Introduction

To be asked to review a quarter of a century of work by a great scholar by, and in the presence of, the great scholar himself is a great compliment but no less daunting from the knowledge that the scholar in question is as genial and kindly as he is learned and acute. What follows is an attempt, undoubtedly inadequately, to put into some perspective the unique contribution, in the studies reprinted in this volume and in a series of major monographs since the mid 1990s, that Erich Gruen has made to the study of Jews in the Hellenistic world and in the early Roman Empire.

As Erich has frequently stressed, he came to the study of Jewish history in this period as something of an outsider. That deep immersion in the study of Greece and Rome in classical antiquity as a young scholar should have included more or less nothing about Jews of that period except when they impinged on the political and military history of the wider Mediterranean world (usually as a result of rebellion) was a direct product of the disciplinary boundaries erected in European and American universities in the nineteenth century which allocated the study of Jews to Christian theologians (as background to the New Testament) or to orientalists seeking continuities in the languages and cultures of the Near East. The texts of Josephus and Philo had been rediscovered and edited by European Christian and Jewish humanists in the sixteenth century, and the Jewish scholars of the Wissenschaft des Judentums movement in the nineteenth century studied their works with enthusiasm as material for their attempts to reconstruct a national history for the Jews as coherent and rational as those of other European national movements, but the Greek Jewish writings were rarely studied either for literary style or (except in a Christian theological context) for moral edification, and none of the works of ancient Jews became part of the core set of texts adopted in the teaching of Greek and Roman history. Classical historians occasionally raided the Jewish material for data on the wider non-Jewish world, especially as evidence for the amalgam of Greek and Jewish culture defined as the essence of the Hellenistic culture postulated for the Near East after Alexander the Great, but they rarely saw it as part of their role as classicists to study the culture of Greek Jews in its own right.

The decision of Erich Gruen, as already a major scholar in the field of ancient history, to turn his attention in the early 1990s to the Jewish material from Alexander to Hadrian was thus rather a surprise. Other ancient historians of Jewish origins had strayed into Jewish history in earlier generations, but in most cases their interest in the topic seems to have reflected the remains of their knowledge derived from a traditional Jewish religious education which
they sought to reconcile with the very different training in the classics to which they had devoted their scholarly lives. Erich, born in Austria in 1935 but educated, after Bible study as a child in Hebrew School, in an essentially secular fashion in the United States and Oxford, had neither the advantage of close acquaintance with rabbinic materials nor the disadvantage of an instinctive tendency to rely too much on such materials for Jewish history, which such an education often brings, and for him it was natural to make the Greek Jewish texts not just an adjunct to rabbinic history but the main focus of his studies. Of these Greek Jewish texts, the writings of one author, Josephus, were beginning by the early 1990s to be treated as a more mainstream object of interest for ancient historians: Pierre Vidal-Naquet in the 1970s had used the example of Josephus caught between two political systems as a source of ruminations about contemporary politics, and Fergus Millar had used his writings as a major source for his study of the Roman emperor in 1977. But very few classicists were working on the rest of Jewish Greek literature, and questions of Jewish identity in a Greek world were still much bound up for most scholars with the issue, still fraught after the convulsions of the mid twentieth century, of the Jewish roots of Christianity.

When a classicist like Erich Gruen turns his gaze onto this material he sees quite different issues from those noted by New Testament scholars, let alone those who start from the rabbinic traditions. It is partly a question of perspective: we may know a great deal about Jews from this period because so much written by and about them was preserved by the continuous religious traditions of either Christians or Jews to the present day, but they were only a small group in a much larger and complex world, and we need to be constantly aware that what appears peculiar about the Jews may be a phenomenon more widely shared in the variegated cultures of the Mediterranean world even if it is only fully attested in the Jewish evidence. No less important is the instinct of classicists to subject texts not just to close reading but to sensitive analysis in light of genre and audience: the temptation of theologians, both Christian and Jewish, to raid the ancient evidence for proof texts to uphold a thesis runs counter to the principle of classical historians that each piece of evidence is to be judged on its merits even if the resulting picture of what actually happened is complex and confused.

Erich has brought these classicist’s skills to bear on this material with masterly precision and infectious enthusiasm. His brilliant proposal in this volume that we should be aware of the strong possibility of irony in the depiction of the Jews by Tacitus cuts through centuries of discussion as to whether Tacitus was or was not anti-Jewish, and his sceptical re-reading of the presentation of Caligula’s antipathy to Judaism in Philo’s Legatio shows how much can be achieved by going back to look with fresh eyes at passages which have been intensively studied and mined for many decades. In his numerous studies of identity
issues, it makes all the difference that he is constantly aware that Romans in the Middle and Late Republic were no less engaged than Jews in negotiating their own identity in relation to Greek traditions, and that integration of Jews into a Greek world will have been fluid and complex in light of shifting Greek views of Jews as well as shifting Jewish views of Greeks.

To such nuanced historical analysis Erich also brings some distinctive personal concerns and instincts. It is striking how often he chooses to emphasise the contingent over the general—in marked contrast to the great constitutional and legal theorists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries like Jean Juster, who sought to demonstrate the formal position of Jews in gentile societies in antiquity against a background of increasing legal restrictions on Jews in their own world, Erich emphasises the temporary and specific reasons both for state persecutions and for the actions in favour of diaspora Jewish communities attributed to the Jewish politician Herod. It is tempting to interpret Erich’s depiction of Jewish life in the diaspora as essentially benign, with issues of identity expressed in literary genres often intended primarily to entertain, as a reflection of the far more cheerful position of Jews within the Californian society where Erich has made his home for the past fifty years. An insistence on the viability of diaspora Jewish life runs through many of these studies, as does an insistence on a humorous side to much Jewish Greek literature which had passed by unnoticed by previous generations of scholars (and remains unrecognised by some even now, despite Erich’s best efforts). Not everyone will be persuaded to learn to read the Letter of Aristeas not just as evidence for a foundation myth about the origins of the Septuagint but as a repository of light comedy, or the strange assertion by the Jewish writer Arta-panus that Moses introduced to the Egyptians their distinctive worship of animal gods as a product of mischievous wit, but scholars and students will undoubtedly much benefit from Erich’s ingenuity and cheerful encouragement to understand these texts with such possibilities in mind.

Well over half of the studies in this volume were published in the last ten years, and Erich shows no sign whatever of slackening his pace in retirement. Not least through Erich’s own teaching of numerous doctoral students, the number of classicists who share his interest in the Jewish Greek materials has burgeoned over recent decades, and his writings have sparked a conversation across the field of ancient history which should ensure that the topics to which he has contributed so much will continue to elicit studies both from him and from others. That study of Jewish Greek culture has now entered the mainstream of ancient historical studies is in no small measure due to him, and to the essays included in this volume.

Martin Goodman
December 2014