

Samuel Tobias Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament, The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith, New York, 1987) pp. xxix + 468.

It is difficult to see what the justification is for the production of this study. Indeed, the author relates to this question in his preface, where he explains why, in his view, the existing works of Strack and Billerbeck, Kittel, Montefiore and others are no longer adequate. L. singles out for criticism his predecessors' theological prejudices, as well as their incompetence in dealing with rabbinic texts. Allowing that L. is not guilty of a Christian slanting of the evidence, the present work nonetheless raises serious doubts with respect to his superior ability in handling Talmudic materials.

Clearly, the one obvious justification for a new study of rabbinic parallels to the NT would lie in the extent to which such a commentary utilized recent methodological advances in the study of Talmudic materials. Such advances have, indeed, been considerable in several areas; notably in the following: with regard to our understanding of the textual variants and the nature of their transmission; the more sophisticated insights we now have into the redactional processes involved in the creation of the principal rabbinic works; as well as exciting new discoveries in the fields of language, *realia* (as learned from archaeological evidence), etc. It is thus particularly unfortunate that L., by his own admission, has not tried to apply the results of such research to his own commentary. As stated in his preface (pp. xxvii ff.), he has attempted as much as possible to avoid all critical judgement with respect to the dating of texts, or even the determining of their relevance! "My position is *caveat lector*, for in the final analysis it is the reader who will decide whether the passage adduced is appropriate or relevant." Such an attitude hardly recommends itself as responsible scholarship.

The main methodological innovation in this work lies in L.'s attempt to reconstruct the lost Hebrew or Aramaic originals of various NT texts. The prevailing assumption throughout the book is that the Greek NT is little more than a collection of mistranslations based on misreadings and corruptions of the Semitic originals. To take some random examples of L.'s method, note his comment on Matt. 12:36: "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." Troubled by a supposed inelegance in the word "abundance," L. reconstructs an Aramaic "*debaliba befuma*" (What is in the heart is in the mouth), in which the "*deba*" was lost to a dittography, and the remaining "*liba*" was misread as "*rov*" (abundance) (at least that seems to be what he is getting at in the confused explanation [p. 214]). Similarly, commenting on Matt 7:11, he suggests that "evil" (reconstructed as Aramaic "*bisha*") is a corruption of the Hebrew abbreviation for "*basar vadam*" (flesh and blood), glibly assuming that such abbreviations were in common use in the first century (p.142). Such instances can be multiplied and speak eloquently for the author's method.

In one of the few cases where his approach might have helped clarify a real obscurity, L. disappoints. In his comment to Matt 5:15 and parallels (pp. 83-4), he is at a loss to find a Talmudic parallel to the proverb “nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, etc.” and offers a number of hypothetical misreadings from the Hebrew. He does not refer us to M. Guedemann’s interpretation (*Religionsgeschichtliche Studien* [Leipzig, 1876] pp. 76-97; the work appears in the bibliography) that the Talmudic anti-Christian parody preserved in *TB Shabbat* 116b, wherein Imma Shalom, the Jewish heroine closes an exchange with a corrupt Christian judge with the remark “The ass came and extinguished the lamp,” is actually a word play on the Hebrew-Aramaic “*homer/hamra*” (bushel/ass)—possibly the only direct citation of a NT passage in Talmudic literature, whose significance L. appears to have missed. (Guedemann’s work is cited later on, in L.’s discussion of Matt 5:17 [pp. 87-89], where the *TB Shabbat* passage is quoted. However, L.’s comment “Is it happenstance that Imma Shalom brought a lamp as a bribe and that the preceding verses in Matthew deal with a lamp?” indicates that he did not appreciate its full significance).

In sum, it must be regretted that the author’s questionable methodology, as well as his failure to make scholarly judgements or to incorporate recent advances in rabbinic scholarship, severely detract from the value of this work.

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