

VU Research Portal

[Book review of:] Julia A. Snyder & Korinna Zamfir, Reading the Political in Jewish and Christian Texts

Smit, Peter-Ben

published in

NTT : Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion
2021

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.5117/NTT2021.2.012.SMIT](https://doi.org/10.5117/NTT2021.2.012.SMIT)

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

document license

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Smit, P.-B. (2021). [Book review of:] Julia A. Snyder & Korinna Zamfir, Reading the Political in Jewish and Christian Texts. *NTT : Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* , 75(2), 288-289.
<https://doi.org/10.5117/NTT2021.2.012.SMIT>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

Julia A. Snyder & Korinna Zamfir (eds.), *Reading the Political in Jewish and Christian Texts*. Biblical Tools and Studies 38 (Leuven: Peeters, 2020), ISBN: 9789042940338; xi + 342 pp., € 88.

Reading the Political in Jewish and Christian Texts is a welcome addition to the (growing) discussion of 'empire criticism' in the field of biblical studies. Within this debate, most of the contributions in the volume – and, in fact, the volume as a whole – are clearly positioned as a criticism of wholesale assumptions concerning a thoroughgoing anti-imperial stance of (early) Jewish and Christian texts. As such, it is a welcome addition to the ongoing discussion about the role of empire (of whichever kind) in these texts.

This can be illustrated with reference to a number of chapters (which will be done here, *en lieu* of simply listing and abstracting all of them). Together, the contributors (and editors, in their introduction, 1-16) show that, to begin with, the texts and authors analyzed in this volume display a lot of diversity, which also means that clearly anti-imperial authors, such as John the Seer (Apocalypse of John), are not to be taken as representative of, for instance, the entire New Testament (see Beate Kowalski, 'Conflict among Christians in the Political Setting of Asia Minor,' 213-225), and that attention ought to be given to different perspectives in writings that follow up on each other, such as is the case in the Maccabean literature (see Barbara Schmitz, 'Judas Maccabee in 2 Maccabees: "Political" Perspectives in 2 Maccabees,' 61-81). Furthermore, they also demonstrate that in some instances, the case for an anti-imperial (e.g., anti-Roman) interpretation may well have been overstated in the past (Julia A. Snyder, 'Apostles and Politics in the Roman Empire,' 227-256, offers a meticulous analysis of non-canonical acts; Sandra Huebenthal [sic], 'Anti-Gospel Revisited,' 137-158; Tobias Nicklas, 'Jesus und Vespasian? Das Markusevangelium als politisch interessiertes "Anti-Evangelium" zum Aufstieg der Flavii,' 159-178). Such doubt is expressed in a number of essays also because it is difficult to establish what an author may have intended with a work ('production' approach to texts), even if it is possible to show, or at least make a case for, empire critical readings of a text (reception approach to texts). One of the essays exploring this is Michael Sommer, 'Reading the Apocalypse of Peter Politically: Depictions of Christ and Trajan' (257-276). It would have been interesting to read on Paul of Tarsus from both of these perspectives as well, but he is conspicuous by his absence in the volume.

While most papers have been contributed by scholars of Ancient Israel, early Judaism and early Christianity, one contribution stems from the field of ancient history (109-135). Babett Edelmann-Singer's contribution offers a welcome invitation to, especially, the guild of New Testament scholars to

engage more fully with insights from the field of ancient history, suggesting that these could give rise to reconsidering certain assumptions regarding empire and imperial cult. Equally welcome are the two concluding essays that focus on the political dimensions of the reception of biblical texts in contemporary scholarship and (very) recent history. Besides offering information about the manner in which scholarship can be read as ideological history (James Crossley, 'Contemporary Politics in Ancient Texts: Some Ways to Read Scholarship on Christian Origins as Ideological History,' 277-293), and on how biblical interpretation functions in the context of communism (in Romania; Hans Klein, 'Biblische Hermeneutik in der Zeit des Kommunismus,' 295-309 – this essay also suggests that seemingly 'apolitical' and 'spiritually oriented' exegesis can have a political function in the sense of supporting and contributing to the resilience of those otherwise marginalized because of their faith), these essays also invite the volume's reader to reflect on their own positionality, which, even *nolens volens*, is part of the scholarly enterprise. The volume is, in sum, a rich collection of essays that significantly contributes to ongoing debates, which makes it an important resource for future scholarship.

Peter-Ben Smit, VU Amsterdam

Jewish Studies

Maren R. Niehoff, *Philo of Alexandria: An Intellectual Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), ISBN 9780300175233; xi + 323 pp., \$38.00.

It does not happen often that a book is published which has the potential to fundamentally change the paradigm of scholarship on its subject matter, but Niehoff's intellectual biography of the Hellenistic-Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE-50 CE) is certainly one of them. Breaking with the synchronic and harmonizing approaches often used by Philonic scholars, this thought-provoking study offers a radical reinterpretation of Philo's life and work and draws attention to, for example, his significance for understanding the Second Sophistic – the renaissance of Greek culture and literature under Rome (50-250 CE) – and the rise of Christianity.

Tracing an intellectual biography is not an easy task because Philo does not write much about himself. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus devotes a few lines to him in the *Jewish Antiquities* (18.259-260), but this