investigate engagement with drama through the performative qualities of Jewish writings.

René Bloch opens the collection with a foundational essay on Jewish theatre in antiquity (“Part of the Scene: Jewish Theater in Antiquity”). Bloch questions the widespread assumption that “the Jew,” until recently, has never been a *homo theatralis*, and he presents a nuanced picture, pointing to the complexities of Jewish engagement with theatre, to the Jewish reading of pagan tragedies and comedies, to their acting and, occasionally, even their writing of their own plays. Although rabbis, in this respect not unlike many ancient bishops, often condemned the theatre, there are also hints of a mitigating position. Bloch reviews the evidence for Jewish theatre attendance in ancient Palestine and the Diaspora, provides a differentiated picture of the views on theatre in the works of Philo of Alexandria and Flavius Josephus, presents us with inscriptional evidence, and examines cases of ancient Jewish actors as well as the clearest case of a Jewish drama preserved from antiquity, Ezekiel’s *Exagoge*.

It is this work on which the next two essays focus. *G. Anthony Keddie* and *Jonathan MacLellan*, in their essay, “Ezekiel’s *Exagoge* and the Politics of Hellenistic Theatre: Mosaic Hegemony on a Ptolemaic Model,” argue that rather than situate the *Exagoge*, on account of its deviations from the classical form of tragedy, along the Hellenism-Judaism divide and conclude that it was either not