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**Satlow, Michael L.**

***Jewish Marriage in Antiquity***

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With this book, the title of which is succinct and to the point, Michael Satlow offers a comprehensive study of Jewish marriage in antiquity, ranging from biblical texts to rabbinic texts and intermittently even post-talmudic texts. At the same time rabbinic and especially talmudic texts surely are treated most thoroughly in this book, while Second Temple literature is mostly made reference to rather than being discussed in its own right. As the author himself is quick to point out in his preface, the first two critical terms in the title—*Jewish* and *marriage*—are fluid and context-dependent, and this is exactly what the book sets out to explore. That is, one of the central questions of the book is the question how “Jewish” Jewish marriage really is. Hence, *antiquity* here is to be understood in the broadest cultural sense and not merely as a chronological term. Indeed, one of the great merits of the book is that in trying to answer this question Satlow not only analyzes texts and epigraphic material from what is generally recognized as Jewish material from the ancient world but also draws amply on Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman literature as well as at times on Zoroastrian material in order to provide a context for what Jewish authors thought and wrote. By doing so, Satlow demonstrates the two central arguments of his book: first, that there is nothing essentially Jewish about “Jewish” marriage in antiquity and that often enough Jewish authors merely “Judaize” (59, 66) prevalent notions or ideologies of marriage; second, that the various Jewish groups in antiquity had

fundamentally different understandings of the goals and functions of marriage, depending on chronological and cultural context. This, according to Satlow, holds true not only for authors of differently located texts, whether the people at Qumran, Philo, Josephus or Paul, but also and especially for accounts for innerrabbinic differences, namely, between Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis. The latter point seems to be most important for Satlow, partially due to the dominant focus of the book on rabbinic texts. Further, however, this particular point is important, even though Satlow is not the first to make it, but often enough “rabbinic Judaism” is still represented as a homogenous culture. Accordingly, Satlow emphasizes the differences between various Jewish subcultures much more than pointing out similarities and continuities. Indeed, he can at times go as far as stating that the respective Jewish subcultures were much more similar to their respective cultural environments than to their respective Jewish colleagues. To overstate the point, Palestinian rabbis appear to be Stoics and Babylonian rabbis Zoroastrians, respectively.

Let me backtrack, however, and briefly provide a description of the book before I critically engage those points. In order to provide a comprehensive study of the particular topic of marriage, Satlow provides a clear structure of dividing the book into three parts, each of which throws light on different aspects of the institution. In the first part he analyzes the ideology of marriage, its underlying theology, and the legal framework. In the second part he presents material about the actual process of marrying, beginning with actual marriage contracts from Egypt and the Judean desert (what he calls “shreds” of real marriage) and going through the various stages of tying the knots (including the age at the time of marriage, issues of intermarriage, customs and rituals of marriage, and including biblical/ rabbinic peculiarities such as levirate marriage and polygyny). The last part finally focuses on the nature of the relationship between the spouses, both in economic terms and in qualitative terms. Each of the chapters walks the reader through a number of texts relevant to the argument presented, with the goal of providing what Satlow calls a “thick” description of the contours of Jewish marriage in antiquity. He proves to be a careful and critical reader particularly of his rabbinic sources and does not merely read his texts as transparent toward the historical reality behind them, as social historians are often prone to do with rabbinic texts. Rather, he often regards these texts as cultural artifacts in their own right. Rabbinic texts, for instance, can hardly ever be read as descriptive texts, not merely because they are often legal in nature and therefore prescriptive rather than descriptive, but also because they are hermeneutically oriented, fragmentary, and argumentative. Thus, Satlow constantly has to find a balance between his aspiration to make a scholarly contribution to the study of the social history of the Jews in antiquity, as he aims to do, and the difficulty that his sources present to him.

The conclusions that Satlow draws are often intriguing and certainly deserve consideration, perhaps sometimes cautious. For instance, he argues that Jewish (including rabbinic) society was fundamentally polygynous in nature, much more so than often assumed. In fact, common opinion holds that rabbinic society was mostly monogamous, since the narrative material rarely represents a particular sage as being married to more than one wife. It seems that part of Satlow's goal here is to acknowledge the divide between rabbinic society and current sensibilities rather than to gloss over it. On the other hand, his suggestion that the rabbinic term *qiddushin* originates not from the biblical root *q-d-sh* but as a foreign loanword, deriving from the Greek term for handing over the bride by her father to the husband (*ekdosis*), seems to be a bit far-fetched. However, rather than rehearsing the individual conclusions of the chapters I will summarize for the current purposes the larger conclusion concerning his analysis of the difference between the Babylonian and the Palestinian rabbinic communities. The picture that he draws is the following: Palestinian rabbis adopted a Stoic ideology, in that they emphasized the larger social aspects of marriage, the formation of a household (*oikos*) as a unit of reproduction and production. Marriage was not a goal in itself but carried larger social weight, in that by establishing a household its male leaders gained identity, achieved social respectability, and produced offspring for the state. Just as the Stoics argued for marriage as a "natural" institution through which a man completes himself, the Palestinian rabbis did the same in their cultural language; that is, they argued for marriage as a divinely ordained institution. Palestinian rabbis, just like their Stoic model, viewed procreation as the only goal of sex within marriage. Babylonian rabbis, on the other hand, did not understand marriage within the household framework. On the contrary, they thought and wrote within the framework of the rabbinic academy, and it is only the Babylonian Talmud that renders the conflict between studying and marriage problematic. Just like the Zoroastrian sources in their cultural context, the Babylonian rabbinic sources do not betray any interest in the social weight of marriage. Rather, the Babylonian rabbis saw the purpose of marriage as legitimately channeling male sexual desire for the purpose of procreation, which, however, they, in accordance with the Zoroastrians, saw as an individual, or salvific, rather than as a social good.

In terms of the social reality behind these differences, then, Satlow somewhat counterintuitively concludes that in the Palestinian (Greco-Roman and later Christian) context marriage was much more contested by the Jewish population, which he attributes to a process of urbanization in the third and fourth centuries, which in turn progressively undermined the dominance of the *oikos* as a social institution. The later Palestinian rabbis then mounted a concerted effort in defense of marriage. In Sassanian Babylonia, on the other hand, where marriage was supposedly not contested at all by the Jewish population,

the Babylonian rabbis felt free to play out their anxieties because the institution of marriage would not be damaged thereby due to its salvific importance.

This, then, is the picture that Satlow develops, and it is a bold one, since it develops a master narrative of ideological differences. While it does account for a number of notable discursive differences between Palestinian and Babylonian sources, it does seem that all of the texts fit too neatly into this picture. Of course, any historical master narrative or neat picture arouses suspicion, especially when the sources are so fragmentary or sometimes simply silent. Thus, the sociohistorical conclusions sometimes strike at least this reader as being a bit too bold, especially when they are based on demographic speculation. It also seems, at times, that the analysis of Palestinian sources within the Babylonian Talmud is too overdetermined by the assumption of difference of cultural context, of which the redactors are all too conscious to that they are compelled to culturally censor and adjust their sources. That is, Satlow does not balance such an analytic procedure enough with concerns of biblical and mishnaic hermeneutics that may not always be driven by context driven censorship, as Christine Hayes argues in her book *Between the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmud* (Oxford University Press, 1997), a book that is surprisingly not considered at all here. As far as Satlow's constructions of cultural context are concerned, it is confounding that the pressures of Christian polemics against and debates about marriage are downplayed to the point that it seems as if Christianity does not exist in the cultural environment of the later Palestinian rabbis, while earlier Stoic sources continued to be important. Nonetheless, Satlow makes an important contribution to understanding particularly the culture of rabbinic Judaism in that he drives home the importance of regarding it as a Roman or Sassanian culture, respectively, and not merely within the parameters of Jewish diachronic developments. The book presents a significant synopsis of material across cultural boundaries and provides further thought for such methodological work.

Finally, it seems that the book does target a nonspecialist audience, especially since Satlow frames it—in his introduction and conclusion—with some allusions to contemporary discussions about marriage in the American context, which is aimed at demonstrating the relevance of the book not merely for historians. Hence, the overdramatic first sentence of the book that “marriage is crumbling.” However, I think that the book will require great devotion from such readers, since in its diction and attention to historical and textual details will be a more difficult read for people who have not been initiated into scholarly discussions and rabbinic sources.