

What a Friend We Have in Jesus

BY PAULA FREDRIKSEN

THE JEWISH ANNOTATED NEW TESTAMENT

edited by Amy-Jill Levine, Marc Z. Brettler
Oxford University Press, 700 pp., \$35

THE JEWISH GOSPELS: THE STORY OF THE JEWISH CHRIST

by Daniel Boyarin
The New Press, 224 pp., \$21.95

KOSHER JESUS

by Rabbi Shmuley Boteach
Gefen, 300 pp., \$26

Arguments over who has the authority to interpret traditions of Shabbat observance. Reprimands for bad behavior when food appears after community service. Boasting of accomplishments in Jewish education. Concern over the proper size of *tefillin*. Discussion of the holidays, both minor (Hanukkah) and major (Pesach, Sukkot, Shavuot). Collecting funds in the diaspora to send back to Jerusalem. Endless infighting over the correct way to be Jewish. Sound familiar? It's all in the New Testament.

An anthology of 1st-century Jewish texts written in Greek, the New Testament provides some of the best evidence we have from (and for) the rough-and-tumble days of Judaism in the late Second Temple period. The intrinsic Jewishness of the New Testament—and that of its two prime figures, Jesus and Paul—has long been obscured because of two simultaneous and linked accidents of history: the rise of Gentile Christianity and of Rabbinic Judaism.

As with Gentile Christianity, so with Rabbinic Judaism: both asserted, very loudly, that though Jesus may have been a Jew, he was a special sort of anti-Jew. (Paul had a more checkered career, either as the ultimate *apikoros* or, in some Jewish retellings, a secret agent of the high priest working to ensure that something as outlandish as Christianity would flourish only among the *goyim*.) The anti-Jewish rhetoric of the Christian churches in late antiquity helped to produce long centuries of sporadic violence. Yet, at those times in Western history when Christian scholars availed themselves of Jewish learning, there came moments of fleeting recognition: the gospels tell a Jewish tale.

Eventually—and for reasons again internal to Christianity (namely, the Protestant repudiation of Catholicism)—Christian scholars began more and more to distinguish the Jesus of history from the Christ of doctrine. The 19th and 20th centuries in particular saw multiple “quests for the historical Jesus” (the title of Albert Schweitzer’s great classic). Modern Jewish writers, availing themselves of the distinction between Jesus and Christ, have in various ways fit the historical Jesus of Nazareth back within the 1st-century Jewish fold—as, indeed, have

Christian scholars. And particularly since the 1950s, with the shifting of the quest from schools of theology to departments of comparative religion in liberal arts faculties, scholars of different faiths and of none have cooperatively joined in the search. In current scholarship, in schools of theology no less than in faculties of religion, to be a Jewish historian of Christianity, particularly of ancient Christianity, is no rarity.

Oxford University Press’ recent publication, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Z. Brettler, celebrates this fact. Reproducing the English text of the Revised Standard Version, the editors have collected a group of fifty

being lightly worn. These outstanding essays—thirty in all—are alone well worth the price of the book.

But *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* offers much more. It provides multiple commentaries on each of the New Testament’s twenty-seven writings, from its first gospel (in canonical sequence, Matthew) to its closing revelation (Apocalypse of John). The primary commentary appears as the individual scholar’s notes to particular verses in discrete writings at the bottom of each page. These contain a wealth of historical information, linking the New Testament text to other near-contemporary Jewish writings (such as those of Philo of Alexandria, or of

Josephus, or of the Dead Sea Scrolls, or of more esoteric apocrypha and pseudepigrapha). Notes “translate” some of the New Testament’s Greek terms back into the Aramaic or Hebrew from which they likely derive. Others align chronological hints in the texts with events in 1st-century Jewish and Roman history. Maps, charts, sidebar essays, and diagrams—scores of them—visually and verbally amplify this contextualizing, providing a secondary kind of commentary. Taken all together, this rich information performs a small miracle, resurrecting the vigorous late Second Temple Judaism that lies buried in these ancient texts, which are so habitually and so understandably regarded by Jews and by Christians as being “against” Judaism.

For example, Matthew 27:25 writes of the Jews’ putative response to Pilate’s “washing his hands” of the execution of Jesus: “Then the people as a whole answered, ‘His blood be upon us and on our children!’” That sentence went on to have a long and hideous history all its own in the annals of European anti-Semitism. But seen in context, this verse functions not

as a standing indictment, but as a realized prophecy. Matthew writes one generation after the Temple’s destruction, which occurred one generation after Jesus’ lifetime. As annotator Aaron Gale points out, “Matthew’s first readers likely related the verse to the Jerusalem population, devastated in 70 C.E.” Recognition of this likelihood leaches away some of the verse’s toxicity.



Top, *Siege of Jerusalem*; center, *the Jews led into exile in Babylon*; bottom: *three pairs of Jesus’ ancestors, Salathiel, Abiud, Amor. Calf-hide from the diocese of Mainz, Germany, mid-13th century.* (Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.)

Jewish scholars of Christian and Jewish antiquity to comment on the texts of the New Testament canon and to contribute succinct essays on matters of moment: Second Temple Jewish history; the ancient synagogue; food and family; Jewish divine mediator figures; concepts of afterlife and resurrection; and so on. The array of topics is at once dazzling and daring, the scholarly erudition all the more effective for

"Jews and Christians still misunderstand many of each other's texts and traditions," Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Z. Brettler note in their preface. The aim of their book, then, is "to increase our knowledge of both our common histories and the reasons why we came to separate." The spirit of the book, both in its scholarship and in its pedagogy, is thus deeply ecumenical. Indeed, though the "sensitivities of the

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contributors" may be "Jewish," the same work with the same academic mission—placing these New Testament texts in their Second Temple Jewish context—could equally well be produced by a squad of Christian scholars.

But who is the book for? Christians (at least in principle) already read the New Testament. One of the editors' specific goals is to demystify these texts and get Jews to read them without worrying about the historically uncomfortable issue of conversion. The religious orientation of all of the contributors, the editors hope, should quiet this fear, while promoting cultural understanding. Increasing understanding of a foundational text of majority culture is a laudable goal for our vigorously mongrel democracy. Perhaps



An early European depiction of St. Paul. (Württembergische Landesbibliothek Stuttgart.)

just as important is the goal of cultural enrichment; actually reading the gospels of Matthew and of John cannot help but enrich appreciation of Bach. And, of course, the history of Western art is a visual commentary on these texts and traditions.

So, who should read this book? The short answer

is: everybody. Christians will benefit from seeing their own tradition placed in historical context, thus coming into a better understanding of Jesus' and Paul's native religion and of the origins of their own. Jews will benefit for the reasons given—and for Jews no less than for Christians, much of 1st-century history is *terra incognita*.

Two other books—also by Jews, also on Christian topics—have just been published: Daniel Boyarin's *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* and Shmuley Boteach's *Kosher Jesus*. These two exercises in popular writing are in some ways similar, in others very different. Boyarin is a scholar of Talmud at University of California, Berkeley; Boteach is a media personality and popular author whose website identifies him as "America's Rabbi." The intellectual muscle mass of the two works corresponds accordingly. Their common goal seems to be to take what, as a Christian datum, seems very strange and foreign to Jews, and then to prove that this datum is in fact profoundly and/or originally Jewish.

For Boyarin, that datum is Christian theology about the divinity of Jesus. In his book's four chapters he brings together an assemblage of (canonical and non-canonical) ancient Jewish texts well known to scholars and juxtaposes these to aspects of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. (A much briefer sample of his technique is available in his essay on *Logos/memra* and the Gospel of John in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*.)

Boyarin's premise and conclusion is that ideas of radically divine mediation figure prominently

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in all of these late Second Temple texts, not just the “Christian” ones. The authors of the gospels—and maybe Jesus himself, though Boyarin proposes this rather than argues it—were thinking with these ideas when they framed their teachings. *The Jewish Gospels* concludes by inviting the reader to place gospel traditions of Jesus’ divinity “within the Jewish textual and intertextual world, the echo chamber of a Jewish soundscape of the 1st century.”

Kosher Jesus, on the other hand, represents a sort of vernacular translation of the work of the late English scholar Hyam Maccoby. For Maccoby

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the synoptic gospels’ accounts were thin contrivances through which one can still glimpse the real Jesus, a man who adhered fully to Jewish law and who sought, above all, the deliverance of his people from servitude to the Romans. What Boteach has gleaned from Maccoby’s work he has blended with his own thoughts on Vatican II; the charge of deicide; the Romans (Romans liked war; Jews, however, liked peace); the true meaning of the gospels; America; modern evangelicals; and much, much more.

Like Boyarin, *grosso modo*, Boteach takes something commonly thought to be quintessentially Christian—Jesus—and shows to his own satisfaction that he was in fact quintessentially Jewish. It’s okay, in brief, for Jews to like Jesus, and, opines Boteach, they should. It’s also okay for Jews to like Christians, and they should. Christians should also like Jews. Once everyone understands Jesus and Judaism and Christianity as Boteach has configured them, the only question left is: What’s not to like? Everybody should live long, be healthy, and there should be peace in Israel.

Serious critical scholarly work on the Jewishness of Christianity, and of Jesus in particular, has been vigorously ongoing for some two centuries. Until very recently, it has been a largely Christian project, but over the past fifty years, in ever-larger numbers, Jewish scholars too have joined in. These three works—*The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Boyarin’s *Jewish Gospels*, and *Kosher Jesus*—testify variously to this fact. That this work now increasingly finds a popular audience is an interesting fact of our cultural moment.

Will enhanced popular knowledge and understanding lead to better relations between communities? That hope, at least, in part motivates these efforts. It’s not such a bad thing to want.

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