Margaret H. Williams


Over the past quarter of a century Williams has enriched our knowledge of Diaspora Judaism and of ancient Jewish epigraphy by a long series of fine articles and also by a very useful book, *The Jews among the Greeks and Romans: A Diasporan Sourcebook* (Baltimore, 1995). In the present volume she reprints 22 of her essays, preceded by a long introduction in which she surveys the flurry of research on the Jewish diaspora and on early Jewish epigraphy in the last decades and shows how these go hand in hand. Most of the Jewish diaspora communities in antiquity are only known to us through inscriptions. In this context she also deals a fatal blow to the fashionable but untenable theory that the Greek term *Ioudaioi* should preferably be translated by “Judean,” not “Jew” (the sooner this fad is over, the better); she discusses this matter at greater length in ch. 17. In this review it is impossible to discuss all 22 essays, so I will only list the topics dealt with and at the end add some general comments.

The book is divided into three parts: the Jews of ancient Rome (11 chapters); diaspora studies (6 chapters); onomastic studies (5 chapters). In ch. 1 (2004) Williams shows how the identity of the Jews in Rome developed over time and that, despite some drastic modifications (e.g., after the fall of the Temple in 70), loyalty and devotion to the Law of Moses remained a constant factor in it. Ch. 2 (2004) deals with the curious ancient reports about fasting by the Jews of Rome on the Sabbath. These reports were no mistakes; Roman Jews fasted because tradition had it that Jerusalem was conquered twice on a Sabbath and these conquests marked the beginning of the slavery of Rome's Jews. Ch. 3 (1989) surveys the debate on the question why Tiberius expelled the Jews from Rome in 19 CE and concludes that the emperor's action was “simply the conventional response of a beleaguered administration to a group which was deemed to be posing a threat to law and order” (79). In ch. 4 (1988) W. deals with the supposed Jewish tendencies of Nero's wife, Poppaea Sabina: she was not a Godfearer in the strict sense but just one of those many pagans in the higher strata of Roman society with a fashionable interest in Judaism. Domitian’s ruthless exaction of the Jewish tax and the charge of living a "Jewish life" leveled against Flavius Clemens and Flavia Domitilla are the subject of ch. 5 (1990), an excellent study with a novel solution to an old problem. In ch. 6 (1998) W. argues, against the majority opinion, that the Jewish community at Rome had a hierarchical structure with a central board governing the various synagogues, as was also the case in Alexandria. Nevertheless, in
ch. 7 (1994) she shows, on the basis of the nomenclature of synagogue officials in inscriptions from the catacombs in Rome, that these synagogues are unlikely to have been homogeneous and were varied in their structure and the titulature of their officials. These are two superb contributions. Ch. 8 (2000) offers an original and convincing solution to the long-standing problem of what was the function of the twice attested exarchôn in Rome’s synagogues. On the basis of a meticulous lexicographical investigation W. concludes that he was not a former archôn but the leader of congregational antiphonal singing. Somewhat more speculative but no less fascinating is ch. 9 (2002) in which W. argues that Alexander, a bubularus de macello from Rome, was an upmarket purveyor of kosher beef. Ch. 10 (1994) refutes the thesis that in a Roman Jew’s choice of burial place his synagogal affiliation was paramount. Leon’s theory that no congregation had ever used more than one catacomb at any time turns out to be wrong. Rather, in the light of evidence from Palestine and the diaspora, the rule seems to have been that one should strive to be buried “with one’s fathers.” There is hardly any evidence for synagogal involvement in funerary matters — burial was pre-eminently a family affair. Finally, in ch. 11 (2011) W. studies the relation between image (or decoration) and text in Jewish epitaphs of Rome and concludes, inter alia, that this relation is best explained in terms of Jewish adaptation of Roman memorialisation practices. Even though they do not cover all aspects of the Jewish diaspora at Rome, these 11 chapters (some 170 pages in total) provide us with the best picture of this important diaspora community since H. J. Leon’s classic work of 1960.

In the second part (Diaspora studies), ch. 12 (1994) argues that Diogenes, the Rhodian grammarian who lectured only on the Sabbath (Suetonius, Tiberius 32.2), cannot but have been a Jew (with wider implications!). Ch. 13 (1992) deals with the question whether the famous Aphrodisias inscription evinces a case of patriarchal interference in a Jewish community in Western Asia Minor. W. rightly argues that it is utterly implausible that the rabbis had any influence in the third (or even fourth) century in Asia Minor and that the inscription does not give us any reason to think so. Chs. 14 and 15 (1992; 1994) are about the epigraphic evidence for the Jewish community in Corycos (South-East Anatolia). W. argues that the Jews there were “enthusiastic integrationists” (241), but that the nature of their integration changed over time, e.g., because of Christian influence after the 4th century. The first of these chapters is important for its methodological considerations as to the question what makes an inscription Jewish. Ch. 16 (1999) deals with the rich epigraphic record of the Jewish community in the South-Italian town of Venusia. In it, W. shows that the evidence allows us, uniquely, to follow a Jewish family through seven generations and to trace the changes it underwent. In ch. 17 (1997) the meaning of the word