

---

# RECENZIÓK

---



Amy-Jill Levine – Mark Zvi Brettler (eds.):

*The Jewish Annotated New Testament. Second Edition,  
Fully Revised and Expanded*

(NEW YORK, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017)

In 2018, the ICCJ (International Council of Christians and Jews) held its annual conference in Budapest, Hungary. The workshop about the recently published second edition of the Jewish Annotated New Testament was heavily attended by scholars, rabbis and priests. Among the 20–30 participants there was only one Hungarian, which indicated that this book needs some more “local” attention. A resource with such international recognition deserves – at least – a critical review.

This book, without doubt, is a success story. According to the preface to the second edition,

Numerous Christian groups and individual Christians across the Church spectrum... hailed the publication of the first edition as a ground-breaking and much needed resource. Similarly Jews, from Orthodox to secular, found this volume to be of significant value... It has become widely used in colleges, universities and seminaries, as well as in Jewish, Christian, and Jewish-Christian study groups.<sup>1</sup>

Having read the book, one cannot deny that it is “a much needed resource”. It is a well-edited, well-written, original commentary to the New Testament, with an additional fifty-four (!) essays by top academics from across the scholarly world, on a wide range of subjects such as the history of the Second Temple period, early Christianity, Jewish reception of Christianity, etc. A unique feature of the book is that it only presents Jewish contributors. One must recognize that the distinctive choice of scholars based upon their lineage is not well explained in the preface. First of all, such selection among scholars raises the question of “who is a Jew?”, which, we can all agree, is an unresolved question to this day. Secondly, a Jewish-born scholar or a convert is not necessarily better at representing Jewish values and viewpoints than an interreligiously sensitive non-Jew. We are living in an age

<sup>1</sup> Amy-Jill Levine – Mark Zvi Brettler (eds.): *The Jewish Annotated New Testament – Second Edition, Fully Revised and Expanded*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2017, xvi–xvii.

where Jewish self-hatred is as much present in the scholarly world as Jewish self-pride. What we can hardly deny is that the editors of this volume reached their goals with the representation of the word “Jewish” in the title. The following objectives are listed in the preface of the first edition: 1. Emphasizing the Jewish aspects of the NT; 2. Putting the NT in the context of Jewish history customs and beliefs of the First and Second Temple period; 3. Highlighting connections between the NT material and later rabbinic literature; 4. Addressing problems regarding passages that “have been used to perpetuate anti-Judaism.”<sup>2</sup>

I think the above-mentioned goals are well represented in the volume. The reader faces a large commentary with a wide range of Jewish sources, picked out not only from the rabbinic literature, but also from Josephus, Philo, the Apocrypha, etc., intended to highlight similarities with Jewish practices and beliefs based upon 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century sources. Nevertheless, one can also see that the book contains references to a number of classical sources (Cicero, Plato, Plutarch, etc.), which might have broadened its title as being not only Jewish, thus placing the Scriptures in a wider spectrum of ancient European cultures.

I would also like to argue that the Jewish Annotated New Testament is not a “ground-breaking resource”, but more likely an exceptionally good continuation of earlier scholarship traditions. It follows in the footsteps of important scholarly contributions to the scientific *and* Jewish research on the NT, especially of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. There is a long history behind a specific kind of Jewish reading of the Christian Scriptures, starting in the modern period with the works of the historian and rabbi Abraham Geiger of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many of his claims later became basic presumptions in Jewish NT scholarship. These include that Jesus was a Jew, most likely with a Pharisee background, who did not intend to radically reform the Pharisaic interpretation of the Scriptures, rather he used their own hermeneutical techniques. And (likewise) that Christianity was in fact created by Paul the Apostle, etc.<sup>3</sup> Neither can we confirm that the genre of the book (i.e., a commentary) is “ground-breaking” as regards commentaries written by Jewish scholars on the NT. Special mention should be made of Géza Vermes, who presented the NT books in the context of not only rabbinic sources but also of the Dead Sea scrolls.<sup>4</sup> There is also a comprehensive commentary on the Gospels using Talmudic sources, written by Arthur Marmorstein (born in Miskolc, Hungary), which is

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Susannah Heschel: “Jewish Views of Jesus.” In Gregory A. Barker (ed.): *Jesus in the World's Faiths: Scholars and Leaders from Five Religions Reflect on His Meaning*. New York, Orbis Books, 2005, 149–160, especially 153–156.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Geza Vermes: *Jesus the Jew – A Historian's Reading of the Gospels*. Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1981.

an undeservedly forgotten work, and would need more scholarly attention especially in the light of the revival in Jewish-Christian scholarship, also represented by the book under discussion.

The section of essays is useful in offering a glimpse at the current state of NT research conducted by Jewish scholars. Daniel Boyarin's essay "Logos, a Jewish Word: John's Prologue as Midrash" is an excellent example of comparative theology, and is an abbreviated form of his earlier published "The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John".<sup>5</sup> Similarly we can find among the essays shortened or amended forms of earlier scholarly publications, such as Susannah Heschel's "Jesus in Modern Jewish Thought."<sup>6</sup> To make it easier to use, the last sections of the book could have seen some improvements, like the large index separated into "index of subjects" and an "index of names". A "reference index" would have been very useful at the end of the volume. With the help of such support, a researcher could find out whether a rabbinic or Jewish source and its themes and motifs have most likely relevance in the NT or in the Second Temple period in general. A person familiar with some parts of the Midrashic literature can realize that many Jewish narratives and parables have parallels in the NT literature. Many are listed in the book, but, certainly, not all of them.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, this book cannot be a comprehensive resource, but, more likely, a "good start" for further research on comparative textual analysis.

The Glossary could have been more comprehensive, and separated into literary sources, Hebrew and Greek expressions, etc. The presence of other tools, such as in-text essays, tables, maps, timetable, parallel texts, etc., are still quite useful.

What especially deserves acknowledgement is the methodology used in the creation of the second edition of the book. The revisions introduced in the second edition were partly based upon the requests of the readers. In the preface, the expanded annotations on the biblical books are mentioned as based upon readers' reactions, not unlike the inclusion of introductions for each book, and the in-

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Boyarin: "Logos, a Jewish Word: John's Prologue as Midrash." In Levine-Brettler, 688–691. Cf. Daniel Boyarin: "The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John." *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 94, № 3, 2001, 243–284.

<sup>6</sup> See our third footnote. Cf. Susannah Heschel: "Jesus in Modern Jewish Thought." In Levine-Brettler, 736–741.

<sup>7</sup> The mentioning of Canticles Rabbah in David Stern's essay "Midrash and Parables" is missing. The introduction of CantR is partly about the purpose of parables. The midrashic parallel to the parable of the "lost silver coin" is particularly missing from the commentary to Lk 15:8–10. According to CantR, parables are about making Torah easier to understand, which is a significant difference from the usage of parables in the Gospels, where they are presented as the essential parts of Scriptures. Cf. CantR 1:1:8 119b–120a. ערצו ערצו ערצו ערצו ערצו ערצו ערצו ערצו ערצו ערצו Cf. David Stern: "Midrash and Parables." In Levine-Brettler, 707–710.

creased number of essays.<sup>8</sup> It is rare to see such a wonderful result of the “feedback culture”. It seems that constructive criticism has its place in the revision of earlier editions – even in the scholarly publishing world.

As a Jew, I would like to emphasize that sometimes it is more than difficult to struggle with NT texts. Some verses in these books are highly problematic from a Jewish point of view.<sup>9</sup> I think, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century such an enterprise, which presents NT texts adjusted to Jewish sensitivity, needs more praise and attention. One example of how the editors address such questions is the “in-text essay” on 1Thes 2:14-16 regarding the accusation of Christ’s killing.<sup>10</sup> The short essay ends with mentioning the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate*, and with Protestant claims rejecting the communal culpability of the Jewish people in the death of Christ.

Regardless of their controversial reception among the wider Jewish community, the NT texts remain one of the most important contemporary sources of Jewish life in the Second Temple period. But the editors aim for more than presenting a historical reference book. They also have educational purposes by using the “study Bible” format. This volume is not only aimed at Christian and secular readers, to make them understand the Scriptures in their original context, but it is also aimed at a Jewish audience, in order that they may be more familiar with the Christian Bible. Interfaith dialogue could deeply benefit from the Jewish Annotated New Testament. The possibility of contextualizing NT passages in Jewish textual traditions makes it easier to address controversial questions, therefore this book could serve the interreligious dialogue to be more intellectually based, more “spiced up”, more direct, and critical. It is also useful for finding numerous similarities between the two religions. Even with its small number of drawbacks, it is a highly recommended resource to rabbis, priests, pastors, theologians, scholars of comparative religion, and to anyone interested in the Jewish and/or the Christian religion.

*Péter Radvánszki*

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., xvii.

<sup>9</sup> The introduction especially mentions the “Synagogue of Satan” of the Book of Revelations 3:9, the replacement theology of Hebrews 8, etc. (ibid., xiv).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 421.