
A vast chronological period, from the Iron Age to the early Muslim period, is dealt with in this collection of interdisciplinary essays, which tackles a broad variety of geographical, historical, archeological, literary and epigraphical issues: five hundred pages enriched with maps, pictures and drawings, bibliography of relevant literature, and useful indexes including subjects, place names, persons, texts and ancient and modern authors.

In the first section of the book, Sean Freyne deals with the meaning of concepts such as Hellenization defining it as “a process which not only introduced new cultural elements into an existing culture but seems also to have triggered internal processes of transformation and adaptation, a multiform process that unfolds on different levels, proceeding with various speeds and affecting social, economic and religious aspects.” It was the Phoenicians who first transmitted Greek cultural impulses in the region, but they did so while also transmitting Egyptian elements alongside their own Phoenician culture. In line with F. Millar’s conclusions (“The Phoenician Cities: A Case Study of Hellenization,” Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society 209 (1983), 55-71). Freyne emphasizes the limits of Hellenization vis-à-vis the persistence of Phoenician culture: there was clearly no attempt by either the Ptolemies or the Seleucids to destroy indigenous religious beliefs in the name of a pan-Hellenic culture, nor is there any intimation of an easy syncretism at work. Freyne soundly concludes (20) that conservatism in cultic affairs may well have combined with openness to other cultural influences, as Collins, too, had suggested in the case of Judaism vis-à-vis Hellenism (J. J. Collins, “Cult and Culture: The Limits of Hellenization in Judea,” in: Hellenism in the Land of Israel, ed. J. J. Collins and G. E. Sterling [Notre Dame 2001], 38-61).

The second section of the book is devoted to various pictures of “Galilee” or “Galileans” presented in our sources. Martin Karrer examines a text (Isa 9:1-2 LXX) that has triggered a lively debate about the conception of Galilee in pre-Hasmonean and Hasmonean times, Timothy Luckritz Marquis explores Josephus’ reworking of 1 Macc 10:25-45, and Silvia Cappelletti presents the testimony of non-Jewish Greek and Roman authors dealing with Galilee. The epigraphical material from the necropolis of Beith-She’arim is examined by Michael Peppard, who suggests that ethnicity “is not fixed but fluid, not fundamental but negotiable, not rooted in the circumstances of birth but continually enacted in the circumstances of daily life.” In addition to Greek and Semitic names (especially biblical, Hebrew, and Palmyrene ones) and bilingual names, complex onomastic situations are also attested at Beith-She’arim, such as that of Isther Amfaitha,
spelled in Greek letters, where the first name transliterates the Semitic Esther, while the second is derived from the verb *ampfaino*, a poetic form of *anafaino*, “to give light” or “to shine forth.” The second name, therefore, suggests that the name Esther was equated to the Greek word *aster* “star” or “light.” The original name has been linked to the Greek word *aster* through a phonetic resemblance, and then that name, already a hybrid of Semitic and Greek affiliation, has been translated or elaborated into a second Greek name. Peppard concludes that “through their onomastic expression, people at Beth She’arim chose to both represent and create their ethnic hybridity” (113). What one might ask, at this point, is what this “hybridity” really meant in the life in these people, how they felt about their own cultural and spiritual identity vis-à-vis that (or those) of their neighbors. It is also possible to wonder how these complex identities changed in the course of time, reacting to the prevailing social and economic circumstances and also to the policy of the different rulers—the Ptolemies, Seleucids, Hasmoneans and then Romans—who happened to govern the country.

As to the Jewish stance vis-à-vis Roman power, cases are attested of Herodian rulers who managed quite well to combine Jewish identity and loyalty to the government. Herod Antipas, for example, seems to have been one of those who most closely adhered to the Jewish tradition. A striking example is offered by the games that he established in honor of the emperor Tiberius, which did not conflict with central demands of the Torah since on one hand they honored the emperor, but on the other hand included no cultic and iconic elements, no sacrifices and no holy processions. Even if the Jews were not legally exempted from the Imperial Cult, Monika Bernett convincingly argues that it was somehow possible to conciliate the need of demonstrating one’s loyalty to the government with the exigencies of the Jewish world (of course, this did not always work out, as Caligula’s days demonstrate).

Other issues appear more problematic. The testimony of I Maccabees on the conflict between Jews and non Jews, for example, may well depend on the biblical narratives of the conquest and settlement of the land: but should we really consider these passages dealing with the hostility of the local ethnic groups towards the Jewish communities as reflecting the rhetorical appeal of the author, completely detached from historical reality? Is it really possible to dismiss a “picture of conflict” between Jews and non-Jews, as many of these essays suggest? One should not forget that in Hasmonean times, archeological evidence would seem to support the literary testimony: cult sites such as Mispey Yamim suffered the same fate as the Samaritan temple on Gerizim under John Hyrcanus, and other Persian-period sites recognized by the presence of a distinctive type of pottery were destroyed and not re-inhabited.

What is true is that archeological finds are often difficult to interpret. Stone vessels and miqva’ot in Galilean villages, for example, undoubtedly attest to Jewish attention to purity concerns, but may this be taken to mean that the