

REVIEW ESSAY

Amy-Jill Levine
Short Stories by Jesus:
The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi
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ANNETTE MERZ

a.b.merz@pthu.nl

Protestant Theological University, 9700 CB Groningen, The Netherlands

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).

Amy-Jill Levine’s book “Short Stories by Jesus” is undoubtedly the most thought-provoking, stimulating, and entertaining book on parables I have read in a long time. It is also a book that evoked mixed reactions in me and thereby stimulated me to rethink my own presuppositions in approaching the parables. The reader thus should be aware that this is not a typical review but a slightly reworked version of my contribution to a panel discussion at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Atlanta in 2015. The intention was then, as it is still, to honor Levine’s contribution by bringing up questions that deserve further investigation and exchange of opinions.

Let me begin by stating that I completely subscribe to Levine’s basic aims and presuppositions. Being a historical Jesus scholar myself I especially like the ambition to try to “hear the parables through an imagined set of first-century Jewish ears” (p. 17) and to do away with anti-Jewish stereotypes that still lurk around every corner in homiletical and exegetical literature, as Levine has shown convincingly and disturbingly in her book. I found it especially revealing how often scholars and preachers have used putative purity issues as a foil to distance Jesus from Judaism and to come up with extremely forced readings, for example, of the parables of the Yeast and the Mustard Seed. Levine’s book helps to sharpen the awareness of this enduring problem and of the responsibility of scholars who try to identify the position of Jesus in early Jewish disputes on the laws of purity and other issues. However, not everything identified as an anti-Jewish reading in the book deserves to be labelled as such, as I will discuss below.

I also share the conviction that many of the parables have been domesticated in their history of interpretation and that we should try to become aware of the diverse domesticating tendencies and the reasons that cause what Levine aptly calls "auditory atrophy" (pp. 18-22). I became really inspired, and at times truly spiritually enriched by some of her "playful speculation(s)" on how we might hear the parables in our own life and time (p. 23). Noteworthy examples are her reading of the Pearl of Great Price and the Good Samaritan (chapters 2 and 4). On the other hand, I found myself quite often objecting to and unsatisfied with some important issues regarding both general methodology and individual readings alike.

Let me begin with a basic hermeneutical issue. What makes this book unique and is perhaps its greatest strength might also be its greatest weakness. Throughout the book Levine undertakes a double task, and I admire her audacity in doing so: "How do we hear the parables through an imagined set of first-century Jewish ears, and then how do we translate them so that they can be heard still speaking?" (p. 17). If we reflect on this double task, the hermeneutical question of unavoidable circularity comes up: to what extent might "the imagined set of first-century Jewish ears" be dependent on the desire to hear the parables "still speaking"? Of course no interpreter can entirely avoid such tensions. What I miss in the book is reflection on that problem. The anti-Jewish readings of Christian authors are exposed astutely, but perhaps Levine is not as critical with regard to the opinions underlying her own analysis of what would characterize first-century Jewish ears and a first-century Jewish storyteller. Two of her basic expectations of the first-century Jewish audience, which are repeated again and again in the book, come to mind: parables are always provocative and disturbing and they have nothing to do with allegories. Both convictions are highly debatable in the light of current parable research and do not stand up to scrutiny, as I hope to demonstrate.

Levine obviously does not like platitudes, so she reconstructs a Jesus who is not teaching what she regards to be "platitudes." She calls the moves "that turn parables into platitudes" as "less toxic but equally distressing," as the "disease of anti-Judaism" that infects the body of Jesus' parables (p. 18). I miss some nuancing here. I understand and share her aversion against "cheap grace" but it is also evident to me that what counts as a platitude is highly dependent on context and subjective understanding. We might not know enough of the original context and the presupposed understanding of the listeners in some cases. In other cases, reflection on the *function* of a seemingly mundane message might get us further. In the parables of growth, the traditional interpretation that contrasts the small beginning with the expected great outcome, called "banal" by Levine (e.g., pp. 155, 166), might not be banal at all when we consider its historical embedding and function. According to my own evaluation the main rhetorical purpose of all the parables of growth seems to be assurance to the former followers of John the Baptist and the disciples of the "Kingdom movement" that God's eschatological intervention is already in action, albeit inconspicuously. This has a *comforting function* in situations of distress that likely occurred after the execution of John by Antipas, and again after the crucifixion of Jesus. It also has a direct *political function* because it proscribes violent action as a means to accelerate the eschato-

logical process.¹ Adherents of movements supporting resistance to Rome that expected men to help implement God's rule over Israel (cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:4ff.) would probably not have called Jesus' parables of growth "banal" but "unacceptably quietistic."

In the introduction, Levine calls parables a "provocative genre" that "is designed to surprise, challenge, shake up, or indict" and "a form that opens to multiple interpretations" (pp. 3-4). Rather than a scholarly substantiation and discussion of this basic conviction we get more assertions: "Jews *knew* that parables were more than children's stories or restatements of common knowledge. They *knew* that parables and the tellers of parables were there to promote them to see the world in a different way, to challenge, and at times to indict" (p. 4, emphasis mine). Levine warns us, "If we stop with the easy lessons... we lose the way Jesus's first followers would have heard the parables, and we lose the *genius* of Jesus's teaching" (p. 4, emphasis mine). I agree that many parables fit into her description and I would not deny a certain geniality on the part of Jesus as story teller. But it is not true that parables are always disturbing and provocative and meant to stimulate multiple meanings. This is not true for many rabbinic parables and even among the *meshalim* of Jesus there are examples that are quite straightforward, such as the Q parable, presented in a discussion of prayer, which asks: "What person among you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?" (Lk 11:11-12). The *meshal*, most probably the term Jesus himself used when referring to his fictive stories and figurative sayings, often presents words of common wisdom. We find examples of common wisdom in the Jesus tradition as well (e.g., about good fruits from good trees [Lk 6:43-45 / Mt 7:25-20; 12:33-35 / GThom 45]). If we start from the assumption that those parabolic sayings and parables cannot be from Jesus because they do not bear witness to the "genius" of his teaching we dissociate Jesus from the only context within which we legitimately can place him. Although Levine consciously and explicitly strives to place Jesus into his Jewish context, she comes dangerously close to using the so-called criterion of double dissimilarity with her insistence on the "geniality" of Jesus' teaching and her readiness to ascribe allegorizing tendencies that corrupt the original meaning to the evangelists. None of the criteria has been more rightly criticised in the current debate about the criteria of authenticity in Jesus research than this criterion.² Pace Levine, I would argue that we should not take the provocative, non-ordinary character of the parables as a safe starting point but as something that must be argued for on

¹ Claims about the anti-zealotic thrust of the parables of growth (and especially of Mk 4:26-29) have been popularized (not invented) by J. Jeremias, in his famous book on parables (J. Jeremias, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 10th ed., 1984], 151-153) and this position still has much to recommend it. For traces of a pre-70 CE inner-Jewish usage of the imagery of the growth of the wheat plant in a rabbinic parable germane to Mark 4:26-29 see E. Ottenheijm, "Waiting for the Harvest: Trajectories of Rabbinic and 'Christian' Parables", in: *Religious Stories in Transformation: Conflict, Revision and Reception*, ed. A. Houtman et al. (Leiden: Brill 2016), 314-333.

² See e.g., D. Winter, "Saving the Quest for Authenticity from the Criterion of Dissimilarity: History and Plausibility", in C. Keith & A. Le Donne (ed.) *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 115-131.

the basis of a given parable and its imagery and plot.³ Nor should one use the argument of false allegories as easily as Levine does.⁴

Her ideas about the allegorical in parables are in my view underdeveloped and do not represent the state of the art in contemporary Jewish and Christian exegesis of the parables. Several times she quotes Jülicher's rule that allegories need a key to be understood and parables do not. This reliance on Jülicher is ironic because he based his one-point-approach to parable exegesis and the idea that parables can be summarized by a simple, nonfigurative moralizing saying on this very understanding of the non-allegorical nature of parables. Such ideas of unambiguity of meaning and translatability into moral statements are with good reason vigorously debated by Levine. Already in Jülicher's time, claims for the non-allegorical character of the parables had been criticized, for example, by Paul Fiebig.⁵ In more recent times, a certain rehabilitation of the presence of allegorical traits in parables has been advocated by several scholars,⁶ while others, such as David Stern, have argued that the parable-allegory dichotomy should be abandoned *in toto*.⁷

Without going into all the details, let us concentrate on the main point of this discussion. Levine's (Jülicher's) definition provides a good starting point: "A parable requires no external key to explain what its elements mean; an allegory does" (p. 7). This is true if we look for logical consistency in the story. It is not true if it refers to the parabolic meaning of the story and its main elements. Lev-

³ An additional argument comes from the insights in the process of learning. A good teacher would not only challenge his pupils but also make sure that they really understand the basics. Thus Jesus may at times also have told parables that were not meant to challenge but to prepare the ground for future challenges.

⁴ I can give two examples, though there are many others. On Luke 18:1, she writes, "Luke turns the parable into an allegory, and so platitude replaces provocation" (p. 16). About the parables of the lost, she writes "Luke misleads by turning the parables into allegories" (by explicitly adding the focus of sinners repenting and God's joy) (p. 27). What Levine calls "allegory" here in most contemporary works on parables is (I think rightly) designated as "allegorization," meaning that an element in the parable that contributes to its figurative meaning is emphasized or explained in order to secure a certain meaning (see also footnote 6 below). It is not a question of whether we allegorize when we interpret (we inevitably do) but whether our interpretations are meeting the range of possibilities presented by the parable to its first audience.

⁵ P. Fiebig, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu im Lichte der rabbinischen Gleichnisse des neutestamentlichen Zeitalters. Ein Beitrag zum Streit um die "Christusmythe" und eine Widerlegung der Gleichnistheorie Jülichers*, Tübingen 1912.

⁶ See esp. H.-J. Klauck, *Allegorie und Allegorese in Synoptischen Gleichnistexten* (NTAbh, 13, Münster: Aschendorff, 1978), who discriminates between allegory (a rhetorical strategy by which a text gains symbolical meaning that may be deciphered point by point; allegories may or may not have consistency on the narrative level), allegorization (an allegorical exegesis of a text), and allegorizing (the reading of a non-allegorical text as an allegory). See also D. Flusser, "Die wirkliche und die vermeintliche Allegorese", in D. Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1981), 119-139. For a more recent summarizing treatment see K. Erlemann, "Allegorie, Allegorese, Allegorisierung", in R. Zimmermann (ed.), *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu. Methodische Neuansätze zum Verstehen urchristlicher Parabeltexte* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2008), 482-493.

⁷ D. Stern, *Parables in Midrash. Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), esp. 11-12.

ine regrettably does not discriminate between these two levels. To be properly understood, parables do require keys and always come with keys, such as introductory formulas, concluding interpretations (*nimshal*), fixed metaphors, and other implicit or explicit features and transfer signals that guide the process of meaning making.⁸ The example of Songs of Songs Rabba 1:1:8 cited by Levine is a good illustration of that: “Consider the king who has lost a gold coin or a precious pearl in his house. May he not find it by the light of a wick worth no more than an *issar* [penny]?” (p. 8). This parable is not self-explaining at all, or if it is, it only reveals the general truth that valuable things might be gained by using cheap tools! But this is a parable about the value of the parable as a rhetorical device which is revealed by the *nimshal* that provides the key for its understanding: “Likewise, do not let the parable appear of little worth to you. By its light, a person may fathom words of Torah.” An allegorical key is needed (and given) to understand it: The words of Torah are the lost valuable item, and the parable provides the light to recover them. Parables like this one provide the background to Fiebig’s objection to Jülicher’s strict differentiation between allegory and parable.

In other cases, fixed metaphors provide the key to understanding. When Jesus spoke about a vineyard, his listeners most certainly would have understood that he was talking about Israel as God’s vineyard. Fixed metaphors like the vineyard, the king, the shepherd, and the sheep are keys to a culturally embedded understanding of Jesus’ parables, and I have doubts about the way Levine sometimes criticizes traditional readings that are in my view fully justified by many contemporary Jewish texts using the same standard metaphors and images.

Let me take the parable of the Generous Employer of Matthew 20 as an example.⁹ Levine polemicizes against interpretations that claim that the parable “addresses the resentment felt by those who had spent long years in faithful observance to Torah at the welcome and acceptance Jesus gave to those who appeared to come so late to any sense of conversion.” She states, “Once Jewish Law becomes equated with ‘bearing the burden of the day and the scorching heat,’ we are no longer listening to the Jewish Jesus talking to fellow Jews. When Jewish practice or Jewish society becomes the negative foil to Jesus or the church, we do well to reread the parable” (p. 211). I followed the advice and reread not only Jesus’ parable but also several rabbinic parables on workers, employers, and questions of payment, analysed masterly by Catherine Hezser.¹⁰ There are several parables—and Levine herself cites one—where toiling in the study of Torah and toiling all day as workers for a king are unambiguously compared. The best known is R. Zeira’s eulogy for Rabbi Bun har Hiyya, who is praised for having accomplished more in two hours than the complaining workers

⁸ See also R. Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus. Methods and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 137-150 and P. Ricoeur, “Biblical Hermeneutics” *Semeia* 4 (1975), 97-100.

⁹ One of the often repeated insights of the book is the fact that the title we assign to a parable matters (e.g. p. 28). I have used some of Levine’s suggestions for fresh titles throughout this contribution.

¹⁰ C. Hezser, *Lohnmetaphorik und Arbeitswelt in Mt 20,1-16. Das Gleichnis von den Arbeitern im Weinberg im Rahmen rabbinischer Lohngleichnisse* (NTOA 15, Freiburg/Schweiz: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990).

in a whole day (yBer. 2:7). This is clearly an allegorical encryption of his short life and can give us another nice example of how allegorical keys, guided by transfer signals from the framing of the parable, work in rabbinic literature.

In another parable warning against weighing the rewards for observance of the Torah, working under a certain tree in the garden is interpreted as fulfilling a certain commandment with a fixed payment that God deliberately kept hidden (see Deut. Rab 6:2; Pesiqta Rabbati 23/24; Midr. Pss. 9:3). There can be no doubt that working in the garden (of the king) or in the vineyard was a common, fixed metaphor for observance of the Torah in the rabbinic corpus. This metaphor may have been used in the same sense by Jesus. Hezser has shown that in the light of the richly developed rabbinic imagery about working and payment, Jesus' parable takes an interesting middle position by using the metaphor of recompense, the denarius, with a double meaning. It encodes a "just" wage for those who worked all day and a wage that graciously provides what is needed for those last hired.

One of the major problems in interpreting the parables is the irrecoverable loss of the original context, which can only be re-constructed hypothetically. Imagine that the last workers who are hired stand for Jesus and those who were baptised by John, while the other workers represent those of former generations, or those contemporaries who did not receive John's baptism of forgiveness. Thus it might be a parable told to defend John's baptism and Jesus' own calling of sinners to repentance by following John's example, and to remind the pious workers of his day of God's sovereign grace. Or maybe the first hired could be Jesus' disciples who left everything behind for the kingdom, and who are thus compared to those who positively responded to Jesus' call without bearing the full burden of itinerant discipleship. The Matthean context would recommend this reading (see Mt 19:27-29, preceding the parable) and it is supported by other traditions that provide evidence that questions of internal ranking among the followers of Jesus existed quite early and that Jesus answered them by endorsing a reversal of status.¹¹ In this case the parable would have defended the double strategy Jesus employed in his proclamation of the kingdom, by calling some to itinerant preaching and demanding less from others without discounting their contribution.¹² This might be a parable where the original setting provided an essential key to its understanding and where the original meaning must therefore be considered irrecoverable. On the other hand, the story itself and its imagery also provide clues, and placing the parable in the context of discussions about "just recompense" is in full agreement with later Jewish parables that stereotypically compares working (and payment) to the fulfilment of the Torah (and recompense). An interpretation along these lines can be grounded in rabbinic parables.

What about Levine's favored economic reading of the parable as an appeal to the rich to generously pay wages that provide a living for all? As the appeal to imitate God's goodness is clearly part of Jesus' teaching elsewhere, and his vision

¹¹ See Mk 9:33-37 and par.; 10:35-45 and par.; and Jn 13:4-5, 12-17.

¹² Another interesting tradition states that anyone who provided the preachers of the kingdom with no more than a cup of cold water "shall not lose his reward" (Mt 10:42).

of the kingdom certainly includes a good and worthy life for all, I regard such a reading as plausible and perhaps an intended second layer of meaning. There might have been listeners who took the parable to mean just that, and perhaps today this really is the interpretation we should follow. But it is questionable that there were many really affluent people who could have identified with the generous employer to be found in Jesus' audiences. It is also doubtful that a change in economic practices was at the heart of his teaching given its imminent eschatological character. Also, the story line does not suggest that this was a primary focus. The focus of the narrative is the discussion with the grumbling workers at the end, and that seems to indicate a context of inner-Jewish (sectarian) discussions between competing groups all hoping for a renewed Israel. Imagining that Jesus the Jew was involved in such inner-Jewish dialogues is both plausible and in no way an anti-Jewish interpretation. The problem arises with Christian applications that claim that Christianity exclusively embodies Jesus' vision and at the same time forget that his is a genuine Jewish vision. It is this anti-Jewish reception history that should be addressed and overcome. It found its classical formulation in Joachim Jeremias' comparison between Matthew's parable, which represents "the world of merit," and the rabbinic funerary parable that honors the untimely death of Rabbi Bun bar Hiyya, which represents "the world of grace."¹³ The whole body of Jewish parables about recompense and grace shows that Jesus and the rabbis do not differ regarding their views of God as a generous yet demanding boss. Levine is correct to note that we find both early Jewish and Christian soteriological claims that at times envision equal pay for unequal work (pp. 216-217).

To return to the issue of "allegorical" readings, I believe that we are always allegorizing when we interpret parables. When Levine re-reads the parable of the great pearl as challenging us to ask about our and our neighbor's ultimate concern in life (pp. 129; 150) and answer the question "What is your pearl of supreme value?" (p. 148), she is in my eyes doubtlessly allegorizing, but on a higher level. She offers an abstract category that includes all earlier allegorical readings. These include Matthew's (or even Jesus') call to leave everything behind and to proclaim the kingdom of God, or the gnostics' search for knowledge, or an insistence on the necessity of sacrifice to meet the demands of one's ultimate concern. All interpretations of parables necessarily include an act of transposition, understanding certain elements or the whole parable metaphorically or allegorically so as to view it in terms of a different topic, situation, or story. I suggest we might organize our study of allegorical features, allegorizations, and allegorical readings according to three different historical levels, which prompt three different groups of questions:

¹³ I have made a modest attempt to contribute to this issue in a classroom exercise set up around this reading; see Gerd Theissen & Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus. A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 339-343, 346, 597f. I hope to give it a fuller treatment in the near future.

1) Which (allegorical) readings were possible or even required at the time when a certain parable was first spoken? For example, parables about the owner of the vineyard, the shepherd, and the widow all present characters that a first-century audience will have easily understood according to fixed metaphorical / allegorical readings.

2) To what extent have Jesus' parables already been further allegorised by the evangelist(s)? Do we embrace those allegorizing readings or is there a legitimate reason not to do so? For example, I would argue that the violence in the parables in Matthew (most notably in Mt 22:7) deserves criticism. I also agree in principle with Levine that some of the later anti-Jewish reception history is already encouraged in the Gospels and should be problematized. On the other hand, given the above mentioned rehabilitation of allegorical elements in parables, more often than Levine assumes the evangelists may have brought out aspects of the parables that are in line with Jesus' intended meaning.

3) What sort of contemporary allegorizing can be called a legitimate re-reading of the parable? What standards do we use to assess this? Must it reflect the views of the historical (Jewish) Jesus, or Christian doctrine, or our own concerns? (The latter might explain Levine's focus on economic issues.)

It can be difficult to determine to which historical level Levine's interpretations should be assigned. At times she seems to criticize readings because they do not fit the context of Jesus, yet there are cases in which I would argue that her own readings do not either. This does not necessarily mean they are incorrect. In the huge rabbinic corpus the same parable has often been used for quite different purposes. Luke and Matthew felt free to adapt the parables to various theological and redactional concerns (such as Christology, ecclesiology, polemics, and other topics that arose after Jesus). So why shouldn't we? But as far as a historically adequate reading is concerned I would like to challenge Levine to engage more systematically the basic methodological questions. In addition to the already discussed issue of allegory I would briefly like to raise two other methodological issues, intertextuality and characterization in parables.¹⁴

Some of Levine's readings are especially strong and convincing because she succeeds in re-evoking a scriptural "echo-chamber" around parables that clearly helps to recover the first century reader's options for understanding. This is the case in the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the plot is reminiscent of 2 Chr 28 (pp. 102-103), and in the parable of the Prodigal Son, for which one needs to be aware of biblical stories of older and younger brothers (pp. 46-47, 49). In other cases Levine is very reluctant to follow scriptural interpretations that have been

¹⁴ Other questions could be posed such as "What constitutes a parable?" For example, Levine calls the passage about the separation of the sheep and the goats (Mt 25:31-46) a parable (pp. 12; 282), which is questionable.

proposed by others, for example when she declares that sometimes “a bird is just a bird” (p. 165) and that the tree in the parable of the mustard seed should not be read as echoing biblical prophet’s use of giant trees as metaphors for (fallen) empires (Ez 31; Dan 4) (pp. 154; 163-167). I would argue that such biblical echoes would be more likely to be recalled than the health benefits of mustard, which Levine introduces as a key to the parable (p. 166). I was not convinced by Levine that biblical images of shepherds and sheep were not essential to interpreting the parable of the Lost Sheep (Mt 18:12-14; Lk 15:3-7) (which she renamed the “Parable of the Initially Oblivious Owner” [p. 35]). She blames Luke for turning the parable into an allegory because “[n]either sheep nor coins have the capability to repent” (p. 27). But she herself deliberately excludes from her interpretation the huge amount of scriptural and other Jewish material that would have encouraged the listener to identify with the sheep and that show that humans are often likened to sheep that go astray and do not repent (Ps 119:176; 2 Sam 24:17; Isa 53:6; 1 Pt 2:25). They require shepherds that (metaphorically) care for them (Ps 23:1; 74:1; 80:2; Ez 34).¹⁵ This illustrates the need for more systematic reflection on the role scripture plays for Jesus and his hearers. Why is a relatively unknown text such as 2 Chr 28 taken into account whereas the well-known biblical metaphors of shepherd and sheep are left out? How do everyday knowledge and scriptural knowledge interact?

Connected to this question is the last topic I want to address, characterization in parables. How far could an author deviate from what his readers / listeners expected without losing his audience? Normally, the characters in parables are stock characters; readers / listeners would easily identify the “good” and “bad” characters. Jesus seems to have stretched that rule in some cases, using figures with bad reputations as heroes in his parables.¹⁶ But there are limits to that authorial freedom. A parable with no positive figures at all (as in Levine’s interpretation of the parable of the Widow and the Judge [Lk 18:1-8]) violates fundamental narrative rules of the genre (see esp. p. 241). Levine’s noble intention is to avoid stereotypes and anti-Judaism: “I do want to question the stereotype. Not all widows are poor, without agency, and completely dependent on the good will of others within an ‘ugly and oppressive’ Jewish system” (p. 229). That certainly is an accurate description of social reality, but there is little doubt about how an ancient Jewish audience would have viewed a literary widow. I have argued elsewhere that Jesus seems to build on the biblical image of the helpless widow in the beginning of the parable and that he surprises the reader by replacing it with the more powerful

¹⁵ Blending theory investigates the diverse ways how two “input-spaces” (here: “Guidance as herding sheep” and “Sinning as losing one’s way”) can interact in figurative speech, and provides useful tools to investigate the cognitive and linguistic operations that take place here. Space limits how much can be said about this approach here.

¹⁶ See, for example, a study of the positive usage of the imagery of social banditry in Mark 3:27 in A. Merz, “Jesus lernt vom Räuberhauptmann (Das Wort vom Starken) – Mk 3:27”, R. Zimmermann et al. (eds.), *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2007), 287-298. More ambiguous heroes are discussed by T. Schramm & K. Löwenstein, *Unmoralische Helden. Anstößige Gleichnisse Jesu* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986).

image reminiscent of the great widows in Israel's narrative tradition.¹⁷ I can agree with Levine that Luke has domesticated this parable substantially, but the positive image of the widow seems to be a constant factor in Jesus' parable and its subsequent interpretation. I doubt that the widow's wish for retaliation would have been criticized by Jesus or by any of his listeners, as Levine proposes. Admittedly, there is subjectivity in all these judgments. All our efforts to hear these parables as first-century Jews heard them reflect our own assumptions, and these are reasonably questioned by others. The parables will be puzzling us forever.

¹⁷ A. Merz, "How a woman who fought back and demanded her rights became an importunate widow – The transformations of a parable of Jesus", T. Holmén (ed.), *Jesus from Judaism to Christianity: Continuum Approaches to the Historical Jesus* (ESCO /LNTS, 352; London: T&T Clark, 2007) 49-86.