



Aphrodite and the Rabbis: How the Jews Adapted Roman Culture to Create Judaism as We Know It

Burton L. Visotzky

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From Reader Review Aphrodite and the Rabbis: How the Jews Adapted Roman Culture to Create Judaism as We Know It for online ebook

Katie B. says

What a fun academic book. Appealing to an array of readers and written with expertise and spunk. I enjoyed learning more about a particular niche in the Classical world. And to paraphrase the author, I wish there had been even more images in this "book with pictures" to illustrate examples.

Rachel says

See my review at <http://www.thereportergroup.org/Artic...>

james lowery says

A Great Book That Needs Follow-up Interpretations

Although this book is apparent in it's biases, the author states them with clarity while sticking to the facts that literature and archaeology provides. I enjoyed reading this book although the author remained hesitant and apologetic in several of his interpretations, even though, as I have already said, he laid his biases before the readers. Overall this was a good read definitely meant for the lay individual.

Jane says

I was really thrilled to receive this informative book on how elements of Greco-Roman culture have influenced the development of post-Second Temple Judaism! Titus destroyed the Temple in 70AD. The rabbi-professor author wrote simply enough for an educated layperson. I am always looking for works on how one religion or culture influences another; this one fit the bill nicely.

The author discusses how the religion had to change; no longer was there a central spot for animal sacrifice. The rabbi [teacher or master] system developed; each rabbi was like a philosopher--surrounding himself with a group of students [or disciples]. I never realized the term "rabbi" for Jesus was a New Testament anachronism. Judaism borrowed loan-words from Greek or Latin, written in Hebrew letters, that were incorporated into their law/rhetoric or philosophy. Each synagogue [itself a loan-word from the Greek] began using the vernacular for prayers rather than Hebrew. The order of the Passover Seder follows that of a Greek symposium--but lacking the raucous entertainment following the meal, conversation, and prayers. Of most interest to me was the incorporation of Roman architecture, e.g., the basilica, and interior decorations--floor mosaics and murals. This was new to me: Rabbi Gamaliel, an important figure, and St. Paul's teacher, declared the only forbidden images would be those specifically designed to be worshipped. So I understand now the Jews' purely aesthetic use of the human figure and animals in their art. Usually the figures are

dressed in Greek or Roman style; the author mentions a Moses at the Burning Bush in chiton and himation and a wall painting at Dura-Europas of Ahasuerus [in Persian dress] and Esther in Greco-Roman dress with tiara. The world map at an ancient synagogue--now in use as a church--at Madaba in Jordan is worth mentioning. In many places, most notably Sepphoris, there are floor mosaics of a zodiac with figures representing the seasons and a Helios and quadriga [4-horse chariot] in the center.

I really learned a lot and this book will always be a great reference. As the book is an ARC, there's no index yet, which lack I hope will be rectified when the book is released. I hope the pictures will be made sharper; in my copy details were indistinct.

Very highly recommended. I thank LibraryThing for sending me a copy for my honest review.

Fred Snyder says

News flash: Jewish thought and practice adapts to the culture at large.

This book digs deep into how Jews lived during Greco-roman times, and how they adapted, and how those adaptations are mainstream practices today. Greek words appear in contemporary writings and persist now, like 'synagogue.' Roman symposia set the structure for the Passover seder. Greek philosophy set the structure for Pirkei Avot.

Also fascinating were greco-roman practices that don't persist today. Jewish tombs. Mosaics of Helios and the zodiac.

Future dissertation: what does this book say about American (or European) jewish culture today?

But my favorite: the rabbis' Greek puns, written in Hebrew, that are lost on translations that don't take the double-entendre into account.

What I hated about this book: no citations. Some of the 'discoveries' seem to contradict hundreds of years of commentary, but do nothing to explain. I'll give one away: Talmud says, "Poverty is good for the Jewish people like a red ribbon on a white horse." The author claims that there were colored racing teams, and the red team was the Cubs of their day, losing for decades. I am left to assume that he made this fact up, since there is no evidence to back it up.

Earl says

Aphrodite and the Rabbis by Burton L. Visotzky is an interesting view on post-70CE Judaism, Roman culture of the period and most importantly where the two converged.

The destruction of the Temple led to a new type of Judaism, namely rabbinic Judaism. It seems that both contemporary Judaism and contemporary Christianity owe a lot of their appearance to cultures within which they had to adapt. While I was very familiar with the Christian equivalent (Christmas overlaid on Saturnalia, for instance) I was ignorant of the influence Roman culture had on Judaism.

I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in Jewish history or Roman history. The writing is engaging and the concepts, both theological and cultural, are presented clearly.

Richard Thompson says

We typically think of the Jews of the Roman Empire as rebellious holdouts, who refused to bow down to the ruling culture, but Visotzsky explains how this view is completely backwards. There were certainly some rebellious radicals, but the majority of the Jews were part of the Greco Roman world in which they lived and which was instrumental in shaping their worldview. And it was not just the assimilated general populace who were part of this world; it was the rabbis too. Visotzsky shows how many of the stories, symbols, rituals and practices of rabbinic Judaism had their origins in Greco Roman culture. Very interesting. The only thing that I did not care for about this book was that in an attempt to make his writing accessible to a broad audience, Visotzsky writes in a highly colloquial style that sometimes borders on being chirpy. It made for an easy read, but sometimes felt a bit inappropriate for the subject matter.

Shomeret says

I knew about some of the things that Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky discusses in *Aphrodite and the Rabbis* from previous reading. I even reviewed *Sefer HaRazim*, which Visotzky mentioned a number of times in his book. *Sefer HaRazim* contains references to Greco-Roman deities, Pagan types of magic and theology that could only come from Pagan sources. I also knew about Pagan images in ancient synagogues.

I liked Visotzky's conclusion that the syncretism in Roman era synagogues such as the numerous zodiac mosaics, validates Reform Judaism which interprets Judaism through the lens of the surrounding culture. This was apparently the same choice that Roman Jews made. So Jewish history has repeated itself. Perhaps the central theme of Visotzky's book is that there are more continuities between ancient and modern Judaism than his readers might have thought.

For my complete review see shomeretmasked.blogspot.com/2016/11/a...

The Jewish Book Council says

"Although Jewish tradition has positioned the Romans as the historic enemy of the Jewish people, Burton L. Visotzky argues that Judaism's transformation into a world religion was in fact made possible by the Roman Empire." Review by Jonathan Fass for the Jewish Book Council.

Melissa says

I love learning history and theology so this was an interesting and very informative book. I wanted to glean all the information from it so I was taking notes but had to return it to the library so I finished it without all the notes I still wanted to jot down. I'd probably read it again. I entered to win this book in a Goodreads giveaway and honestly was disappointed I didn't win. This would be a great book to add to any library. Recommended reading for those who are interested in the subject aptly described in the title.

Joan Mitchell says

First let me say "I am not Jewish and I know no Jewish people". This is an excellent book of Jewish history starting with the demise of the second temple and even a little before that showing the influence of the Roman empire on Jewish culture and religion. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book as it was history that I was never taught or ever thought I would be interested in. I recommend this book to anyone who likes history and who is interested in how historical events, places, cultures and beliefs were intertwined to make that history. I received this book from Goodreads for free.

catechism says

Disappointing. It had a very HOW DO YOU DO, FELLOW KIDS tone throughout, which sometimes led to eye-rolling ("Esau was the macho one and Jacob was the metrosexual") and sometimes to ranting at my friends ("the rabbis had a really locker-room culture and you know, boys will be boys" and if I never hear that bullshit excuse again it will be FAR too soon -- and! it was not even necessary! he was discussing bilingual puns!).

Anyway. Weird tone and bad editing aside, the thesis is that even though Rome is positioned as Traditional Enemy Of The Jews, the Judaism practiced today was hugely influenced by Roman culture. It seems pretty convincing just on the face of it, but the more I read, the less convinced I was. Some of his evidence was fascinating, but some was just plain weird, and he admits he cherry-picked it to prove his point. Bad historian! On top of that, while he definitely knows a lot about Judaism, I am less sure he knows his shit when it comes to Greece and Rome. He sure spends a lot of time talking about Greece when he claims to be talking about Rome, and maybe he means 'Greco-Roman culture' but who even knows. He conflates them when it's convenient and doesn't when it's not. I mean, start with the title: Aphrodite is Greek, not Roman. I guess "Venus and the Rabbis" did not sound as cool? Be less concerned with being cool, Visotzky.

Peter Eckstein says

This is a great book.

Rabbi Visotzky delves in the birth of Rabbinic Judaism in the Greco-Roman period. He describes how Greek and Roman culture informed the evolution of post-70 CE Judaism. He explores the art, language, architecture and scholarship of Jews living in the Roman empire, and how Rome helped redefine that Judaism. He dives into how this assimilation of non-Jewish culture, which strengthened Judaism, can help us understand how modern Judaism is evolving in American society.

His style is easy, and humorous.

I'll say it again....Great book.

Sara Goldenberg says

Naaaaah

Ruth Feathers says

An interesting summary of the cultural interactions in early CE times between the Greeks, Romans, and Jews of the middle east. Rabbi Visotzky looks at writings and art and shows us how the cultures mixed.
