

Jewish Annotated New Testament

Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 637 pp. \$35.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 0195297709.

The *Jewish Annotated New Testament* is a unique and important work for understanding the New Testament in its Jewish milieu. It is an exegetical tool for New Testament study written entirely by Jewish scholars. The book introductions, annotations, and background essays are the fruit of a generation of Jewish scholars who have developed the necessary expertise in the language, history, and culture of the New Testament, in both its Jewish and broader Hellenistic settings. These fifty scholars, who teach at major research universities, leading Christian and Jewish theological schools, and church-related institutions, are expert in a wide range of subjects, from Early Judaism to New Testament to Ancient Near Eastern Civilizations to Rabbinics. Following in the spirit of the formal statement *Dabru Emet* (2000) and the groundbreaking book *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (2000), this book should also be understood as an important text in Jewish-Christian relations—as a Jewish reappraisal of the central text of Christianity in the light of the renewed appreciation of the Jewish origins of Christianity among Christians and Jews.

This book is formatted like other modern study bibles such as the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* (4th ed., 2010) or the *Catholic Study Bible* (2nd ed., 2011), with NT (New Revised Standard Version) text (1-498) in the body of the page and a section of fine-print annotations at the foot of the text, filling one third to one half of the page. Annotations for the most important books (i.e., Galatians or Romans) extend over one half of each page. An extensive section of thirty background essays form a small handbook, followed by chronological charts and tables, textual information, a glossary, and an index.

Each NT book is introduced with a helpful introductory essay (typically one to two fine-print pages) that covers standard topics (title, author, date, overview/structure) with a particular focus on the relationship of the writing to Judaism. This focus is explored in a separate section of the essay (Matthew, John, Revelation) or in the “Interpretation” or “Reading Guide” section (Luke, Acts, Colossians).

The annotations form the heart of this work and provide the reader with excellent guidance in understanding the text. The annotation authors take an objective approach, showing great sensitivity as they attempt to understand the texts in their original contexts. The annotations are particularly strong in explaining the relevant aspects of Jewish and Greco-Roman religion and culture. A main purpose of this work is to clarify and correct the many misunderstandings of Judaism in relation to NT texts. The Jewish responses to Jesus and early Christian leaders as described in the texts, as well as the texts’ characterizations of Judaism, are explicated with great sympathy to the Jewish perspective of those who do not come to believe in Jesus. Yet this is normally done in a non-defensive manner. Difficult texts that have strong anti-Jewish elements or ones that have long histories of anti-Semitic interpretation are explored at multiple levels, with the primary task to understand them in their original contexts. The perspective of early Christian writers, even when sharply critical of Jews who do not believe in Jesus (i.e., the writer of the Gospel of John), is treated fairly.

One of the richest features of the annotations is the extreme level of attention given to primary source citation. Constant reference is given to the Tanakh, Septuagint, Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphal writings, Philo, Josephus,

Dead Sea Scrolls, NT writings, Greco-Roman sources, early Christian writings, and the Mishnah and Talmudic literature. Typically, sources are used critically with particular attention given to other Second Temple Jewish texts, yet sometimes sources are simply listed in a string of references, from Tanakh to Talmud, with no explicit distinctions made. The frequency of this varies from scholar to scholar. A particularly fine example of the careful handling of sources is found in the annotations on the Gospel of John by Adele Reinhartz. Not only does she carefully distinguish between contemporary sources and later writings, she also has a keen eye for seeing NT texts as evidence for later rabbinic practices, i.e., the use of “rabbi,” specific ritual practices, Sabbath regulations, and particular exegetical practices.

A very valuable section of thirty essays, organized under broad categories, completes the book. These include Introductory Essays (Amy-Jill Levine, “Bearing False Witness: Common Errors Made about Early Judaism”), History and Society (Shaye Cohen, “Judaism and Jewishness,” Ross Kraemer, “Jewish Family Life in the First Century CE”), Literature (Maxine Grossman, “The Dead Sea Scrolls,” David Satran, “Philo of Alexandria”), and Jewish Responses to the New Testament (Claudia Setzer, “Jewish Responses to Believers in Jesus,” Susannah Heschel, “Jesus in Modern Jewish Thought”). These are complemented by 60+ sidebar essays on more specialized topics (e.g., “Paying Taxes,” “Parable of the Good Samaritan,” “Sexual Mores,” “Perfection through Suffering”), as well as a glossary and various maps, tables, and indexes.

This modestly priced work is a recommended title for serious lay people (Jewish or Christian), clergy, students, and even scholars. This book is critically important for clergy and their lay audiences. Tremendous progress has been made in the last fifty years on the part of major Christian groups to formally reject a supersessionist approach to Judaism, as well with the development of a much more complex scholarly portrait of Judaism in the time of Jesus. Yet the “typical” Christian sermon or homily often falls back on the common caricature which frames Jesus against the backdrop of a lifeless/legalistic Judaism. This book provides clergy and lay people alike with a source that very quickly helps them avoid stereotypes by providing a more nuanced perspective on the Jewish aspects of any NT text. Students and scholars will also appreciate having ready access to a vast array of source information at their fingertips.

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