

## Highlighting Religious Diversity: Creating “Jews among Greeks and Romans”

In many undergraduate Classics courses, Classicists recently have begun to highlight the unsung voices in the ancient Mediterranean. Within Classical Archaeology, scholars such as Michelle Berenfeld (Pitzer College) and Blair Fowlkes-Childs (Columbia University, New York University) have taught undergraduate seminars specifically focused on the archaeology of Roman provinces. Projects such as WCC’s *Diotima* and *Reflective Pedagogy Series*, *The Worlds of Roman Women* at [feminaeromanae.org](http://feminaeromanae.org) and *The DELTOS PROJECT: Gender & Sexuality in the Ancient Mediterranean* provided educators with resources to engage students in conversations about gender and sexuality. Inspired by other scholarly efforts to highlight unsung voices from the Greco-Roman Mediterranean, this presentation will discuss the presenter’s attempt at highlighting a sliver of the religious diversity in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean: creating the course “Jews among Greeks and Romans.” The primary goal of the course is to investigate cross-cultural dialogue and interaction between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors throughout the Greco-Roman world. The course has two basic premises: Jewish history cannot be understood without contextualizing it within the political, social, and cultural systems in which Jews lived, and the study of the Greco-Roman world, particularly in the undergraduate pedagogical context, ought to consider the experience of minority populations.

“Jews among Greeks and Romans” covers 600 years of history (~300 BCE-300 CE), examining both Jewish history during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Students explore how Jewish communities across the Mediterranean experienced Greek and Roman political, social, and cultural forces and, in the process, devised new ways of being Jewish. Particular attention is devoted to how Jews used religious ideas and practices not only to accommodate, but also to

distinguish themselves from the political and cultural milieu of their Mediterranean context. The class proceeds chronologically: (1) beginning with the conquests of Alexander the Great, (2) followed by Jewish community during the Ptolemaic and Seleucid dynasties, (3) continuing with the arrival of Rome as the dominant political and military power in the Eastern Mediterranean, and (4) concluding with the two Jewish revolts against Rome and their aftermaths.<sup>1</sup>

In this presentation, the presenter will discuss how they created “Jews among Greeks and Romans.” First, they will discuss the challenge of selecting relevant primary sources and topics. Because the class focuses on the cross-cultural dialogue between Jewish communities and their non-Jewish neighbors, the presenter wanted to select diverse primary sources. Therefore, the primary sources of the course not only draw from the Jewish and Classical literary canons but also from archaeological, epigraphic, and papyrological evidence. The diversity of primary sources selected for students, however, posed a challenge for the presenter. Previous scholars have published volumes that compile Greco-Roman representations of Jews<sup>2</sup> and have made literary and archaeological evidence about Jewish diasporic communities more accessible to students.<sup>3</sup> Yet, before the creation of this class, there was not a sourcebook that incorporated the literary, epigraphic, and papyrological evidence both from Judea-Palestine and also the Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the students engage with Josephus’ account of Alexander’s visit to Jerusalem; the Ptolemaic administration of the kingdom and the activity of the Tobiads, Roman imperialism in the second century BCE and the alliance with the Hasmonean rulers; and how Jews and Romans experienced the first Jewish revolt, both as a landmark military victory and opportunity to burnish the image of the Flavian dynasty, and as a landmark catastrophe forcing Jews to reassess their political and theological status.

<sup>2</sup> Menahem Stern’s 1974, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, is still the most comprehensive volume on Greco-Roman attitudes toward Jews and Judaism.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret H. Williams’ 1998 *The Jews among the Greeks and Romans: A Diasporan Sourcebook* is one such example of this kind of sourcebook accessible to undergraduates.

diaspora.<sup>4</sup> In the second part of the presentation, the presenter will discuss the coursebook compiled by the presenter, the criteria for the entries and the thinking that went into making this material accessible to a non-specialist, undergraduate audience.

After two years of work by the presenter researching, compiling materials and creating the syllabus, the presenter taught the class for the first time in the fall 2024 semester. The last section of the presentation will focus on the “lessons learned”: what worked well and what will be improved in future iterations of the course.

Both the course and its sourcebook present Jewish history as a part of the history of the ancient world and to highlight the diversity of religious experience within the ancient Mediterranean, making fascinating evidence, often ignored by all except specialists with scholarly training, accessible to an undergraduate audience.

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<sup>4</sup> The main Jewish diasporic communities included in the sourcebook are the following: Rome and Ostia, Alexandria, and Dura Europos.