

REVIEW ESSAY

Amy-Jill Levine
Short Stories by Jesus:
The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi
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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 want to begin by noting that Amy-Jill Levine is not the first scholar to focus on Jesus as a master of parables. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on Joseph Klausner’s treatment of Jesus and early Christianity. While there is not a great deal of interest in Klausner’s work today, in 1921 he published a groundbreaking book in Hebrew, *Yeshu ha-Notzri*, which was subsequently translated into English by Herbert Danby under the title *Jesus of Nazareth*. The book itself is now quite outdated, but in its day it was instrumental in demonstrating to Christian scholars that when studying the historical Jesus they could not ignore Jewish literature from the Second Temple and early Rabbinic period, or, for that matter, the contemporary Jewish scholarship of Klausner’s day. Klausner, who was a well-known Hebraist and Zionist leader, also helped make the study of Jesus a “kosher” topic for Jews. Despite their differences, both Klausner and Levine recognize the profundity of Jesus’ stories. On the very last page of his book, Klausner sums up Jesus as “*a great teacher of morality and an artist in parable*.” He is *the* moralist for whom, in the religious life, morality counts as – everything” (emphases in original). Though I am trained in religious studies, with a focus on Judaism and Christianity in antiquity, and have taught on the seminary level, most of my work has focused on the area of interreligious relations and Jewish-Christian dialogue with diverse audiences, especially in my current position as Director of Interfaith Affairs at the Anti-Defamation League. It is primarily from this perspective, rather than as a teacher in the university or seminary classroom, that I will approach my examination of Levine’s excellent book.

I want to situate Levine's work in this context. There has long been a fruitful interplay between scholarship and interfaith relations. Interreligious dialogue is motivated by the desire to promote better understanding between religious communities and to overcome the prejudice and even violence with which we are all too familiar. Since academic scholars aspire to neutrality and seek to avoid bias toward one religious tradition, their work can provide an important corrective to the misunderstandings and misuse of history and texts that have often served as the excuse for negative portrayals of "the other." At the same time, scholars who accept the basic goals of interreligious dialogue may be better positioned to critique scholarship that is distorted by religious prejudice and to produce new research that does not impose later conflicts and theological agendas onto the past.

It is for this reason that *Nostra Aetate*, whose fiftieth anniversary was recently observed, states:

Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues.

In Christian-Jewish dialogue, the past several generations of scholarship on Second Temple Judaism, New Testament, and early Christianity, beginning with the likes of Klausner, Danby, and George Foote Moore but really taking off after the Holocaust, have firmly (re)located Jesus within his Jewish context. We have also become much more aware of the insidious effects that anti-Judaism can have on both teaching and preaching. We have seen that these negative depictions of Jews and Judaism can be recalibrated without compromising the core beliefs of either tradition. However, it is not easy to displace deeply embedded modes of thinking about either Jews and Judaism or the New Testament.

Levine's book is a major contribution to this effort. She aims to help the reader to hear the parables as Jesus' first century Jewish audiences would have heard them. This provides the proper context for reading the New Testament. Many Christians have never been challenged to look at the New Testament in that way. Others may be familiar with the basic outlines of the approach; they accept the premise and may understand it conceptually, but have never really applied it to specific texts within the New Testament. It is only through the kind of thorough exploration of the texts provided in this book that the implications of "hearing the parables as they would have been heard" can be fully appreciated.

The book is a delight to read. Levine on the page is very much like Levine in person: entertaining, witty, incisive, and provocative. The writing style is conversational—there were times when I really could hear her voice—and the meticulous scholarship is liberally sprinkled with humor as well as references to popular culture and events from history and the headlines. However, some of the references to popular culture, which I found so engaging and entertaining, might be an obstacle for some for whom English is a second language and American

culture a mystery. One of the reasons that I raise this is precisely because I believe this book is so necessary, not only for American Christians (and Jews), but for Christians in other parts of the world as well. What works so well in the specific American milieu may not be as effective in other settings. A version of the book that was more accessible to a broader audience would not be nearly as much fun, but might spread Levine's good news "to all the nations."

Another challenge that may arise in using this book with some Christians comes from the very methodology that I earlier described. Levine insists on situating Jesus within his first-century Jewish context. This requires stripping away from the parables the accretion of centuries of interpretation that Levine describes as having tamed their provocative character, including the narrative framework into which the gospel writers or editors placed the parables. It also means reading the parables through a pre-crucifixion, or if you prefer, a pre-resurrection lens. What we gain from the parables as Levine has interpreted them is insight into what Jesus was attempting to teach his Jewish compatriots. This will not be a surprise to those who come to the book having had some exposure to contemporary New Testament scholarship, and who may be the primary audience for this book.

For other Christian readers, however, this may be provocative, even threatening, in that the Jesus whom they encounter in this book is the fully human, fully Jewish Jesus, not the Christ of Christian faith. As far as I can tell, there is nothing in these interpretations that is incompatible with Christian faith, even if some traditional interpretations are shown to be simplistic or anti-Jewish. Nor is it the job of a Jewish New Testament scholar to teach Christian theology to Christians. And, in fairness, Levine does address this in the introduction. However, those who teach this book should be prepared for some resistance or pushback from some of those who are encountering this portrait of Jesus for the first time. I do not see this as a "problem"; on the contrary, it is a necessary part of the learning process. Teachers should be aware of this possibility and be ready to address it respectfully.

I do have one small quibble about the use of the term "rabbi." While it appears prominently in the title of the book, only once in the book itself does Levine refer to Jesus as a rabbi: "For people who claim to follow Jesus today, whether they regard him as the divine Son or as a rabbi with superb things to say, the parables cannot remain historical artifacts" (p. 19). It is not clear if Levine is promoting this view or simply describing what some Christians think. There is also one reference to "Rabbi" Hillel (p. 107). In contrast, there are also many references to rabbinic literature, culture, and practice, but Levine regularly—and appropriately—reminds the reader that these rabbinic texts post-date the time of Jesus and therefore must be used cautiously. Elsewhere, Levine states: "There are connections between first-century Pharisees and the later rabbis" and concludes, "Thus the Pharisees could be seen as "proto-rabbis" (p. 192). (One can say the same about Hillel, who is never called a rabbi in rabbinic sources.) Because "rabbi" later came to be used as a technical title for one ordained with the rabbinic tradition, calling Jesus "rabbi" (especially in the title of the book) seems to blur a boundary that in the rest of the work is carefully maintained.

Short Stories by Jesus is an effective and powerful book. Levine has provided an invaluable resource for those who teach the New Testament in a variety of contexts.