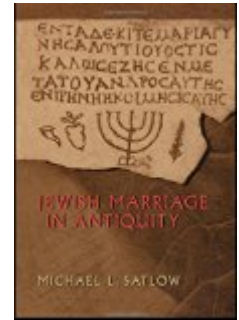


Michael L. Satlow. *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. xii + 431 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-00255-2.



Reviewed by Steven Fine

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Michael Satlow begins this hefty volume with the assertion that his title "is deliberately misleading." Satlow believes that his title misleads in its seeming concrete use of such terms as "Jewish," "marriage," and "Jewish marriage." Our author notes that this terminology is far more ambiguous than his title might suggest. He is certainly right. A book called "Rabbinic Perceptions of Jewish Marriage within their Literary and Greco-Roman Contexts" (or something like that) would, however, be far more clumsy-and sell far fewer copies.

Satlow's goal was not to provide a stodgy academic volume, however, but rather to have an effect upon the broader culture. Satlow wants to show that "a scholarly study of the past [can] contribute to burning contemporary societal issues" (p. xiii). By showing how "Jewish groups in antiquity understood marriage, how they practiced it, and how they reconciled the messy realities of marriage with their ideals" (p. xvi) Satlow hopes to provide a more ambiguous model of marriage from the past to contemporary readers (particularly Jews).

Ambiguity is an important notion for understanding Satlow's project. It has become an important interpretive category for members of his school in recent years. Ambiguity is a central feature of the work of Satlow's doctoral advisor Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley and Los Angeles; University of California Press, 1999), and of another member of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Seth Schwartz in his recent *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Satlow's forthrightness in expressing his contemporary agenda is commendable.

Satlow's fundamental insight in this volume is that "there is nothing essentially Jewish about Jewish" marriage in antiquity. He concludes that there "was no 'essence' of Jewish marriage, no single quality that must have been present for a marriage to be termed Jewish" (p. xvi). This conclusion is not surprising. Jews have always adapted to the times and places where they live. What is interesting about Satlow's book is that it carefully traces the early history of Jewish marriage from

the Second Temple period up through the Rabbinic community. This was the formative period of Jewish marriage as we know it.

"Rabbinic Perceptions of Jewish Marriage within their Literary and Greco-Roman Contexts" is in fact a far closer approximation of the context of this volume than is *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity*. Lack of sources for marriage beyond the Rabbinic corpus, either in Palestine or in diaspora communities, necessitates Satlow's focus upon the Rabbis-whose attitudes are carefully drawn out from the extant literature. Satlow's careful study first explores aspects of Jewish marriage, as depicted in Rabbinic sources in Palestine and Babylonia, and then sets them against the general Greco-Roman background. This volume is divided into three major parts. The first section, "Thinking about Marriage," explores such questions as "Why Marry?," "Metaphor and Myth" and "Marriage and Law." Here our author lays out what he sees as the "ideological, theological and legal understandings of marriage."

After surveying Second Temple period attitudes, Satlow contrasts Rabbinic attitudes in Palestine with those of the Babylonian sages, arguing that "Jews under Greek and Roman influence "understood marriage much as their non-Jewish neighbors did" (p. xix). According to Satlow, marriage in Palestine was "under attack" from changing urbanization patterns during the fourth to sixth centuries. This accounts for differing approaches in Palestine and Babylonia. In "Metaphor and Myth" Satlow argues that Palestinian Jews, influenced by Christians, theologized marriage in ways that Babylonians did not. Finally, in "Marriage and Law," Satlow argues that Jewish marriage rituals in use today "are rabbinic inventions," and were not used by "the vast majority of Hellenistic Jews." This chapter in particular is written with real historiographic sensitivity to the ways that legal systems interact with "real people."

The second part, simply called "Marrying," discusses "Shreds of Real Marriage," "Making a Match," "Endogamy and Exogamy," "Customs and Rituals of Marriage" and "Irregular Unions." Here our author brings together Rabbinic sources that deal with each chronological stage of marriage and with unions related to divorce, widowhood, levirate marriage and polygamy. He continues his practice of setting these sources against the backdrop of Biblical and Second Temple period sources.

The third and last part, "Staying Married, explores "The Economics of Marriage" and "The Ideal Marriage." Satlow asks whether these areas are intimately connected, the large body of Rabbinic material that establishes the economic basis of marriage (*mohar*, *ketubah*, *get*) setting the background for ideal marriage, or not. Satlow strikes a good balance, writing that: "These texts might sometimes use the language of economics, rights, and obligations, but they are at the same time reflecting and reproducing their ideals of spousal relationships" (p. 224). The final chapter, "The Ideal Marriage," analyses ideals of marriage among ancient Jews, particularly the Rabbis. Satlow makes good use of epigraphic sources for Jewish burial of the Second Temple period and late antiquity, drawing judicious parallels between them.

Concluding this volume, Satlow suggests that Rabbinic definition of marriage in Palestine was related to a need to define Judaism and Jewish identity during the late Roman period. Alternately, in Babylonia, it was "a response to individualism" (p. 266). He does not explain, however, why Rabbis living under such different social conditions as Imperial Rome and Sassanid Babylonia were both interested in issues of marriage and could discuss them so avidly together. Our author notes, significantly, that "in our own society, both of these conditions exists" (p. 266).

In reading through *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity*, I sense a tension between the author's desire to reach both a scholarly and a lay audience. The

notes, by his own admission, are not complete, while at the same time, the well-written discussion is often far too technical for all but the most intrepid non-specialist. Still, as a scholar who esteems good writing, this book was a pleasure to read. Satlow's *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* is an important study of marriage within the Rabbinic communities of late antiquity. I highly recommend it.

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