

Review of Erich S. Gruen, *Ethnicity in the Ancient World—Did it Matter?*

Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020

Shawn Kelley, Daemen University

With *Ethnicity in the Ancient World—Did it Matter?* Erich S. Gruen dives into the controversial issue of ethnicity in antiquity. He opens with an introductory chapter on theoretical approaches to race and ethnicity before turning to classical antiquity (chapters 1-5) and the biblical material (chapters 6-11). Six of the 11 chapters have appeared elsewhere while the remaining chapters were written for this volume. The previously published and new essays form a coherent whole built around the thesis that ethnicity, which he finds to be a more useful designation than race, is extraneous to the ancient world. For Gruen, it is the task of scholarship to let the ancients speak for themselves without imposing categories on the texts. It is “hazardous, inappropriate” and the result of “faulty methodology” to apply either race or ethnicity to antiquity (215).

The introduction gives an overview of some of the theoretical approaches to race and ethnicity (i.e., primordial, instrumentalist, and constructionist), which can be divided into two large schools of thought. The first sees a universal human impulse to think in terms of ethnicity. The second sees ethnic identity as a construct dependent on social and political factors. Gruen argues that neither approach is adequate for understanding communal identity within antiquity and instead focuses on a close reading of an impressive assortment of texts. Critical race theory, which has recently expanded its scope to include antiquity, is not utilized.

He starts by looking at the issue of terminology. While the relevant terms (*ethnos*, *genos*) appear regularly in ancient texts, they are not limited to what could be called “ethnicity” (66-68). Josephus uses the term *genos* for distinctive modes of life, peoples, customs, dynastic lineages, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, and animals (167-178). Polybius uses *ethnos* for nations, peoples, and tribes (66-67) while Herodotus even applies it to cannibals (47). Neither term provides a window into ancient views of ethnicity.

Gruen identifies two recurring ancient themes that may offer insight into ancient ethnic thinking, although he is ultimately skeptical of both. The first involves claims of genealogy, common ancestors, and lineage while the second consists of common customs, rituals, and social practices. As Gruen notes, these two possible markers of identity stand in fundamental tension with each other. The former implies that communities are held together by an intrinsic character passed down through bloodlines while the latter presumes malleable communal boundaries and fluid social identities.

For Gruen, the genealogical approach does not provide the critic with sure footing. While appeals to lineage and genealogy are widespread, ancient authors commonly trace their people back to multiple, competing ancestors (77, 87, 90-91, 149). Many of the genealogies are far more concerned with the lineage of families, tribes, and royal figures (169-170) than with an entire community. Most Greek cities claimed their own founder while the Romans appropriated them all and added several more to the mix (74). Gruen finds a similar dynamic in the Jewish material.

He argues, for example, that Mattathias's appeal to the ancestors in 1 Maccabees is less about blood lineage and more about exemplars to be imitated (132-133). He concludes that ancient genealogical claims are not connected to ethnicity.

The customs and ritual practices are no less confounding. Herodotus's narrative has a character (Demaratus) respond to the Persian monarch (Xerxes) by implying Greek superiority but emphasizing acquired virtue (*arete*) rather than inherited (48). Communal identity is often associated with rituals and practices, but here too problems arise. For Gruen, "customs not only varied, they overlapped, they were imitated, borrowed, or adapted. They were also malleable. They could be reshaped, resisted, or discarded" (55). This explains the casual expansion of communal boundaries throughout antiquity, the diversity of Roman citizenship, and the persistence of biblical intermarriage. Communal practices are malleable enough to undercut claims of blood lineage and fluid enough to sever connections between common practices and ethnicity.

Most provocatively, Gruen argues that the vituperation and calumnies against other peoples are also disconnected from ethnic reasoning. He catalogs numerous taunts and insults that appear to have an ethnic feel. He highlights insults hurled at barbarians (41), those articulated by Herodotus, Polybius, and Philo (45, 71, 158), and the staggering number that permeate Roman literature and culture (80-87). He also identifies biblical prohibitions against the impure people of the land (121), and Pauline rhetoric about Gentiles (186). Gruen makes two points about these statements. The first is that the critic must avoid oversimplification by situating provocative quotes within their literary context and by being attentive to who is speaking. A character's insult-laden speech does not necessarily reflect the author's point of view (24-25). His second point is that internal contradictions, textual ambiguities, and ironies (21, 61, 65, 86-87) undermine any coherent sense of ethnic identity. As impressed as I am by his comprehensive and detailed analysis, I see a complication of ethnic reasoning rather than its complete absence.

Gruen's rejection of the category of ethnicity is grounded in a combination of careful textual analysis and a narrow view of the nature of ethnicity. For Gruen, ethnicity requires claims of an inherited, permanent collective essence. It is difficult to find a sense of a permanent ethnic core in the contradictory, divided, and amalgamated texts that Gruen analyzes with such care. Given his assumption about what ethnicity and race mean, his conclusions are entirely warranted, although I think that his definition of ethnicity merits critical examination. A growing number of scholars analyze race-ethnicity in the Bible but are working with broader definitions, equally careful textual analysis, and a nuanced sense of how racial reasoning works in both modernity and antiquity. These scholars are working towards identifying diverse forms of ancient and biblical racial reasoning, a form of reasoning that includes multiple and permeable identities, fluidity, and textual and social contradictions (as Gruen acknowledges, 187 n. 11, 194 n. 55).

Essential to Gruen's analysis is the repeated and not unreasonable claim that scholarly attention should focus on topics that were of interest to ancient writers and should be on guard against the projection of modern categories. I am not convinced, however, that it is possible or advisable to discard modern categories entirely. Even Gruen is unable to avoid their lure, given his rather free use of "religion" and "Jewish" (185 n. 1), neither of which are any less contested than "ethnicity." More importantly, I believe that there is much to be gained by the careful application of a wide range of interpretive categories that do not emerge from the text. Biblical

scholarship has been enriched by such theoretical approaches and would also benefit from the properly nuanced use of the categories of race and ethnicity. Gruen's meticulous readings of a wide range of texts should inform and challenge scholars who agree with his conclusions as well as those who find ethnic or racial reasoning to be useful categories.

I recommend this book for scholars interested in the topic, for graduate students, and for adventurous undergraduates. It represents a significant contribution to an important ongoing conversation and is deserving of a wide audience.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)