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Public Spectacles in Roman and Late Antique Palestine by
Zeev Weiss (review)

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Zeev Weiss

Public Spectacles in Roman and Late Antique Palestine

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014

Pp. xii + 361. \$49.95.

This welcome study offers a comprehensive overview of the surviving evidence attesting to the staging of large-scale public entertainments in Roman Palestine. An archeologist by trade, Weiss appeals to the ancient Jewish and Christian literary records to account for the varieties of athletic competition, blood sport, and stage performance held in the arenas whose monumental remains are found throughout Israel, the Palestinian Territories, and the surrounding region. Weiss argues that such spectacles became regular fare for the various populations of Judea and greater Palestine following their introduction by Herod the Great in the first century B.C.E., only to wane in popularity during the Byzantine age due to the moral censures of Christian religious authorities. In the meantime, Jews, Christians, and pagans alike routinely indulged in the leisure pursuits of their Roman overseers, just as did their provincial peers throughout the Empire.

Weiss proceeds in the Chapter One to explore the testimonies of Flavius Josephus to Herod's efforts to introduce Roman entertainment among his Jewish subjects. In Chapter Two he describes in ample detail the archeological remains of theaters, amphitheaters, and hippodromes constructed by Herod and his administrative successors and maintained through the classical period. In Chapter Three, Weiss discusses a range of literary and epigraphic evidence speaking to the types of performances and athletic competitions commonly held in these facilities. Chapter Four analyzes the public and private financial means whereby they were built and maintained, which Chapter Five focuses on rabbinic and patristic testimonies to the occurrence of public spectacles in Palestine prior to its Christianization in the fourth century. Finally, in Chapter Six Weiss posits that the decline of such events was a casualty of evolving Christian mores.

Richly illustrated with photographs, diagrams, and architectural drawings, Weiss's presentation of the archeological record is exemplary. He easily improves upon Arthur Segal's *Theatres in Roman Palestine and Provincia Arabia* (1997) in respect to the scope of his survey and the accessibility of his exposition thereof. Yet Weiss's most substantial advancement here is his effort to read the material evidence in light of the critical remarks of contemporary Jewish and Christian observers active in Palestine, who were less than forthcoming regarding the mass appeal of such spectacles among their friends and neighbors. His study therefore stands to contribute significantly to the interpretation of those abstract moral judgments as functions of a common socio-cultural rhetoric on popular entertainments in the Roman world.

Weiss's synthesis is not without its methodological issues. Although he acknowledges the difficulty of reading rabbinic texts as historical documents (6), he seems to ignore his own warning in neglecting to account for the relatively late dates and rhetorical contexts of the documents from which he adduces the majority of his Jewish evidence after Josephus. His appeal to the Christian record is just as concerning, consisting largely of brief excerpts divorced from the moral exhorta-

tions in which they are embedded. While Weiss manages to show that both the rabbis and the Church Fathers were generally opposed to involvement in public entertainments, he does not account for the fact that those same men regularly employed metaphors drawn from that ostensibly illicit cultural sphere. Those looking for deep insight into the rhetorical strategies of the Jewish and Christian authors whose words Weiss uses to illustrate the archeological record might not find his selective approach adequately suited to their needs.

Of like concern is the relatively small pool of literary sources at Weiss's disposal. Although Jewish and Christian commentators residing in Palestine were sufficiently aware of their incidence to acknowledge the Roman entertainments, they did not describe these events in substantial detail. Weiss therefore has to appeal repeatedly to the same rare textual selections exhibiting such incidental information. The same can be said of the relatively few well-preserved archeological sites at his disposal. In order to fill out his analysis of the Palestinian record, Weiss must frequently adduce literary and material evidences from elsewhere, predominantly Syria, Arabia, and Asia Minor. This lends a circular quality to Weiss's argument for the resemblance of Palestine's leisure culture compared to those of other areas of the Roman world.

All told, however, I find in Weiss's study more to commend than to criticize. Students of Jewish and Christian antiquity not previously acquainted with the technical aspects of Roman leisure culture and its physical remains will find this book a fine primer on those subjects, while all readers will find much to acclaim in the author's incomparable wealth of knowledge on the place of public entertainments in the common cultural sphere of classical Judea-Palestine.

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Eugenia Scarvelis Constantinou

*Guiding to a Blessed End: Andrew of Caesarea &
His Apocalypse Commentary in the Ancient Church*

Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014

Pp. 350. \$69.95.

Following the appearance of English translations of the two early Byzantine commentaries on the Apocalypse of John, that of Oecumenios, translated by John N. Suggit (CUA Press, 2006), and her own translation of that of Andrew of Caesarea (CUA Press, 2011), Constantinou offers a study to place Andrew's commentary in its various historical and theological contexts. She considers the importance of Andrew's work in securing the canonicity of the Apocalypse for the Byzantine Orthodox Church. She compares Andrew's work with Oecumenios's, to which it explicitly and implicitly responds. She provides analysis of Andrew's exegesis and theology, highlighting his persistent efforts to read the text as a prophecy of personal eschatology, with rewards and punishments, rather than as a prediction of imminent end times. The genre of this study approaches *pie exponere*, strangely