

**REVIEW ESSAY**

**Amy-Jill Levine**  
***Short Stories by Jesus:***  
***The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi***  
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**LUKE TIMOTHY JOHNSON**

ljohn01@emory.edu

Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322

This review was adapted from an invited panel presentation “A Review of Amy-Jill Levine’s *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*,” sponsored by the Jewish-Christian Dialogue and Sacred Texts Group at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting (Atlanta, GA; November 2015).

I have been an admirer of Amy-Jill Levine’s iconoclastic wit for many years, ever since I happened to read an early essay of hers called, “Who Catered the Q Banquet?,” which delicately skewered the sexist assumptions of some historical Jesus research. Like the importunate widow she discusses in her most recent book, she is fearless, forthright, and often just plain funny; among her many admirable qualities is her inability to suffer fools in any shape or size, and her willingness to slice and dice with equal vigor both academic and ecclesiastic foolishness.

In her book *Short Stories by Jesus*, her target is the long history of interpretation of Jesus’ parables—a history that, for Levine, begins with the narrative use of these stories by the evangelists—and specifically the ways in which Christian commentators and preachers read the parables through a hermeneutical frame of soteriology that was more than a little Marcionite in character. She relentlessly catalogues the ways in which the parables are read as good news for Christians and bad news for Jews, in the process revealing how pervasively and profoundly anti-Jewish stereotypes pervade such Christian discourse. Nor does Levine spare the academic critics; she notes how post-colonialist readings of the parables actually perpetuate anti-Jewish stereotypes. She seeks to provide an antidote to such toxic interpretations by exposing the reader to more and better knowledge about Jews and Judaism in the time of Jesus, and by demanding a much closer and more critical reading of those details of the stories that are often used to advance anti-Jewish positions.

To this aspect of Levine's work I offer my warmest approval. Such critical assessment of interpretive history—largely a history of Christian supersessionism—is an essential ground-clearing stage, if conversations among Jews and Christians are to move forward in a more constructive manner. In this regard, I see Levine's work as continuing, in greater detail and energy, and with specific attention to the parables, the important work by Charlotte Klein, *Anti-Judaism in Christian Theology* (1978). Such critical work, alas, must evidently be done anew in every generation, for like other toxic ideologies, antisemitism is so deeply ingrained in Christian consciousness, and so consistently reinforced by certain forms of Christian preaching, that total victory can never be assumed.

Like any scholar who has devoted honest sweat to the task of exegesis, I have my own views on some of the parables discussed by Levine that do not entirely agree with hers. I am more than willing to grant that the story of the lost son in Luke 15:11-32 “would not have been heard as... a story of works-righteousness and grace, or a story of Jewish xenophobia, and Christian universalism,” for example (p. 28). However, I am less confident that it “would not have been heard as a story of repentance or forgiveness,” precisely because the structure of the story so clearly points to such a *teshuvah* on the part of the younger son and invites such a *teshuvah* on the part of the older son, and because the theme of conversion is one that is so widely attested in the rabbinic literature on which Levine heavily depends otherwise. Similarly, I am unconvinced by her effort to render the Greek phrase *para ekeinon* at the end of the parable of the Pharisee and Tax-Collector in 18:14 as “justified alongside the other” or even “because of the other” (p. 209). The structure of the parable—including verse 9, which Levine accepts as part of the story—seems to demand a contrast rather than an equivalence or mutual dependence such as she proposes. But these exegetical quibbles do not detract from my admiration for Levine's consistent battle against all stereotypes concerning ethnicity, gender, and social class, and her desire to restore to the parables their complex and often ambiguous connections to actual human experience.

I next want to consider whether Levine's overall approach to the parables is in fact the best way to further a constructive dialogue between and among Christians and Jews. I will do this in the form of three questions.

**First, are the parables of Jesus, once removed from the narrative context given to them by the evangelists, more distinctively Jewish?**

Levine's project involves liberating these stories not only from a long history of anti-Jewish interpretation, but also, and in the first place, from the narrative framework of the gospels, which she regards as having begun the process of distorting Jesus' meaning through allegorization. But even if such recovery is possible—and for reasons I will touch on in a moment, it is more problematic than sometimes assumed—it by no means follows that the voice of the story-teller is any more recognizably or distinctively Jewish than it was within the gospel narrative. Rather, the stories open themselves up to the play of polyvalence, capable of being fitted to any number of interpretive frameworks. Certainly, the

symbolic world of Judaism is one such possible framework, but it is seldom demanded by the stories themselves, once deracinated. Exceptions include the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, and the Good Samaritan. It is hard to escape the historical and cultural rootedness of those tales.

But other stories chosen by Levine for analysis do not demand a Jewish context. Indeed, with the three parables of the yeast, of the pearl, and of the mustard seed, Levine herself delights in the possibilities of polyvalence. In other cases, Levine's interpretations come close to Adolf Juelicher's position that the parables teach universal principles, skirting dangerously close to the edge of what she calls "turning parables into platitudes" (p. 18). Thus, in her reading, the Parable of the Good Samaritan has a lesson for all situations of antagonism, the Parable of the Prodigal Son teaches that relationships should be carefully tended, the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard stands for sound labor relations in business, and the Parable of the Widow and the Judge reminds the reader that nobody is entirely good or bad. There is, with the exceptions already noted, little here of a "Rabbi" Jesus whose stories bear some importance for those who live within the tradition of the Rabbis.

**Second, should we have such confidence that the parables ought to be read as artifacts of a historical Jesus and against the grain of their narrative placement?**

Levine shares the premises of the Jesus Seminar, and many other students of the parables from Joachim Jeremias to John Dominic Crossan, first, that the parables provide us access if not to the actual words of Jesus, then to his actual voice, and second, that the framing of the parables by the evangelists should be regarded as tendentious and possibly even a betrayal of what Jesus intended. But in fact, neither authorship of Jesus nor misuse by the evangelists can be so simply assumed. Indeed, there are cases, especially in the Gospel of Luke, where both the parables and their narrative use are quite possibly to be attributed to the evangelist. This point is particularly pertinent, because eight of the eleven parables that Levine considers are found in the Gospel of Luke, five of them exclusively. Is it possible that the necessary—or at least, preferable—starting point for conversations among Christians and Jews concerning the stories of Rabbi Jesus is not a hypothetical historical Jesus but a very definite Jesus of the Gospel?

Take, for example, the Parable of the Lost Son. I have always been a bit surprised when those in the Jesus seminar and others accept it as authentically from Jesus when it does not in any way meet the famous criteria for authenticity laid out by the same scholars: it is lengthy rather than short; it is not multiply attested; it does not meet the criterion of dissimilarity; and it conforms wonderfully to the *tendenz* of Luke's Gospel. As with the parable of the Good Samaritan, which equally fails to meet the standard criteria, the story is universally accepted as from Jesus because it is a great and gripping tale, and very much the kind of thing we would want Jesus to have said. But there are very strong reasons for attrib-

uting to Luke not only the placement of the three stories concerning the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son, but also their composition.

The two stories of the lost sheep (found also in Matthew and the Gospel of Thomas) and of the two sons (found also in Matthew) may indeed have their origins in Jesus' teachings, but we cannot know in what form. Efforts to get behind received traditions to some primordial authorial bedrock are always speculative. What is certain is that Luke shaped both tales decisively and amplified his point by adding the story of the woman with the lost coin—which I think virtually all commentators agree is a Lukan composition—and then elaborated the simple contrast between the obedient and disobedient sons in Matthew into a psychologically complex tale of alienation and reconciliation.

And here is the main point: absolutely everything in his version corresponds perfectly with what is characteristically Lukan: the diction, the syntax, the characteristic moment of introversion ("coming to himself"), the theme of compassion, and the way the use of possessions symbolize relationships. All of this is unmistakably from Luke. Understood in this way, Luke's narrative introduction to the three parables in 15:1-2 is deliberate and appropriate. Luke has not allegorized a free-standing parable of Jesus; he has composed the parable precisely as an allegory to serve as a commentary on his own overarching narrative. That Luke does this elsewhere is shown by his distinctive kingship parable in 19:11-27, which serves exactly the same sort of narrative function.

**Third, are not the parables in their gospel contexts a better basis for conversation among Jews and Christians today than the parables removed from their gospel contexts?**

It may seem as though I am making the same point three different ways, and perhaps I am. But it is worth observing that the real engagement with ancient Judaism—and therefore the possibility of a serious conversation about the character of that engagement—is to be found in the narratives of the Gospels, not in the parables of Jesus. The parables participate in that engagement with Judaism to the degree that they are read, not as independent artifacts, but as part of the narrative texture of the gospels. Again I take Luke-Acts as my example, and make only two observations.

The first is that Luke-Acts as a whole makes a powerful narrative argument about God's fidelity to his people and especially to God's promises. While God intends that "all flesh shall see salvation" (Luke 3:6), this does not mean that God has forgotten his mercy to Israel. Luke tries to show that Gentile believers do not replace the Jews, but rather represent the extension of faithful Israel. The problem of resolving the rejection of the good news by Jews with God's fidelity to his Word to Abraham remains no less critical for Luke than for Paul in Rom 9-11. Is Luke's narrative argument through his whole composition a basis for fruitful conversation today? Does it provide a context for reading the parables of the Gospel in a less supersessionist manner?

The second point is that in the Gospel, Luke presents Jesus as a prophet, whose words and actions represent a renewal or reform movement within Israel. This movement comes into conflict with one of the two other reform movements within Judaism at that time, Pharisaism (Qumran was the other), which was committed to cultivating the holiness of the people through the observance and the teaching of the *mitzvot*. Because at the time of Luke's writing, the Pharisees and the Christians were, in the post-temple setting, the remaining rival claimants to the heritage of Israel, Luke's characterization of the opposing reform movement carries the polemical weight of ancient competitive rhetoric. But beneath the vituperation, we can see in Luke's portrayal a genuine form of Judaism distinct from that of Jesus the prophet, which had its own values and arguments and own vision for God's will to be done. Is it not possible to even further flesh out that alternative reform movement once we have cut out the polemical characterizations? I think, in fact, that Levine's own historical work on the rabbinic tradition has taken us a good step in that direction, as in her careful consideration of the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector.

We must disavow the stereotypes embedded in the history of Christian interpretation. We must eschew the polemic that arose from the competitive rivalry between two reform movements in ancient Judaism. But when we have done that, our conversation has only begun.