

LOREN R. SPIELMAN

Jews and Entertainment in the Ancient World

*Texts and Studies in
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181

Mohr Siebeck

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181



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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	VII
Abbreviations	IX
Introduction	1
Section One: The Herodian Period	15
<i>Chapter One</i>	
Departing from Native Customs: Josephan Rhetoric on Herodian Games	17
<i>Chapter Two</i>	
The Background of the Jerusalem Games: Were Greek and Roman Spectacles Really Foreign to Jewish Custom?	35
<i>Chapter Three</i>	
Playing Roman in Jerusalem: Symbols of Power and the Past	53
Section Two: Theaters, Amphitheaters and Stadia in Roman Palestine	69
<i>Chapter Four</i>	
In the Wake of the Wars: Becoming Spectators in Roman Palestine	71
<i>Chapter Five</i>	
Spectacle and Identity in Roman Palestine and the Jewish Diaspora ...	87
Section Three: Rabbis and Roman Spectacle	125
<i>Chapter Six</i>	
Sitting with Scorners: Early Rabbinic Attitudes to Roman Spectacle ...	127

Chapter Seven

Still Sitting with Scorners: Later Rabbinic Attitudes

Towards Roman Spectacle 178

Chapter Eight

Performance and Piety: Theaters and Synagogues in Later Rabbinic

Culture 220

Conclusion 259

Bibliography 269

Index of Ancient Texts 291

Modern Authors 301

Subject Index 305

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations used throughout this book for all ancient texts, reference works, periodicals and serials are according to those given in P.H. Alexander *et al* (eds.), *The SBL Handbook of Style: for Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical and Early Christian Studies* (Peabody, Hendrickson, 1999). Any exceptions are clarified in individual bibliographic notes.

Introduction

The theaters, amphitheaters and other public entertainment buildings of Roman Palestine bear witness to the impact of roughly seven centuries of Roman domination on the rhythms of daily life. The first few entertainment structures were constructed in the first century B.C.E. by Herod the Great, the Jewish client king of Rome, just a few decades after the introduction of Roman rule in 63 B.C.E. Within two centuries after the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 C.E. and the incorporation of Palestine as a province of the Roman Empire, monumental entertainment buildings could be found in almost every major city. The cities of the province and its surrounding areas were home to more than 30 theater buildings.¹ Five or six amphitheaters in the region provided space for beast fights and gladiatorial combat,² while more than seven hippodromes housed horse races and perhaps a host of athletic events.³ Though built largely during the late second and third centuries C.E., these structures lasted in some cases until the fifth or sixth centuries C.E., falling out of use near the end of Roman political control in the region. Along with a number of other small finds, these buildings demonstrate beyond a doubt that the theater, gladiatorial combats, and horse racing were as popular in the cities of Roman Palestine as they were throughout the Roman Empire.⁴

¹ For a survey of theaters in Palestine and environs see E. Frézouls, "Les Théâtres romains de Syrie," *Les Annales archéologiques de Syrie* 2 (1952): 46–100; idem, "Recherches sur les théâtres de l'Orient syrien," *Syria* 38, no. 1 (1961): 54–86; A. Segal, *Theatres in Roman Palestine and Provincia Arabia* (Leiden: Brill, 1995). See also Z. Weiss, *Public Spectacles in Roman and Late Antique Palestine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); idem, "Games and Spectacles in Roman Palestine and their Reflection in Talmudic Literature [Hebrew]" (Ph.D. diss, Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1994); idem, "Adopting a Novelty: The Jews and the Roman Games in Palestine," in *The Roman and Byzantine Near East: Some Recent Archaeological Research*, ed. J. H. Humphrey, JRA Supplementary Series 31 (Ann Arbor, MI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1999), 23–50; idem, "Roman Leisure Culture and its Influence upon the Jewish Population in the Land of Israel," *Qadmoniot* 28 (1995): 2–19.

² See Weiss, "Games and Spectacles," 180–214; idem, "Adopting a Novelty," 23, 39–41; idem, *Public Spectacles*, 108–113.

³ J. H. Humphrey, *Roman Circuses: Arenas for Chariot Racing* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1986), 528–33; Weiss, "Games and Spectacles," 129–179; idem, "Adopting a Novelty," 34–6; idem, *Public Spectacles*, 101–118.

⁴ Weiss, "Adopting a Novelty;" idem, *Public Spectacles*, 195–226.

The most useful tools for explaining the popularity and significance of Roman entertainments in other provinces in the Empire are generally epigraphic remains.⁵ Some inscriptions commemorate the donors who were responsible for financing games, competitions, and furnishing prizes. Others were dedicated by local communities to celebrate the impressive achievements of a range of performers, including mimes, dancers, athletes, and gladiators. These dedications and epitaphs have helped to demonstrate that Roman entertainments played a central role in civic life not only in the West, in places like Gaul and Iberia, but also in the Eastern Empire, where games and festivals had been essential features of the Greek and Hellenistic *polis* long before the introduction of Roman rule.⁶

The epigraphic record in pre-Christian Roman Palestine, however, is extraordinarily thin.⁷ Only a handful of Palestinian inscriptions exist which might be used to contextualize the spread of Roman entertainments in the region.⁸ In the place of epigraphic evidence, however, there exists a good deal of literary material to draw upon. The writings of Jews living in Palestine during the first through the fourth century C.E. make frequent, though often critical, mention of Greek and Roman style games. The works of the Jewish historian Josephus provide some of the richest descriptions of the events held in hippodromes, theaters and amphitheaters of any Roman

⁵ E. g., L. Robert, *Les gladiateurs dans l'Orient grec* (Paris: Champion, 1940); M. J. D. Carter, "The Presentation of Gladiatorial Spectacles in the Greek East: Roman Culture and Greek Identity" (Ph.D. diss., McMaster University, 1999). C. Roueché, *Performers and Partisans at Aphrodisias in the Roman and Late Roman Periods: A Study Based on Inscriptions from the Current Excavations at Aphrodisias in Caria* (London: Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 1993).

⁶ See Robert, *Gladiateurs*; Carter, "The Presentation of Gladiator Spectacles;" and O. van Nijf, "Local Heroes: Athletics, Festivals and Elite Self-Fashioning in the Roman Near East," in *Being Greek under Rome: Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic, and the Development of Empire*, ed. S. Goldhill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 306–304.

⁷ Cf. L. Di Segni, "Epigraphic Documentation on Building in the Provinces of Palaestina and Arabia, 4th-7th C.," in *The Roman and Byzantine Near East: Some Recent Archaeological Research*, ed. J. H. Humphrey, JRA Supplementary Series 31 (Ann Arbor, MI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1999), 149–178.

⁸ E. g., Welles #192–194 in C. H. Kraeling et al., *Gerasa, City of the Decapolis; An Account Embodying the Record of a Joint Excavation Conducted by Yale University and the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem (1928–1930), and Yale University and the American Schools of Oriental Research (1930–1931, 1933–1934)* (New Haven, CT: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1938); D. Adamesteanu and A. Frova, *Scavi di Caesarea Maritima*, (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1965), 224 #11= B. Lifshitz, "Inscriptions de Césarée en Palestine," *Rbi* 74 (1965): 57; H. C. Butler, E. Littmann, and W. K. Prentice, *Syria: Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria in 1904–1905 and 1909* (Leiden: Brill, 1907), vol. 3 #549.= M. Sartre *IGLS XIII* #9407; CIL XIV suppl. 4624; an inscription in the theater at Beth She'an/Scythopolis mentions Zadok Absalom, who may be of Jewish or Samaritan origin, see A. Negev, "Beth She'an: The Roman Theater," *Hadashot Archeologiyot* 2 (1962): 14.

province. Josephus describes the establishment and reception of the earliest spectacles held in Roman Palestine during the first century B.C.E. and offers invaluable evidence about the first Jewish encounters with Roman forms of entertainment in the first century C.E.⁹ The major works of classical Rabbinic literature – the Mishnah, the Tosefta, the Palestinian Talmud and midrash collections – furnish scattered references and reactions to the theatrical performances, gladiatorial combats, mimes and chariot races held in Roman Palestine from the second through the early fifth century C.E.¹⁰ These texts provide a valuable context through which, with the application of great care and a healthy dose of skepticism, we can interpret the physical evidence and view the spectrum of Jewish attitudes towards Roman spectacle.

Most of the literature written by Jews from Roman Palestine shows a critical bias against Roman spectacles and entertainment. In a few passages, Josephus describes Roman entertainments as a foreign corruption of the traditional Jewish way of life and a violation of Jewish religious and ethical norms. The Jewish historian relates a number of incidents that appear to attest to Jewish antagonism towards Roman entertainments and the rulers who attempted to promote them, most notably a protest against Herod the Great's foundation of Greek and Roman style games in Jerusalem.¹¹ A few centuries later, the early rabbis forbade Jewish attendance at theaters, amphitheatres, and other entertainment buildings.¹² They developed a whole range of strategies designed to discourage Jews, except under dire circumstances, from becoming spectators. They considered Roman spectacles to be religiously circumspect, morally degenerate, and ultimately a useless waste of time and resources. Both Josephus and the works of Palestinian rabbinic literature, then, provide some evidence for Jewish opposition to the culture of Roman spectacle.

⁹ H. A. Harris, *Greek Athletics and the Jews* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976); M. Lämmer, "Griechische Wettkämpfe in Jerusalem und ihre politischen Hintergründe," *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Sporthochschule Köln* (1973): 182–227; idem, "Griechische Wettkämpfe in Galiläa unter der Herrschaft des Herodes Antipas," *Kölner Beiträge zur Sportwissenschaft* (1981): 37–67; idem, "The Attitude of King Agrippa I Towards Greek Contests and Roman Games," in *Physical Education and Sports in Jewish History and Culture*, ed. U. Simri (Netanya: Wingate Institute, 7–17); idem, "The Introduction of Greek Sports into Jerusalem Through Herod the Great and its Political Significance," in *Physical Education and Sports in Jewish History and Culture*, ed. U. Simri (Netanya: Wingate Institute, 1973), 18–38.

¹⁰ See Weiss, *Public Spectacles* esp. 117–69; M. Jacobs, "Theatres and Performances as Reflected in the Talmud Yerushalmi," in *Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*, ed. P. Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 1.327–47.

¹¹ *AJ* 15.267–90.

¹² *t. Avod. Zar.* 2:5–7.

Traditional scholarship has tended to accept the testimony of these two main literary sources uncritically as evidence for native Jewish aversion to the culture of the theater and the games. M. Lämmer, G. Alon, M. Smallwood, J. Juster, M. Goodman, L. Levine, and a host of other scholars consider Josephus's accounts of Jewish resistance to Herod's games as trustworthy evidence for an "orthodox" or typical Jewish attitude towards Roman spectacle.¹³ This view imagines that Jews were predisposed to resist this culture, either on religious or nationalistic grounds. Jewish particularism and separatism, this view argues, were diametrically opposed to the sorts of values that guaranteed success of the games and entertainments in other areas of the Roman Empire. Jews were exposed to these entertainments largely because of foreign influence, either early on under the aegis of the client king Herod the Great, or, later, as a result of living under a pagan empire that sought to assert not only political, but also cultural, domination over its subjects. Jews had to struggle against outside pressure to remain culturally distinct from their neighbors. This struggle took the form of either resistance, avoidance, or harsh criticism of Roman entertainments as a detestable form of foreign influence.

One notable exception to this trend in early scholarship on the relationship between Jews and spectacle deserves special mention. In an impressive monograph entitled *Greek Athletics and the Jews*, H. A. Harris, a classicist who wrote extensively on Greek and Roman sport, argued that Hellenistic Jewry, far from avoiding Greek sport and athletics, actually participated in and promoted games of all kinds.¹⁴ As evidence, Harris presented numerous instances from the writings of the Alexandrian Jew Philo where this Jewish philosopher reveals a detailed knowledge and a somewhat passionate personal fascination with certain forms of sport, particularly foot-races and other forms of athletics. Examining athletic language in *I* and *II Macc*, as well as in the writings of Josephus, Harris came to the conclusion that

¹³ Lämmer, "The Attitude of King Agrippa I towards Greek Contests and Roman Games;" idem, "Griechische Weltkämpfe in Jerusalem und ihre politischen Hintergründe;" idem, "The Introduction of Greek Sports into Jerusalem through Herod the Great and its Political Significance;" G. Alon, "Me'Halakhot Rishonim," in *Mehkarim Be-Toldot Yiśrael Bi-Yeme Bayit Sheni Uvi-Tekufat Ha-Mishnah Vēha-Talmud* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hotsa'at ha-Kibuts ha-Me'uchad, 1970); E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews Under Roman Rule: From Pompey to Diocletian* (Leiden: Brill, 1976); J. Juster, *Les Juifs dans l'Empire Romain; leur condition juridique, économique et sociale* (Paris: Geuthner, 1914); L. H. Feldman, "The Orthodoxy of the Jews in Hellenistic Egypt," *Jewish Social Studies* 22, no. 4 (1960): 215–237; M. Goodman, *State and Society in Roman Galilee, A. D. 132–212* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2000); idem, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations* (London: Allen Lane, 2007); L. I. Levine, *Jerusalem: Portrait of the City in the Second Temple Period (538 B.C.E.–70 C.E.)* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002).

¹⁴ H. A. Harris, *Greek Athletics and the Jews*.

Jews were thoroughly acculturated and not overwhelmingly resistant to Greek athletics. A few Jews, like Josephus and the authors of *I* and *II Macc*, may have held more critical views about the acceptability of Jewish participation in Greek sport, but their familiarity with the phenomenon betrays the fact that athletics played a significant role in Second Temple Jewish society. Harris's argument is largely overstated. He has been criticized for underestimating the cultural differences between Diaspora Jews like Philo, an Alexandrian Jewish philosopher with an elite background and a Platonic education, and Jews living in Jerusalem or elsewhere in Palestine.¹⁵ For this reason, his ideas about Jewish familiarity with Greek sport have been largely ignored. Modern scholarship tends to take the opposite view, that Jews on the whole avoided Greek and Roman entertainments during the Second Temple Period.

The basic premise that Jews were predominantly resistant to Greek and Roman entertainments colors much of the scholarship on the rabbinic evidence as well. Several passages from the Tosefta, early rabbinic midrash, and the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds forbid going to theaters, stadiums, or circuses. Early scholarship on the issue of Jewish attitudes towards Roman entertainment tends to treat rabbinic laws against attending Roman entertainments as a reflection of actual Jewish behavior, mistaking these rabbinic prescriptions for descriptive evidence.¹⁶ S. Krauss, for example, considered rabbinic hostility towards Roman entertainment proof that Jews were totally averse to the presentation of gladiatorial combat, theatrical productions, athletic competitions and horse racing. Krauss claims that "the Jews, following their spiritual leaders, the sages, looked upon these games as a detestable abomination and distanced themselves from them as much as was possible."¹⁷ Krauss and others were working under the assumption that most Palestinian Jews considered the rabbinic sages their spiritual, and perhaps even political, leaders.¹⁸ If the rabbis considered Roman spectacles to be a form of pagan worship, immoral self-indulgence or a simple waste of time, then likely the rest of Jewish society, whose

¹⁵ T. Rajak, "The One Great Scorer," *The Classical Review* 29, no. 1 (1979): 127–128.

¹⁶ For a collection of the relevant rabbinic evidence see S. Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie*, 3 vols. (Leipzig: Gustav Fock, 1910–12; repr. Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1966), I. 113–122.

¹⁷ S. Krauss, *Paras Ve-Romi Ba-Talmud Uva-Midrashim* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk, 1947), 220. [The translation from the Hebrew is my own].

¹⁸ For a correction of this view, see S. Schwartz and M. Goodman, "Historiography on the Jews in the 'Talmudic Period' (70–640 CE)," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 79–114; S. Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C. E.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); C. Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997); L. I. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine in Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1989).

behavior did not significantly differ from rabbinic norms, did so as well. The theaters and amphitheaters of Roman Palestine, according to Krauss and others, are explainable as pagan phenomena, imposed upon the Jews by their neighbors. Though they existed in close proximity to the Jews, and touched almost every aspect of civic life, Jews largely avoided them.

The notion that rabbinic laws against attending the theater furnish evidence for overwhelming Jewish resistance to Roman spectacle has been successfully challenged by Z. Weiss. His interdisciplinary approach to the study of Roman entertainment in Palestine combines a survey of the Talmudic evidence with serious archaeological inquiry. Weiss demonstrates that the archaeological evidence does not support the notion that Roman entertainments were strictly pagan phenomena. Theaters, amphitheaters and other monumental buildings for Roman entertainment were constructed not only in pagan cities in Roman Palestine, but also in cities that were populated mostly by Jews, such as Tiberias and Sepphoris. These structures, Weiss argues, must have been constructed with more than the scattered pagan population in mind. The existence of theaters in largely Jewish areas of Roman Palestine suggests that Jews participated in Roman entertainments despite rabbinic prohibitions. Moreover, Weiss suggests that the rabbinic texts should be interpreted as indirect evidence for Jewish involvement in Roman spectacle. The Jewish community did participate in these games, and the rabbis were forced to repeatedly prohibit Jewish attendance. The rabbinic dicta represent practical attempts to control and regulate what the rabbis saw as unacceptable Jewish behavior. Ultimately, Weiss argues that the archaeological and literary evidence, not only just rabbinic prohibitions against attending the theater or the circus but also the many rabbinic parables that are infused with details from the world of public entertainment, argue quite strongly that Jewish interaction with Roman spectacle was widespread.¹⁹

All of these previous approaches, from Krauss to Harris, and to a more limited extent Weiss, have concentrated on the issue of whether or not the Jews predominantly resisted or assimilated themselves to the culture of Roman spectacle. For the most part, the division between those who consider Jews to have been predominantly resistant to Greek and Roman entertainments and those who criticize this premise reflects the nature of the available evidence. The literary evidence provides much information to support the notion that Jews traditionally opposed public games and shows. Smallwood, Juster, Krauss, and most general accounts of Jewish society and culture under Greek and Roman rule take for granted Jew-

¹⁹ Weiss, *Public Spectacles*, esp. 6, 195–227; idem, “Adopting a Novelty”; idem, “Roman Leisure Culture.”

ish resistance or distaste for foreign entertainments. On the other hand, the physical evidence irrefutably demonstrates Jewish support and interest in these very same entertainments. Following Weiss, a number of scholars take seriously the notion that the majority of Jewish society differed with the rabbis on the issue of Roman entertainments and deviated from rabbinic norms.²⁰ Weiss argues that the rabbis were forced to deal with Jewish interest in Roman entertainments as a social reality and fought repeatedly to counter it.

Attempts to determine a “Jewish” attitude towards spectacle entertainment will inevitably fall prey to historical reductionism. As with most discussions of the ancient Jewish relationship to Hellenization or Romanization, a focus on Jewish assimilation or resistance towards Roman entertainment overlooks the fact that Jewish culture largely emerged in the context of, rather than in strict opposition to, imperial cultures.²¹ It has been far more useful, in most cases, to discuss the ways that Jews developed different strategies of accommodation and resistance to these cultures than to define a typical Jewish response.²² There clearly existed a spectrum

²⁰ See e.g., Jacobs, “Theatres and Performances;” C. Hezser, “Toward the Study of Jewish Popular Culture in Roman Palestine,” in *“The Words of a Wise Man’s Mouth Are Gracious”* (Qob 10, 12): *Festschrift for Günter Stemberger on the occasion of his 65th birthday*, ed. M. Perani (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 267–297.

²¹ See the helpful bibliography in L.L. Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), 147–70. The idea that all forms of late antique Judaism were influenced by Hellenic culture was introduced in large part by M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974); idem, *The “Hellenization” of Judaea in the First Century After Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1989). See also E. S. Gruen, “Hellenistic Judaism,” in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. D. Biale, vol. 3 (New York: Schocken, 2002), I. 77–135; J. J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000); L. I. Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity: Conflict or Confluence* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998); G. Boccacini, “Hellenistic Judaism: Myth or Reality,” in *Jewish Literatures and Cultures: Context and Intertext*, ed. A. Norich and Y. Z. Eliav (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2008), 55–77.

²² J. M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE – 117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996); S. Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society?: Reciprocity and Solidarity in Ancient Judaism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), esp. 21–45, 161–5; B. A. Berkowitz, *Execution and Invention: Death Penalty Discourse in Early Rabbinic and Christian Cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); idem, “The Limits of Their Laws: Ancient Rabbinic Controversies about Jewishness (and Non-Jewishness),” *JQR* 99, no. 1 (2009): 121–157; J. Levinson, “The Athlete of Piety: Fatal Fictions in Rabbinic Literature [Hebrew],” *Tarbiz* 68 (1999): 61–86; R. L. Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia Between Persia and Roman Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); idem, “Problems in the use of the Bavli for the History of Late-Roman Palestine: The Example of Astrology,” in *Rabbinic Texts and the History of Roman Palestine*, ed. M. Goodman and P. Alexander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 165–83.

of Jewish attitudes and behaviors towards spectacle entertainment. These ranged from violent opposition to uncritical acceptance and included a host of intermediate positions. Not all modes of Jewish resistance or acculturation were similar. They varied from individual to individual, from context to context, and likely evolved and shifted over time. Each of these attitudes, strategies and contexts deserve ample attention and recommend caution against over-generalization.

Previous investigations of Roman spectacle have also tended to concentrate on the external forms of popular entertainment. Theaters and amphitheaters are sometimes dismissed as mere conveniences. Since they housed entertainments for the urban masses, cavalier accounts of the spread of Roman entertainment view these structures as little more than “luxurious additions to the Roman lifestyle.”²³ Because of this assumption, one frequently encounters the suggestion that Jews picked up the spectacular habit simply because Roman entertainments provided pleasant diversions. Jews who attended the theater succumbed to the sorts of mild social pressures and influences, mostly as a result of contact with Roman elites, that could be avoided, should these Jews wish. Occasionally, Jewish abstinence from Roman spectacle is cast as an esthetic choice with little real societal implications. Accordingly, if Jews refused to go to the theater, they perhaps missed out on the latest bit of satire, but little else. These Jews may have marked themselves off as different, but the loss in social capital could perhaps be easily made up for in other ways.

But the spread of theaters and amphitheaters in the provinces represents far more than the diffusion of Roman tastes. Throughout the Roman world, the presentation of theater performances, gladiatorial combats, athletic competitions, chariot races and a host of other public entertainments went hand in hand with the process of Romanization, as different groups of people absorbed aspects of Roman culture and a sense of Roman identity.²⁴ Games and spectacles played a more complex social function than mere entertainment. They served as the most conspicuous displays of *Romanitas*, the very essence of being Roman. Theaters and amphitheaters were often the first public buildings constructed in a new or resettled Roman city.²⁵ The extent of their diffusion went far beyond any expectations based on population or need, stretching even beyond the urban network in some cases.²⁶

²³ For criticism of this tendency, see A. Futrell, *Blood in the Arena: The Spectacle of Roman Power* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001), 75–6.

²⁴ Carter, “The Presentation of Gladiatorial Spectacles,” iii and passim.

²⁵ G. Woolf, *Becoming Roman: The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 121–2.

²⁶ Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 53–76.

Spectacle entertainments also transcend categorization as purely political or religious phenomena. In the wake of K. Coleman's work on "Fatal Charades," and D. Potter's "Performance, Power and Justice in the High Empire," a great deal of attention has been placed on the theater and amphitheater as a site of Roman disciplinary control.²⁷ Since theaters, amphitheaters, and stadiums could be used as settings for trials and punishments, Roman games served as an important locus for the demonstration of Roman power. There were strong links between these games and the imperial cult.²⁸ Some theaters and stadia were connected to temples or local festivals. Altars and statuary were common architectural features in monumental Roman circuses, and it may be assumed that many events began with some sort of dedicatory sacrifice. The presence of theaters and amphitheaters in the provinces to some extent represents the influence of imperial concerns from the center and the reproduction of Roman power in the periphery. But at the same time, provincials often imported these entertainments on their own terms and imbued them with local significance.²⁹ More often than not, theaters represented points of communication between the center and the periphery, rather than a one-sided imposition of values and expectations.³⁰

Games and spectacles were part and parcel of Roman life and could scarcely be avoided. K. Hopkins explained the popularity of gladiatorial combat by describing these spectacles as a sort of safety valve for the anxieties caused by living in a highly disciplinary and controlled society.³¹ Since seating in entertainment structures was divided according to status, and

²⁷ D. Potter, "Performance, Power and Justice in the High Empire," in *Roman Theater and Society: E. Togo Salmon Papers I*, ed. W. J. Slater (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 129–161; K. M. Coleman, "Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments," *JRS* 80 (1990): 44–73.

²⁸ See S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Carter, "The Presentation of Gladiatorial Spectacles" 144–238, 286–92; Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 79–92.

²⁹ Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 75–6.

³⁰ H. Dodge, "Amusing the Masses: Buildings for Entertainment and Leisure in the Roman World," in *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire*, ed. D. J. Mattingly and D. Potter (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 205–255.

³¹ K. Hopkins, *Death and Renewal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–30; T. E. J. Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators* (London: Routledge, 1992); D. G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1998); idem, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007); R. Beacham, *Spectacle Entertainments of Early Imperial Rome* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); R. Auguet, *Cruelty and Civilization: The Roman Games* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972); C. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans: The Gladiator and the Monster* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); P. Plass, *The Game of Death in Ancient Rome: Arena Sport and Political Suicide* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

tickets were often provided by patrons and voluntary organizations rather than by means of purchase, attending games and other spectacles also provided an unparalleled opportunity to express sub-group identities, whether as a client of a particular patron, a member of a guild or a constituent of an ethnic or religious minority.³² Festivals and games served as an arena to express rivalries between cities and to promote civic solidarity. Attending the games and spectacles hosted by prominent citizens demonstrated a willingness to be counted among the Roman crowd. Provincial spectators displayed not only the outward forms of Rome, but a whole set of accompanying meanings and assumptions as well.³³

Because of the important roles that popular entertainments played in Roman society, they provide an interesting lens to examine the relationship between Jewish and Roman culture and identity. These entertainments and the values they represented were practically unavoidable, and inexorably linked to the political, social, and religious life of Greco-Roman cities.³⁴ Jewish attitudes towards these spectacles, then, reflect the willingness of Jews to identify themselves as Romans and to participate, either out of interest or out of necessity, in the political and social life of the city. Jews could have expressed this willingness in a number of ways. The civic nature of Roman entertainment may have enabled some Jewish accommodation to Roman norms, rather than complete avoidance. These spectacles provided at least some opportunities for other provincials to express their own tastes and showcase local practices. This was always done in a way that was recognizably Greco-Roman, but under limited and fortunate circumstances games and festivals might be adapted to regional, local, or religious practices and beliefs. At the same time, the rejection of the values that lay at the heart of these games would have been a statement that reflected far more than personal taste and might have considerable consequences.

The present study is directed towards the task of examining this variety of Jewish attitudes towards Roman spectacle and understanding the different strategies for accommodation and resistance to this culture that emerged during the period of Roman domination of Palestine. Rather than dwell on the issue of Jewish acceptance or avoidance of the popular entertainments of the Roman world, I work from the assumption that Jews did not respond to these spectacles in a unified or easily predictable fashion.

³² G. Fagan, *The Lure of the Arena* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Robert, *Gladiateurs* #48 mentions, for example, a Dionysiac association while #97 mentions a corporation of launderers.

³³ Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 75.

³⁴ Dodge, "Amusing the Masses: Buildings for Entertainment and Leisure in the Roman World;" B. Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives: John Chrysostom's Attack on Spiritual Marriage* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 13–41.

Index of Ancient Texts

Hebrew Bible		16:10	225
		16:11	216–217
<i>Genesis</i>		26:5	231
4:10	210–211	37:9	231
32:25	213	49:18	164
		69:13	189
<i>Exodus</i>		104:32	228
21:28	133	<i>Proverbs</i>	
		20:5	255
<i>Leviticus</i>		21:24	231
18:3	47, 143–145, 148, 151, 178, 222, 232, 262	<i>Ecclesiastes/Qohelet</i>	
18:4	144–145	7:14	252
24:43	237	<i>Isaiab</i>	
27:32	147, 163	33:14	252
<i>Deuteronomy</i>		51:3	254
4:6	143, 145	66:24	252
11:12	228	<i>Jeremiah</i>	
12:31	143–144	25:30	228
18:10–11	143	<i>Ezekiel</i>	
<i>Joshua</i>		16:44	244
23:6	36	<i>Amos</i>	
<i>2 Samuel</i>		1:1	229
6:20	40, 191	<i>Zechariah</i>	
<i>1 Kings</i>		14:5	229
18:28	36	<i>Malachi</i>	
<i>2 Kings</i>		3:19	231
23:10	144	New Testament	
<i>2 Chronicles</i>		<i>Acts</i>	
26:14–24	229	19:29	235
<i>Psalms</i>		<i>1 Corinthians</i>	
1:1	145, 147–148, 160, 182, 231	9:24	156
1:1–2	146, 149, 168–169, 178, 180–181, 222–223, 232, 257		

Deuterocanonical Works

Tobit

4:12 36

Sirach

1:29 40–41

32:15 40–41

33:2 40–41

1 Maccabees

1:11–12 151

1:14 44–45

1:38 36

1:44 36

13:27–29 63

2 Maccabees

4:12 44

4:13 45

4:13–14 32

4:13–15 170

4:14 151

4:18–20 45

6:2 114

2 Esdras

10:2 36

Pseudepigrapha

Letter of Aristeas

284 40

312 42

New Testament Apocrypha

Acts of Paul and Thecla

9 135–136

Philo

De ebrietate

177 43

Legum allegoriae

38.299–305 56

De legatione ad Gaium

203–205 87

Quod omnis probus liber sit
144 43

Josephus

Antiquitates Judaicae

1.214 36

2.213 36

5.90, 101 36

6.235, 266 36

8.186, 340 36

12.113 42

14.143–155 50

14.151–155 46

14.210 49

15 30

15.167 32, 170

15.260, 266–299 30

15.264–271 17, 158

15.264–291 15, 54

15.266 31

15.267 19

15.267–280 12

15.267–290 3, 50

15.267–299 30

15.268 32, 36, 39

15.272 61–62

15.274–275 47

15.275 32

15.282, 291–292 64

15.287 164

15.299 30

15.326–341 25

15.331–341 57

16.136–137 57

16.136–141 18

16.150–159 21

16.150–160 29

16.158 24

16.28 65

17.149–151 56–57

17.254–255 19

17.255 28

18.55–59 56

19.332–335 130, 158

19.335–337 51, 96, 164

19.343 103

19.355 29

20.140, 147 29

20.216 37

<i>Contra Apionem</i>		2:1	230
1.43	51, 76	3:5, 7–10	142
1.50–53	29		
2.89–102	80	<i>m. Avot</i>	
2.217	76	3:10	230, 232
		3:14	177
<i>Bellum Judaicum</i>			
1.3–6	29	<i>m. Bava Qamma</i>	
1.282	65	4:4	132–133, 162
1.401–429	30		
1.403–425	25	<i>m. Berakhot</i>	
1.408–415	57	4:2	225, 249
1.415	18, 50		
1.648–650	56–57	<i>m. Gittin</i>	
1.665	29	4:6	205
2.162	130	4:9	205
2.169–174	56		
2.408–416	37	<i>m. Hullin</i>	
2.490–491	235	4:7	144
2.490–497	77	5:3	144
2.599, 618	91, 93		
3.88, 115, 125	36	<i>m. Kelim</i>	
3.305, 307	75	23:2, 24:1	132, 202
3.539	91, 93		
3.540–542	75	<i>m. Megillah</i>	
4.13	36	3[4]	249
4.436, 488	75		
5.350	36	<i>m. Nedarim</i>	
6.420	75	2:1	144
6.418	51, 71		
7.38	51, 76	<i>m. Rosh Hashanah</i>	
7.47–60	51, 78	3:7	237
7.132–157	72		
7.138–145	71	<i>m. Sanhedrin</i>	
7.143, 146	72	6	164
7.208	75	10	226
7.218	84		
<i>Vita</i>		<i>m. Shabbat</i>	
17	91, 93	6:10	144
27–28	91, 93	22:6	132, 138, 151
64	91, 93		
65	57–58	<i>m. Sotah</i>	
169–173	164	9:15	177
331	235	8:3	229
		<i>m. Ta'anit</i>	
		4:8	237
Rabbinic Works			
Mishnah		Tosefta	
<i>m. Avodah Zarah</i>		<i>t. Avodah Zarah</i>	
1:3	200–201	2:2–5	147
1:7	132–133, 136–137, 204	2:5	122, 130
		2:5–7	3, 136, 178, 181, 195, 223

- 2:6–7 168
 2:7 162, 204
 3:2 230
- t. Bekhorot*
 7:3 147
- t. Megillah*
 2[3] 249
 2:18 250
- t. Ohalot*
 18:17 184
- t. Qiddushin*
 5:2 230
- t. Shabbat*
 6, 7 144
 6(7):4 149
 13:2 226
 15:17 168
- Talmud Yerushalmi
- y. Avodah Zarah*
 1:2 200
 1:7 146, 162, 181, 195
 2:3 204
 3:1 224
- y. Bava Metzi'a*
 2:11 241
- y. Berakhot*
 4:2 225, 231, 249, 257
 9:2 228, 230
- y. Bikkurim*
 3:3 249
- y. Erubin*
 5:1 (22b) 185
- y. Giṭṭin*
 4:9 204–205, 220
- y. Horayot*
 3:2 229, 241
- y. Ketubbot*
 5:5 229
 12:3 185, 229
- y. Kil'ayim*
 9:1 229
 9:4 185, 232
 27a 204
- y. Megillah*
 2:4 193, 220
 3:3 249–250
- y. Nazir*
 7:2 249
- y. Peah*
 1:1 229
- y. Qiddushin*
 1:3 229
 14:11 230
- y. Sanhedrin*
 2:4 220
 2:6 237
 3:6 (21b) 168
- y. Shevu'ot*
 4:2 (35a) 168
- y. Sotah*
 1:4 241
- y. Sukkah*
 4:6 234
 5:1 191, 241
 5:4 220
- y. Ta'anit*
 1:4 64b 84, 186, 192, 220
 4:5 229
- Talmud Bavli
- b. Avodah Zarah*
 15a 132
 18b 168, 181, 195
- b. Bava Qamma*
 82a 231
- b. Berakhot*
 19a 225
 28b 231
- b. Giṭṭin*
 46b 205

47a 204, 264

b. Moed Katan

3:7 193

b. Shabbat

32a 230

b. Sukkah

29a 230

b. Ta'anit

41a 220

Other Rabbinic Works

Avot of Rabbi Nathan

21 136, 230–232

28 184

Ecclesiastes Rabbah

1.11 220

Exodus Rabbah

30.24 104

Genesis Rabbah (BR)

10 183

19.5 183

22.9 183, 210–211

67.4 183

75.4 183

77.3 183, 210, 213, 220

80.1 183, 220, 238

80.2 237–238

85.9 231

87.7 183–184

96.5 183, 204, 208

98.11 241

Lamentations Rabbah

3 256

17 183, 189

Leviticus Rabbah (VR)

11:9 193, 220

13:3 189, 216, 254–255

30:2 216–217, 220

34:2 106, 185

Midrash Psalms

17:5 217–218

Pesikta of Rab Kahana

15:2 223, 256

18:5 241, 249

26:2 223, 256

28 183

28:3 216, 252

101b 241

Sifra Aḥare Mot

13.7 230

13.9 143, 178, 222

Sifra Behukotai

8:10 177

Sifre Deuteronomy

306 177

343 136

Song of Songs Rabbah

1.3.3 220

Yalqut

256 189

440b 195

Apostolic Fathers

Didache

11:1–2 228

Classical and Ancient Christian Writings

Appian

Bella civilia

2.90 80

Historia romana

19 80

Apuleius

Apologia

81 197

Arnobius

Adversus Nationes

7.33 199

- Artemidorus
Interpretation of Dreams
 1.42 197
Oneirocritica
 35.55 196
- Athenagoras
Legatio pro Christianis
 35 153, 163
- Augustine
Confessions
 6.8 163, 224
Sermones de Tempore
 241.5.5 233
- Cassius Dio
Roman History
 4.57.4 82
 48.43.2 175
 54.2.5 175
 66.7.2 84
 62.17.3–5 82
 64.17.5 240
 66.25.1–9 82
 66.25.3–4 74
 68.32.1–3 79
 69.10–12 99
 69.13.1–5 81
 71.4.1 79
 73.16–22 81
 78.6.2 81
- Choricius
Apologia Mimorum
 32.150 210
Orations
 32.120 239
- Cicero
Epistulae ad Atticum
 V.21.5 135
Epistulae ad familiares
 7.1 165
 9.16.7 199
Tusculanae disputationes
 2.41 165
- Cyprian
Epistles
 10.4 214
- Dio Chrysostom
Orations
 18.4–5 245
 20.10 197
- Epiphanius
Adversus Haereses
 80.2.1 234
Panarion
 30.11.9–10 90
- Eusebius
Chronicon
 201–202 211
De martyribus Palaestinae
 11 201
Historia ecclesiastica
 4.2.1–2 83
 4.2.1–5 80
 9:5 87
- Gaius
Institutiones
 1.13 208
 2.4.16–17, 67, 217 134
- Gregory of Nazianzus
Oratio
 42.24 246
- Gregory of Nyssa
Letters
 9 196
- Horace
Satirae
 2.7.58–59 207
- Isocrates
Antidosis
 178–185 214

- Jacob of Serugh
Homilies
 4, 5 190
- Jerome
Commentary on Isaiah
 58.2 241
Commentary on Jeremiah
 31.15 83
Commentary on Ezekiel
 33.23–33 246
 34.3 247
Commentary on Zechariah
 11.5 83
Epistulae
 52.2 199
Letter to Marcella
 43.2.4 191
Vita S. Hilarionis eremitaie
 2 224
 16–20 196
 20 201, 203
- John Chrysostom
Ad populum Antiochenum de statius
 11 245
Adversus Judaeos
 1.3 247
 1.7 236
 7.1 236
 7.3 236
Contra Ludos
 56.264 233
De educandis liberis
 19 214
De inani gloria
 23–25 227
De incomprehensibili dei natura homiliae
 7.1 232
De Maccabeis
 I. 1, 3.2 214
De sacerdotio
 5.5 246
- Homiliae in Acta apostolorum*
 30.4 247
Homiliae in Joannem
 1 193
Instructions to Catechumens
 6:1 232
- John Lydus
De Magistratibus reipublicae Romanae
 1.40 199
- John Malalas
Chronographia
 10.338 87, 98–99
- Juvenal
Satirae
 7.112–114 171
 10.72–81 175
 15.93–115 79
 2.162 193
 6.67–72 199
 6.216–8 208
- Lactantius
Divinae Institutiones
 5.10:16–17 233
- Leontius of Naples
Life of Symeon Salos
 150 197
- Livy
History of Rome
 7.2:3–5 152
 23.5:11–13 79
 41.20:10–13 48
 48 27
 61.20:10–13 152
- Lucian
De saltatione
 59 190
 63, 68, 72 193
Hermotimus
 5 214

- Toxaris*
5:8 206
- Macrobius
Saturnalia
3.14.7 191
- Marcus Cornelius Fronto
Correspondences
17 (2.217) 240
- Martial
Epigrams
1.6 135
4.14 172
5.24 172
10.50 172
10.53 172
10.74 172
10.76 172
Liber De Spectaculis
1 152
10 254
20, 22 135
21, 26 135
Liber Spectaculorum
104–108 135
- Origen
Epistula ad Africanum
20(14) 84
- Oxyrhynchus Papyri
43.3088 108
1050 200
- Paulus Orosius
Historiae Adversus Paganos
7.12.6–8 80
- Pausanias
Graeciae descriptio
8.40.3–5 211
10.4.1 185
- Philostratos
De gymnastica
21 211
- Pliny the Elder
Naturalis historia
3.2.136–138 62
- Pliny the Younger
Epistulae
1.7.10 172
10.40.2 153
Panegyricus
33 167
34.4 172
54.1–2 175
- Plutarch
Moralia
973E–974A 190
1099B 208
Quaestiones convivialum
4:6:2 671D 237
Sulla
36 18
- Polybius
The Histories
5.59.1 38
30.26.1 38
- Procopius
De Aedificiis
2.10.22 185
- Ps. Cyprian
De spectaculis
4 233
- Seneca
Epistulae morales
6.3–6 252
7.3 166–167
7.3–6 166
37 207
76.4 172
88.21–26 171
- Statius
Silvae
1.6.67 186

- Suetonius
- Caligula*
27.4 239
- Divus Augustus*
43.1 27
44 67
- Domitianus*
4.1–5 73
10 239
12.2 77
- Gaius Caligula*
27.4 239
- Galba*
13 239
- Nero*
19 75
39.3 239
- Synesios
- Encomium on Baldness*
13.4 190
- Tacitus
- Annales*
1.54.2 176
1.77.1 176
4.14.3 176
6.13.2 176
13.24.1 176
14.20–21 152
15.36.4 176
16.43.3 176
- Dialogus de oratoribus*
29.3 171
29.4 171
- Historiae*
1.4.3 176
1.32.1 176
1.72.4 176
2.87.3 176
2.91.2 176
- Tatian
- Oratio ad Graecos*
23 154, 163, 206
24 154
- Theodoret
- Historia ecclesiastica*
IV.22.35 90
- Theophilus
- Ad Autolyicum*
3.15 153
- Tertullian
- De Idolatria*
11:3–5 163–164
- De spectaculis*
1 156, 174
3 155, 160–161, 169
4 175
5 156
8 157
10 157
11 157
12 158
13 157, 175
15 164
18 156
19 155
22 208
30 251
- Scriptores Historiae Augustae
- Commodus*
3.4 239
- Elagabalus*
26.3 186
- Marcus Aurelius*
25.8–9 202
29.3 239
- Maximini Duo*
8.3–5 239
- Septimus Severus*
9.5 202
- Tres Gordiani*
3.5–8 254

Major Reference Works

Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum
III.5361–5362 234

Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum
II.749 41
III.25 41

Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum
II.6278 208

Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum
II.153 73–104 47
II.158 189
II.437 79
II.748 117
III.519 188, 218

Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis
I.Ach31 78
II.14b, 37 78
II.196 118

Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae
5260, 10143–10144 193

Supplementum epigraphicum graecum
19 105
37:1485 213

Unknown Authorship

Chronicon Paschale
I:474 20, 89

Codex Assemani
66 143

Didascalia Apostolorum
2 228

Expositio Totius Mundi et Gentium
32 179, 187, 201, 210

Modern Authors

- Adamesteanu, D. 2, 96
Agusta-Boularot, S. 105
Albeck, H. 127, 202
Alföldi-Rosenbaum, E. 26
Alföldy, G. 51, 73
Alon, G. 4, 19, 21, 130–131, 144, 150–151, 165, 238, 242
Anisfeld, R. 226
Applebaum, S. 106, 109, 114, 159, 234
Ari, S. L. 20, 39
Ariel, D. 25
Auguet, R. 9
Avi Yonah, M. 91, 205
Avigad, N. 26
Avida, U. 203
- Bagnall, R. S. 111
Baker, M. 117
Bar, D. 205–206
Barclay, J. M. G. 7, 11, 41, 44, 77
Bar-Ilan, M. 165
Barnes, T. D. 11, 173–174, 185–187, 245
Barton, C. A. 9, 207
Batey, R. A. 92
Bauman, R. A. 167
Baumgarten, J. M. 130, 237
Beacham, R. C. 9, 27, 66, 199
Beard, M. 72, 184, 200
Beare, W. 198–199
Becker, H. J. 228–229
Bekkum, W. J. van 243–244
Belayche, N. 26–27, 89–90, 97, 109, 113, 179, 200
Berkowitz, B. A. 7, 82, 135, 137, 141, 143–145, 147–148, 160, 163–164, 222, 230
Bickerman, E. J. 41, 114
Bieber, M. 27, 186, 198–199
Bilde, P. 31
Billig, Y. 19, 26–27, 89
Blanc, P.-M. 94
Boccacini, G. 7
Bokser, B. M. 131, 194
Boustan, R. 165
- Bowersock, G. W. 114–115, 188
Bowman, A. K. 108
Boyarin, D. 90, 204, 265
Brändle, R. 235, 237
Braund, D. 24
Broshi, M. 75
Brown, P. 248
Bull, R. 209, 218
Burns, J. E. 135–136, 149, 162
Burrell, B. 25
Butler, H. C. 2, 187
- Cameron, A. 117, 120, 201, 203, 217, 239–240, 265
Carter, M. J. D. 2, 8–9, 48, 98, 112
Case, S. J. 77
Castelli, E. A. 135, 174, 214–215
Chachy-Laureys, R. 57
Chapman, H. 29
Charles-Picard, G. 54, 59–61
Cobb, L. S. 214
Cody, J. M. 73
Cohen, S. J. D. 20–21, 28–31, 131, 164, 204, 230
Coleman, K. M. 9, 73–74, 133, 135, 167
Colledge, M. 38
Collins, J. J. 7
Cribiore, R. 214
Croke, B. 99
- Dalman, G. 19
Day, L. P. 116–117
DeLaine, J. 106
Dench, E. 153
Dentzer, J. 92, 94
Destinon, J. von 20, 31
DeVoe, R. F. 11
Dicke, M. W. 196–197
Di Segni, L. 2, 187
Dodge, H. 9–10
Downey, G. 78, 99, 202
Dox, D. 12
Drake, H. A. 165

- Duckworth, G. 197–198
 Duncan-Jones, R. 106–108
- Edwards, C. 186, 194
 Eliav, Y. 138
 Elitzur, S. 244
 Epstein, J.N. 127, 244
- Fagan, G. 10, 70, 100, 119, 138–139, 184, 260
 Feldman, L.H. 4, 20, 41, 43–44
 Fine, S. 60
 Fleischer, E. 243–244
 Foerster, G. 94, 159
 Forbes, C.A. 102
 Fraade, S.D. 129, 227
 French, D.R. 11
 Frey, J.B. 55
 Frézouls, E. 1, 92–95, 97
 Friedheim, E. 142, 159, 195
 Friedlaender, L. 206
 Frova, A. 2, 96, 187
 Fuks, G. 23, 25, 33, 93, 114
 Futrell, A. 8–10, 48, 86, 110, 113, 117, 152, 184, 206
- Gager, J.G. 196
 Gammie, J.G. 39–40
 Gleason, M. 100
 Goldberg, A. 127, 146
 Goldhill, S. 251–252
 Goodman, M. 4–5, 19, 21, 77, 84, 90, 176
 Grabbe, L.L. 7, 28
 Gradel, I. 24–25
 Graetz, H. 17
 Graf, F. 200, 209
 Grant, M. 65
 Gruen, E.S. 7, 40, 65
 Gurval, R.A. 66
- Hadas, M. 39
 Hadas-Lebel, M. 137, 142, 195, 199–200
 Halbertal, M. 138
 Halivni, D.W. 127
 Hall, E. 187
 Harland, P.A. 119–120
 Harries, J. 84, 233–234
 Harries, H.A. 3–6, 19, 43, 45–46, 216
 Harris, W.V. 75, 206
 Hayes, C. 133, 135, 142, 222
 Heimgartner, M. 235, 237
 Heinemann, J. 226
 Hengel, M. 7, 41
- Herr, M.D. 226, 237, 239, 241–242, 244
 Hezser, C. 5, 7, 83, 177, 182, 195, 199, 205, 231, 233–234, 241–242, 245, 249
 Hirshfeld, Y. 90–91
 Hirshman, M. 246
 Hohlfelder, R. 209, 218
 Holum, K. 209, 218
 Honigman, S. 39–40
 Hopkins, K. 9, 70, 75, 152, 165, 252
 Horst, P.W. van der 117
 Hübsch, A. 94, 109
 Humphrey, J.H. 1, 19, 28, 38–39, 88–89, 93–94, 201
- Isaac, B.H. 97
 Israeli, Y. 203
- Jacobs, M. 3, 7, 87, 90, 131, 146–147, 162, 165, 181–182, 186, 191–193, 195–200, 204–205, 237–239, 255
 Jacobson, H. 42–43
 Jassen, A.P. 165
 Jastrow, M. 146, 189, 228
 Jones, A.H.M. 102, 105, 201
 Jones, C.P. 186
 Juster, J. 4, 6, 19, 23
- Kahana, M.I. 141
 Kalman, Y. 57
 Kalmin, R. 7, 194–195, 205, 222
 Karakasis, E. 198
 Kerestes 77
 Khouri, R.G. 92
 Kimmelman, R. 90
 Kindler, A. 114
 Klein, S. 91
 Kloner, A. 94, 109
 Kohler, A. 19
 König, A. 210, 214
 Kovelman, A.B. 40
 Kraeling, C.H. 2, 78, 92, 101–103, 105, 111, 159, 179, 201
 Kraemer, D. 127
 Krauss, S. 5–6, 146–147, 192, 195, 197–198, 204, 241, 246
 Kyle, D.G. 9, 76, 166–167, 207, 212–213, 254
- Lada-Richards, I. 191, 196–197
 Laistner, M.L.W. 214
 Lämmer, M. 3–4, 19–20, 47–50, 54–55, 130, 152
 Landau, T. 28–29, 32–33

- Lanfranchi, P. 40–43
 Lapin, H. H. 84, 124, 127, 151, 176, 219,
 249, 261–262
 Lee, H. M. 212–213
 Lehmann, C. M. 98, 109, 113
 Leibner, U. 206
 Levick, B. 175
 Levine, L. I. 4–5, 7, 19–20, 28, 31, 56,
 204–205, 231, 234–235, 242, 246, 249–
 250
 Levinson, J. 7, 211–213, 216
 Leyerle, B. 10–11, 150, 174, 191, 193, 233,
 245–247
 Lichtenberger, A. 18–20, 25–28, 32
 Lieber, L. 243–244
 Lieberman, S. 40, 84, 90, 135, 138, 144,
 146, 185, 191–192, 200, 220, 228, 252
 Liebeschuetz, J. H. W. G. 98, 209, 214,
 235–236
 Lieu, J. 36
 Lifshitz, B. 2, 109, 187
 Lightfoot, J. 18, 105
 Lightstone, J. 119, 124
 Littmann, E. 2, 187
 Lugaressi, L. 174

 Magen, Y. 93, 116
 Mandel, D. 146, 183
 Marcus, R. 18
 Maxwell, J. L. 11–12, 174, 232–234, 242
 Mazar, B. 203
 Mazor, G. 159–160
 McGinn, T. 186
 McGowan, A. 79
 Mead, M. 173
 Meir, P. 56
 Meshorer, Y. 23, 57
 Meyers, C. L. 159
 Meyers, E. M. 159
 Millar, F. 21, 38, 51, 74, 98, 114–115
 Miller, S. S. 90, 97
 Modrzejewski, J. 77, 79
 Moralee, J. 102–103
 Moskowitz, L. 178
 Moss, C. 190
 al Mougdad, R. 94
 Mutius, H. G. 196

 Nach, S. 141
 Najbjerg, T. 135
 Najjar, A. 159–160
 Negev, A. 2
 Netzer, E. 19, 23, 25–26, 28, 57, 90, 159

 Neusner, J. 127–128, 146
 Newman, H. I. 161, 241, 246
 Nicoll, A. 197–199
 Nijf, O. van 2, 117, 209, 213
 Noy, D. 117

 Otto, W. F. 20, 30–31, 50, 60
 Ovadiah, A. 159

 Patrich, J. 18–20, 25, 27–28, 39, 50, 88–89
 Plass, P. 9
 Pleket, H. W. 102
 Porath, R. 57, 88, 94, 96
 Potter, D. 9, 135
 Pouilloux, J. 92
 Pradels, W. 235, 237
 Prentice, W. K. 2, 187
 Price, S. R. F. 9, 24, 48
 Pucci Ben Zeev, M. 78
 Puchner, W. 18, 102, 186, 188

 Rabinowitz, Z. M. 243–244
 Rajak, T. 5, 204
 Rappaport, U. 45, 151
 Rathbone, D. 108
 Reich, R. 19–20, 26–27, 89
 Reif, S. C. 243
 Rengstorf, K. H. 36
 Retzleff, A. 179
 Reynolds, J. M. 50, 117
 Richardson, P. 22–23, 25–26
 Rieks, R. 114
 Ringel, J. 96, 218
 Rives, J. 79
 Robert, L. 2, 10, 48, 88, 119, 187, 191,
 196, 206–209, 215, 234
 Rocca, S. 25, 46, 66
 Roetzel, C. J. 165
 Rojek, C. 139
 Roller, D. W. 26
 Rosenthal, D. 133–134
 Rostovtzeff, M. I. 18, 97
 Roth, C. 56–57
 Roueché, C. 2, 117, 120, 186, 209
 Rubenstein, J. 128, 255
 Rutgers, L. 118

 Safrai, S. 90
 Sanders, E. P. 234
 Sarason, R. 226
 Satlow, M. L. 230
 Schäfer, P. 196
 Schalit, A. 17–18, 22–23, 65

- Schick, C. 19, 89
 Schlüter, M. 196
 Schnusenberg, C. 12, 233
 Schürer, E. 18–20, 30, 38, 41, 43, 50, 56
 Schwartz, D. R. 130
 Schwartz, J. 95
 Schwartz, S. 5, 7, 29, 65, 67, 75, 77, 84–86, 90, 97, 110, 124, 127, 130–131, 137–138, 142, 149, 219, 224, 231, 235, 243, 249–250, 261
 Sear, F. 106–108, 111
 Segal, A. 1, 19–20, 28, 38, 44, 87, 93–96, 159, 179
 Segal, A. F. 226
 Seigne, J. 105, 114
 Shammah, A. 141
 Shaw, B. D. 215
 Shaw, S. 140
 Shepardson, C. C. 235–236
 Shinan, A. 242
 Sider, R. 156, 173–174
 Smallwood, E. M. 4, 6–7, 18–19, 65, 77
 Smith, R. H. 116–117
 Sperber, D. 111, 205
 Spielman, L. R. 222–223
 Stemberger, G. 246
 Stern, D. 210
 Stern, E. 159
 Stern, M. 79
 Stern, S. 177, 248
 Strack, H. L. 127–128, 178, 181, 230
 Stratton, K. B. 251, 253–255
 Sturgeon, M. 98, 100, 115
 Sussman, Y. 128, 178, 180
- Tal, O. 38
 Tcherikover, V. 38, 41, 45, 114, 188–189
 Thompson, L. A. 77
 Toner, J. P. 173
 Treadgold, W. T. 99
 Trümper, M. 160
- Tsafirir, Y. 94, 159
 Turnheim, Y. 159
 Tzaferis, V. 203
- Urbach, E. E. 164
- Veltri, G. 146, 195, 197–198, 200
 Ville, G. 163, 207
 Ville-Patlagean, E. 203, 265
 Visotzky, B. 161, 226
- Wacholder, B. Z. 30
 Waterman, L. 90, 159
 Webb, R. 11, 153, 162, 174, 186, 188, 190–191, 193–194, 238, 247–248, 251
 Weber, T. 92
 Weiss, Z. 1, 3, 6–7, 12, 28, 87–94, 96, 98, 101, 104–106, 109, 111–112, 114, 116, 120, 123, 125, 131–132, 136, 138, 142, 146, 158–159, 162, 165, 179, 182–191, 193, 195–198, 200–205, 209–212, 216, 218, 221–223, 226, 239, 261, 265
 Welch, K. E. 27, 152, 166
 Westermann, W. L. 75, 193
 Wiedemann, T. E. J. 9, 152–153, 208
 Wilken, R. L. 235–236, 246
 Williams, M. H. 77, 161
 Wistrand, M. 153, 165–167, 171, 175, 214
 Wolfson, H. A. 43–44
 Woolf, G. 8, 113
- Xanthakis-Karamanos, G. 42
- Yahalom, J. 243
 Yegül, F. 138
- Zachos, K. 60
 Zellentin, H. M. 161
 Zlotnick, D. 127
 Zulay, M. 243
 Zuntz, G. 40

Index of Subjects

- Abba b. Kahana, R. 204n, 256
Abbahu, R. 192–193, 205–208, 262–263
Acta Martyrum 135, 137
Actian games 18
Actium 60, 61, 66
Ad bestias 18, 32, 48, 50, 51, 52, 76, 83
Aelia Capitolina 26
Africa 59
Agonothetes 38n, 100, 101–102, 103n, 104, 113, 121, 215, 216–218, 220
Agrippa I 66, 96, 158, 164
Agrippa II 29, 37, 85
Aḥa, R. 228, 230, 252–254
Alexander the Great 59, 95, 131
Alexandria 39, 42, 43, 44, 53, 65, 77, 94, 97, 201, 224, 234
Alexandrian Amphitheater 77
Amoraic literature 182–184, 218–219, 221–223, 231, 248–249, 255, 256–257, 262–264
– on gladiatorial combat 204–209
– on gymnastic events 210–218
– on mime 188–190
– on pantomime 191–195
– on public architecture 185
Amorites, ways of 125, 126, 143–144, 148, 155, 222, 223, 256, 262, 264
Amphitheaters see Theaters
Ananias 37
Antioch, Syrian 15, 48, 51, 77, 98, 99, 109, 120, 152, 202, 209, 232, 235–237, 240, 246
Antiochus IV Epiphanes 36, 46, 48, 49, 152
Antipas see Herod Antipas
Aphrodisias 15, 50n, 78n, 100, 115, 117–118, 119–120, 121, 123, 261
Aphrodite 138
Apollo 41, 120
Appian 80
Arabia 2n, 87, 95, 102, 103, 115, 116, 261
Arch of Titus 73, 74
Aristobulus II 22, 63, 67
Armenia 94
Arrachion 211–212, 215
Artemis 25
Ashkelon 96, 179, 209–210
Asia Minor 15, 24, 76, 94, 95, 114, 115, 117, 121, 123, 179, 201, 209, 261
Athenagoras 153, 156, 163, 167
Athens 46
Athletic competitions see Gymnastic events
Augustine 162n, 163, 224, 247
Augustus 11, 12, 17, 18, 20, 22, 24–25, 27n, 29, 32, 48, 53, 54, 56, 57, 60, 61, 62, 65, 66, 67, 72, 73, 74, 82, 114, 240
Ba'al Shamim 114
Babylon 65, 94
Bar Kokhba Revolt see Jewish Revolt, Second
Basil of Caesarea 246
Bath houses 133–134, 137–141, 184, 185
Beast hunts 18, 24, 32, 48, 50, 52, 54, 148, 151–152, 155, 167, 252, 260
Beit Guvrin 94
Beit She'an 84n, 88n, 93, 94, 109, 114n, 159, 187, 209, 265
Berakhtein 89
Berenice 234–235
Berytus 50, 51, 66, 76, 96, 187
Beth She'an see Beit She'an
Beth She'arim 203, 204n
Blues 117, 119–120
Bostra 89, 93, 94, 114–115, 116, 123, 261
Caesarean games 20, 29, 30, 50, 51, 66, 76, 96, 266
Caesarea Maritima 20, 25, 29, 51, 56, 57, 75, 88, 93, 94, 96, 98, 109, 113, 116, 117, 122, 179, 187, 192–193, 209–210, 218, 259, 260, 262–263, 265
Caesarea Paneas 209
Caesarea Philippi 51, 75
Caligula 56, 81, 82

- Canatha 27n, 89n, 93n, 111
 Cannibalism 79–80, 153–154, 205n
 Capitolia 73
 Capitulation tax 84
 Caracalla 81, 84, 120
 Caria 78n, 117
 Carthage 156, 161, 174, 214
 Cassius Dio 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83
 Cassius Longinus 27n
 Celts 82, 86, 113n, 152
 Cestius Gallus 56
 Chariot racing 8, 27n, 120, 179, 201–203, 233
 Choricus of Gaza 187, 239, 240
 Christians & Christianity 13, 79, 82, 83, 99, 128, 224, 235–237, 241–242, 257
 – in mime 188
 – oratory 245–248
 – on Roman entertainment 11, 13, 150, 153–158, 160–164, 167, 168–169, 173–175, 187, 232–234, 245
 Cicero 135n, 165, 176, 199
 Circus see Hippodromes
 Circus Maximus 27n–28n, 72, 74, 88, 89
 Civic tribes 116
 Claudius 47, 96, 239
 Commodus 81, 82, 109, 239
 Constantinople 246
 Cyprian 162n, 214
 Cyprus 78
 Cyrene & Cyrenaica 78, 80, 82, 83, 88, 121
 The Colosseum see Flavian Amphitheater

 Damascus 93, 96
 Daphne 98
 Decapolis 38n, 86, 89, 94, 95
 Diadochi 59
 Diaspora Judaism 5, 42, 44, 47, 52, 53, 65, 95, 124, 261
 – Guild membership 118–120
 – Pogroms 77–78
 – Theater attendance 117–120, 123, 266
 Diaspora Revolt 78–83, 84
 – inscriptional evidence 80n
Didascalía Apostolorum 227–228
 Dionysia 27n, 41, 46
 Domitian 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 105
 Dor 93n
 Dosa b. Hyrcanus, R. 230–231, 249
 Drama see Theater
 Dusares 114

 Egypt 39, 42, 59, 72, 77, 78, 79, 80, 108, 121, 201, 218
 Eleazar ben Ananias 37
 Eleutheropolis 98, 109
 Elijah 228–230
 Epiphanius of Salamis 234–235
 Ephes, R. 202
 Ephesus 25, 100
 Etruscans 152–153, 156
 Euergetism 100, 121, 123, 257, 261
 Euripides 43n, 187, 242
 Eusebius 80, 83, 187
 Eustathius 42
 Ezekiel the Tragedian 42–44, 121, 265–266

Fabula atellana 146n, 195–201, 239
 Flavian Amphitheater 27, 51, 73, 74, 81, 82, 135n, 150, 152, 163, 224

 Gadara 92, 93, 95
 Gaius Caesar see Caligula
 Galba 239
 Galilee 75n, 83, 85, 96, 110, 129, 164, 232, 249
 Gamaliel II, R. 184
 Gaul(s) 59, 61, 73, 82, 86, 190, 261
 Gaza 83, 179, 209–210
Genesis Rabbah 183, 184, 202–203, 208–209, 210–213, 218, 227, 237–238, 240, 262, 263
 Gerasa 92, 93, 95, 97, 101–105, 111, 113, 116, 159, 179, 261
 Gerrenus, T. Flavius Quirina 101–105, 113, 115, 123, 261
 Gladiatorial combat 1, 5, 8, 9, 18, 24, 43n, 48, 50, 76, 82, 83, 88, 148, 151–152, 154–158, 162–168, 170, 203–209, 260
 – *auctorati* 207
 – and the Diaspora Revolt 78–83
 – and financial crisis 205–206, 208
 – and Genesis 183, 184, 212
 – and the Imperial cult 48
 – Jewish opposition 47–52, 66
 – with Jewish captives 74, 86
 – as murder 162–164
 – Rabbinic opposition 125, 165, 167–168
 – and Roman imperialism 81
 – as virtue 167
 Gladiators 206–209, 219
 Greek sport 4–5, 18, 209–213
 Gregory Nazianus 246

- Gymnasia 38
 – in Jerusalem 44–45, 46, 151, 158
 Gymnastic events 8, 17, 18, 35, 39, 43n, 88, 209–216
 – in Christian literature 214–216
 – and divine benefactor 202, 216–218
 – and Genesis 183, 210, 212, 213
 – Jewish reception 44–47, 54, 213
 – as metaphor 213–216
 – in pagan literature 213–214
 – Rabbinic opposition 125
- Hadrian 26, 80, 83, 94, 99, 104, 201
 Hamat Gader 89, 93n
 Hannibal 79, 82
 Hasmoneans 31, 46, 49–50, 57, 63, 67
 Hebron 83
 Hera 41
 Herod Antipas 57, 58, 90
 Herod the Great 1, 3, 4, 11, 12, 15, 17–34, 49, 50–51, 54–55, 65, 83, 95, 103, 131, 151, 259, 265, 267
 – conspiracy against 64, 65
 – devotion to Rome 22–24
 – and Jewish law 25–26, 31–32
 – in Josephus 29–33, 52
 – and images 57–58, 59
 – and trophies 53–67, 158
 Herodian games 3–4, 12, 15, 17–34, 35, 39, 47, 51, 52, 53, 54–55, 60, 62, 67, 76, 121, 158, 265, 267
 – and the Imperial cult 23, 24–25, 34
 – lack of gladiators 49, 66
 – and Roman sport 18, 32, 47–50
 – Success 26–34
 – Trophies 28, 32–33, 53–67
 Herodium 23, 57
 Hierapolis 115, 118–119, 120
 Hippodromes 1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 19n, 37, 38n, 50n, 69, 88, 89, 91, 93, 96, 97, 121, 122, 125, 132, 142–144, 157, 179, 181, 201, 260
 – and magicians 196
 Hispania 61
 Homosexuality 228–230
 Horse racing 1, 18, 38n, 39, 43n, 88, 152, 170, 179
 Hyrcanus I 46
 Hyrcanus II 22, 49–50, 67
- Iasos 41, 266
 Ionian Jews 65
 Isaac Nappaha, R. 241
- Isocrates 214
 Italy 48, 75n, 88, 107, 117
- Jacob of Serugh 190, 247
 Jaffa 38n
 Jason the High Priest 45, 46, 54, 151, 158
 Jerash see Gerasa
 Jericho 22–23, 57
 Jerome 83, 161, 179, 191, 196, 241, 246–248, 263
 Jerusalem 3, 15, 17, 25, 31, 56, 85, 191, 259
 – Roman destruction of 19, 32, 51, 56, 75, 76, 91, 96n, 98, 105
 – Theater and amphitheater 17, 19–20, 21–22, 26–28, 29, 32, 33, 35, 36–39, 53, 58, 92, 95, 265
 Jerusalem games see Herodian games
 Jewish drama 15
 Jewish Revolt, First see Jewish War
 Jewish Revolt, Second 11, 12, 83–84, 90n, 96, 121
 Jewish War 11, 37, 51, 57, 84, 85, 97, 101, 121, 122, 164, 259
 – Captives from 75–77
 – Roman triumph 71–76, 259–260
 John Chrysostom 162n, 190n, 227, 233, 235–237, 245–248, 250, 251, 263–264
 John Malalas 98, 99n, 119
 Joppa 50
 Josephus 2–3, 11, 12, 15, 19, 23, 28–33, 35–39, 51, 56–57, 71, 91, 95, 128, 130, 151, 158, 170, 226, 260, 265–266
 – Audience 28–29
 – editorialization 33
 – on Herod 29–30, 32–33, 64, 65
 – on the Herodian games 17, 20–21, 28, 31–33, 35, 38–39, 46, 47, 52, 53–54, 55, 104, 164–165, 266
 – on Jewish captives 75–77
 – on Jewish custom 32, 35, 36–39, 47
 – on Jewish martyrdom 76
 – on Diaspora Judaism 77–78
 – on Roman sport 47, 49–52, 164, 263–264
 – on the Roman triumph 71–72
 – Sources 30–31, 50n
 Julius Caesar 27n, 49–50, 59, 60, 62
 Jupiter 25, 71, 157
 Juvenal 79, 171, 172, 175, 240
- Kalends 118
 Kitos War see Diaspora Revolt

- Latin 113–114
Lamentations Rabbah 183, 188–190
 Law, Jewish see Torah
 Legio 94, 95, 98
 Lepcis Magna 88
Letter of Aristeas 39–42, 265
 Levi, R. 227–228
 Levites 37
Leviticus Rabbah 185, 226, 263
 Libanius 246
 Libya 80
 Livy 48, 49, 79, 152
 Lucian 190–191, 214
 Lugdunum Convenarum 60–61

Maccabees, I 4–5, 44, 46, 130, 151, 155, 158, 265
Maccabees, II 4–5, 44–46, 130, 151, 155, 158, 170, 265
 Macrobius 191
 Magerius 100, 101, 105
 Maimonides 134–135
 Marc Antony 22, 65, 74
 Marcus Agrippa 50–51
 Maruc Aurelius 202, 239–240
 Maresha 38n
 Mariamme 63
 Mars 60
 Martial 74, 135n, 150, 152, 172, 254
 Masada 57–58
 Meir, R. 144, 146–148, 160, 231, 240
Mekhilta de Arayot 131, 141, 143–145, 148, 151, 154–155, 160, 178, 257
Meridiani 166–167, 252–253
 Midrash, Amoraic 126, 178, 180, 183, 202, 216–218
 Midrash, Tannaitic 128, 220
 Miletus 100, 117–118, 119–120, 121, 123, 261
 Mime 2, 3, 18n, 43n, 154, 183, 186n, 187–190, 196–197, 198n, 199, 201, 218, 220, 233
 – and rabbis 237–245
 Mishnah 13, 126, 127, 129, 132–142, 145, 146, 150, 160, 162, 179–180, 181–182, 205, 220, 222, 225, 249, 262
 – on idolatry 140–141
 Mode'in 63
Munera see Gladiatorial combat
 Musical competitions 18, 39

 Nabataea 89, 114
 Nathan, R. 162, 168

Naumachia 74
 Neapolis 116, 209
 Nechuniah b. HaKanah, R. 225, 229, 249, 250, 256, 257
 Nehorai, R. 228
 Neptune 60, 157
 Nero 27n, 77, 81, 97, 152–153, 175–176, 239
 Nicolaus of Damascus 30, 31, 32, 33, 35, 42, 55, 64
 Nicopolis 18, 62, 114
 Niketas, son of Jason 41
 Novatian 233

 Octavian Caesar see Augustus
 Olympic games 17, 22, 157, 209
 Origen 84
 Ovadiah, R. 134

Palaestra 45, 138, 151, 158
 Palestine 1, 2, 6, 12–13
 Panais 57
 Pantakakos 192–195, 218
 Pantomime 40n, 171, 183, 186n, 190–195, 199n, 219, 220, 244
 – and thaumaturges 196–197
 Passover 43, 75, 118
 Paul 156
 Paulus Orosius 80
Pegmata 71
 Pella 93n, 116
 Pentacost 118
 Pentateuch see Torah
 Perpetua 214–215
Pesikta de Rav Kahana 183, 254, 262, 263
 Petronius 56
 Pharisees 37
 Philadelphia 93n, 209
 Philip the Arab 93, 114
 Philo 4, 5, 43, 44, 128, 265
 Philopopolis 88n, 93
 Philostratus 211
 Phoenician coast 38n, 94
 Phrygia 118
Piyyut 243–245
 Pliny the Younger 153, 172, 175–176
 Pompeii 107
 Pompey the Great 27, 50, 59, 157
 Pontius Pilate 56
 Pontus 59
 Priests, Jewish 37, 45, 85, 170
 Ptolemy II Philadelphus 39, 40
 Punic War, Second 82

- Rabbinic literature 3, 5–6, 11, 13, 125,
127–130, 142, 160–162, 164–165, 252,
261–265
- And Christian literature 263–265
 - on circus 202
 - distinctiveness 130–132
 - parables 126, 180, 219
 - practicality 221–222, 226–227
 - on theater attendance 91, 122n, 125–
126, 137, 142, 180, 220–224
- Rashi 134–135
- Rehov 185n, 234
- Resh Lakish see Shimon b. Lakish,
R. Rhodes 22
- Roman civil law 136–137
- Roman Empire 1
- Roman entertainment
- Christian attitudes 11, 13, 150, 153–
158, 160–164, 167, 168–169, 173–175,
187, 232–234, 245
 - as distraction from Torah 13, 32n,
144–145, 146, 148–149, 163, 169–170,
176–177, 181, 223, 225, 262, 264
 - and eschatology 251–255, 257
 - as expression of Jewish identity 15,
117–122, 123
 - as expression of local identity 10, 112–
115, 261
 - inscriptional evidence 2, 19, 41, 100–
105, 115, 179
 - Jewish attitudes 3–8, 10–12, 33–34, 51,
94–96, 125–126, 220–224, 259, 265–267
 - Jewish opposition 11, 13, 15, 21, 32–33,
35, 47–52, 146–147
 - Jewish participation 6, 12–13, 34, 69–
70, 86, 91, 95, 118, 121–122, 124, 266
 - as legal obligation 23
 - as leisure activity 172–173
 - and military personnel 98
 - pagan critiques 150, 151–153, 155,
170–173, 175–176
 - in the provinces 9–10
 - and religion 9, 157
 - and Roman imperialism 9, 72–73, 97–
100, 139–140, 184, 223, 229
 - social value 8–10, 70, 103, 139
- Rome 25, 27, 50, 52, 58, 59, 66, 67, 73, 81,
88, 98, 152–153, 200, 229
- Rosh Hashanah 216–217, 237
- Sabbath see Shabbat
- Samaria see Sebaste
- Saturnalia 200
- Scorners, sitting with 145–146, 148–149,
160–162, 163, 168–172, 176–177, 180–
182, 223, 225, 231–232, 250, 256–257,
262, 264
- Scythopolis see Beit She'an
- Sebaste 20, 25, 29, 57, 88n, 93
- Seleucid Empire 94–95
- Seneca 43n, 150, 165–167, 171–172, 176,
214, 252
- Sepphoris 6, 90, 91, 92, 96, 117, 121, 129,
159, 187, 241, 262, 265
- Septimus Severus 120, 201
- Septuagint 40n, 42
- Shabbat 36, 65, 78, 138, 189, 205, 243
- Shechem 93, 94
- Shimon b. Lakish, R. 204, 238, 240, 250,
264n
- Shimon b. Yochai, R. 210–211, 216, 217
- Sidon 96, 209
- Sifra* 47n, 141, 145, 178, 222–223, 226
- Simon bar Gioras 71
- Simon Thassi 63
- Smirat 100
- Sophocles 187
- Sosius 59
- Spectacle see Roman entertainment
- St. Bertrand de Comminges see Lugdu-
num Convenarum
- Stadia 5, 9, 37, 69, 88, 91, 93, 97, 115, 122,
142–144, 181
- in the Mishnah 133–137, 139–141, 149,
162
 - as murder 147, 148, 167
- Stoicism 40, 166–167, 214
- Suetonius 66, 150, 175, 239
- Sukkot 217, 237, 254
- Sulla 59
- Susanna 42
- Synagogues 57n, 87n, 90, 91, 98–99, 118,
126, 248–251
- liturgy 242–245
 - similar to theater 234–237
 - non-Rabbinic 230–232
 - opposed to theater 225–232, 248, 250,
256–257, 264
 - Samaritan 234
 - Syracusae 117–118
- Syria 15, 19, 38n, 48, 49, 56, 76, 92, 94, 95,
114, 116, 121, 123, 190, 201, 209, 261
- Tacitus 150, 152–153, 171, 172, 175–176
- Talmud, Babylonian 127, 162n, 168n,
181n, 182n, 195, 197, 223

- Talmud, Palestinian 84, 126, 127, 178,
180–183, 185–186, 219, 220–221, 223,
225, 229, 237–238, 245, 249, 262–263
– on *fabula atellana* 195–201
– on gladiatorial combat 204–205, 207–
208
– on pantomime 191–195
Tannaitic literature 127–129, 150, 179,
182, 204, 221–222, 231, 248–249, 256,
262
Tarquins 153
Tatian 153–155, 156, 162n, 163, 167, 262
Tel ‘Eitun 203
Temple, Jerusalem 1, 12, 23, 25, 29, 32,
46, 74, 75, 85, 91, 95, 99, 170, 259
golden eagle 56
statue of Caligula 56
and theaters 228–230
Temple of Peace 73, 74
Temple of Zeus Olympios 114, 159
Terichaea 91
Tertullian 140n, 146n, 156–158, 160–161,
162n, 163–164, 167, 169, 174–175, 214–
215, 245, 247–248, 251–252, 253, 255,
262, 264
Theater
– and Biblical narrative 42–44
– Christian alternatives 251
– similar to church 245–248, 250–251
– genres 186–187
– in the Hellenistic era 42
– as idolatry 133–135, 146–147, 226
– Jewish appreciation 39–44, 52, 92,
94–96
– as non-Rabbinic 232
– pagan content 41–42, 44, 135, 147,
156–157, 233
– in Palestine 44, 121–124
– Rabbinic opposition 125–126, 167,
220–224
– as rival to church 232–234, 248
– sponsorship 101–105
– similar to synagogue 234–237
Theater of Marcellus 67, 106
Theater of Pompey 27, 106, 157, 159,
186n
Theaters 1, 2, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 24, 27,
37–38, 51, 53, 69, 88, 97, 115, 122, 125,
142–144, 181
– amphitheaters in Palestine 94, 203
– archaeological remains 37–38, 41
– and city size 110
– civic sponsorship 105–112, 123, 260
– construction 27–28, 38n, 92–94, 109–
110
– cost 106–109, 111–112
– and destruction of synagogues 98–99
– and the imperial cult 159–160
– imperial sponsorship 97–100, 107, 108,
123
– individual sponsorship 100–101, 107,
108–109, 123
– Judean theaters, pre-Herodian 43–44
– in Palestine 87–94, 98–100, 110–112,
116–117, 121–123, 127, 132, 136, 141,
158–159, 179, 184, 259–260
– seating 66–67, 115–120
– women’s seating 116
Theatrical competitions 18, 39, 170
Theodectes of Phaeselis 42
Tiberias 6, 57, 58, 90, 91, 117, 121, 129,
238, 262, 265
Tiberius 56, 114, 239
Tiberius Julius Alexander 77
Titus 51, 71–77, 82, 83, 96n, 99, 101, 150,
152, 164
Torah 15, 21, 32n, 42, 47, 48, 54, 55, 85,
145, 148, 177, 221, 223, 225, 227, 235,
238, 243, 250, 254, 257, 266
– in Aristeas 40, 41
– as entertainment 241–242
– in Josephus 36, 76, 77
– opposite spectacle 13, 32n, 144–145,
146, 148–149, 163, 169–170, 176–177,
181, 223, 225, 262, 264
Tosefta 13, 126, 127, 131, 141–142, 144,
145–149, 150, 160, 162–164, 166, 167–
170, 176–177, 178, 180–182, 195, 197,
200, 219, 221, 222–223, 225, 231, 234,
249–250, 256
Trajan 48n, 74, 78, 80, 101–103, 153, 172
Trophies 58–60
– Herod’s 61–63
– in Jewish contexts 63–64
– as religious symbols 58, 61, 62–63
– see also Herodian games, Trophies
Tyre 45, 46, 89, 187, 209
Urbanization 97, 115, 121
Valerius Messala 27n
Venationes see beast hunts
Venus 59, 157, 159
Vespasian 71–74, 98, 99, 101
Xiphilinus 79, 81

- Yochanon, R. 240
Yannai 243-245
Yom Kippur 216-217, 237
Yosi of Ma'on 183n, 237-238, 240-242,
244n, 249, 250
Yudah Nesi'ah 238, 242
Yudan b. Shimon, R. 254
Zabidon 114, 123, 261
Zealots 33
Zeno 119
Zeus 80n, 109, 114, 159

