BOOK REVIEW

New Testament People – A Rabbi's Notes (Bloomington: Author House, 2016, 236 pp), by Raymond Apple. Reviewed by Clifford Durousseau

How does this work consisting of ninety-eight brief articles differ from the major current Christian Bible dictionaries such as *Anchor Bible Dictionary* and *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* and their treatment of the same or similar topics? In this: it is written by a prominent Jew, rabbi emeritus of the Great Synagogue of Sydney and a current resident of Jerusalem, Israel, and one whose express purpose in the writing of the work is to make a contribution to dialogue and 'to advance the cause of mutual respect' between Christianity and Judaism.

That being so, the questions that immediately arise in both Jewish and Christian minds are: (1) What will he say about Jesus? (2) What will he say about Mary, his mother? (3) What will he say about Paul?

The book's title leads us to expect that only persons who lived in the first century and are mentioned in the NT will be treated. But the very first article is surprisingly on Abraham, an OT person, whose history is narrated in Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Bible. Same for the article 'Moses' (pp. 136-137), whose history we have in Exodus through Deuteronomy. And later there are articles on the Essenes and the Teacher of Righteousness who do not appear in the NT. There is also one entitled 'John,' which is on a book of the NT, *The Gospel of John*, 'a book which is the most difficult for Jewish readers, because of its ideas and its negative references to 'the Jews'.' John, the Apostle, is treated separately. The article 'Lucifer' treats a term which is pre-NT, and it and 'Beelzebul' do not concern human beings. So also the article 'God.'

Since Judaism differs from Christianity in its concept of God, this latter article is one of the most important, if not the most important, in the book. Here are a few choice lines: 'Judaism and Christianity are said to be two religions sharing the same God. It is more accurate to say they are *divided* by a common God. . . . Each faith perceives and speaks of Him differently. . . . Jesus himself was a Jew with a Jewish concept of God (Mark 12:29). . . . In

Clifford Hubert Durousseau taught Bible as Literature courses at University of Louisiana at Lafayette during his tenure there. A former member of the Chicago Biblical Research Society and the Society of Biblical Literature, he now lives in Istanbul, Turkey.

Judaism, God has two main names: YHVH (‘Existence’) and ELO-HIM (‘Power’). The NT uses Greek versions –THEOS (‘God’) and KYRIOS (‘Lord’) . . . as well as PATER (‘Father’). Though Jews were sure they were constantly in His Presence, they did not go so far as the Christian tendency to see Him as mystery, especially if He is all or part of a Trinity’ (p. 56).

His view of Jesus (pp. 81-83) is a foregone conclusion: he was not the Messiah and he was not God manifested in the flesh. ‘Jesus’ (Yeshu) is a Grecianized form of Jehoshua (Joshua)’ (p. 81). He puts the claim of Jesus to be the Messiah found in the Gospels of Mark and John in the subjunctive mood: ‘He may have thought of himself as Messiah, who for Jews was a human who would bring earthly redemption whilst in Christianity it came to denote a spiritual saviour of mankind’ (p. 82). He interprets the saying of Jesus in the Gospel of John 10:30 (‘I and the Father are one’) as a claim to being God incarnate (see pp. 56, 82, 87, 88). NT scholars, especially Unitarians, would point out that the word translated ‘one’ is neuter in the Greek of that book in this place and is not such a claim. They would also point out that in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, ‘The Father is greater than I’ (John 14:28), and later in an apparition to Mary of Magdala after his death, ‘Go and find my brothers and tell them: I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’ (John 20:17b).

The subject of Mary and the Virgin Birth prophecy is dealt with in three chapters, in the one on the word ‘Emmanuel’ (pp. 46-47), in the chapter on Isaiah (pp. 74-75), and in the one entitled ‘Virgin Mary’ (pp. 216-217). The chapter on Emmanuel (a name which, incidentally, is not given to Jesus by Mary) begins this way: “The first chapter of Matthew assumes that the birth of Jesus was prophesied in the OT and says he will bear the name Emmanuel or Immanuel, ‘God is with us,’ on the basis of Isa. 7:14, which Christian translators often rendered, ‘The virgin shall conceive and bear a son and he shall be called Emmanuel.” However, I would rephrase that thoiought in a more precise manner: ‘**The author of the Gospel of Matthew** in Chapter 1 assumes **incorrectly** that **a supernatural virgin birth of the Messiah** was prophesied in Isaiah 7:14, which Christian translators repeatedly misquoted as ‘**A** virgin shall conceive and bear a son and **shall call** his name **E**mmanuel.’ Apple correctly states: “The translation ‘virgin’ for the Hebrew *almah* follows the Septuagint, though the Hebrew means ‘young woman’ i.e.

of marriageable age." In the chapter on Isaiah, Apple admirably distills the centuries-old debate between Jews and Christians on this topic in one sentence: "The passage,'A [sic] young woman shall conceive and bear a son' (Isa. 7:14) is regarded as prophesying a virgin birth, though Jewish exegesis limits the verse to a historical context." In the chapter intriguingly entitled 'Virgin Mary', he writes, "If Joseph was not the physical father of Jesus, the latter's link with David is in doubt, . . ." He goes on to say that Mary's relation to Elizabeth (her cousin) "might suggest that Mary had her own Davidic descent (Luke 1:39-56)." But when Luke gives the genealogy of Jesus later in Chapter 3, he makes no mention of Mary's Davidic bloodline.

The subject of Paul is dealt with in the chapter entitled 'Paul of Tarsus' (pp. 141-142). Apple writes: "Paul Johnson's *History of Christianity* calls Paul of Tarsus in southern Turkey 'the first and greatest Christian personality. Paul, more than Jesus, was the moulder of Christianity. Geza Vermes' view is 'No Paul, no Christianity. . . . Where Jesus was a Jew who said that none of Judaism would vanish (Matthew 5:18), Johnson says that Paul 'moved quite across the religious conspectus to a complete repudiation of the law—the first Jew to do so" (p. 141).

Limitations of space preclude me from examining the host of other figures and topics to which the author brings an enthusiastic and welcome Jewish perspective. The book is highly recommended alongside such recent works as Samuel Sandmel's *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament,* Michael Cook's *Jews Engage the New Testament,* and especially Marc Zvi Brettler and Amy Jill-Levine's *Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Second Edition).