

REVIEW ESSAY

Amy-Jill Levine
Short Stories by Jesus:
The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi
(New York: HarperOne, 2014), hardcover, 313 pp.

ADAM GREGERMAN

agregerm@sju.edu

Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia, PA 19131

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).

The contemporary Jewish-Christian relationship has only recently turned from centuries of hostility and estrangement toward respect and occasionally even mutual enrichment. This new phase not only reflects strikingly different attitudes toward the other tradition shaped over the last half-century (largely in the wake of the shock of the Shoah) but is grounded in solid scholarship. Scholars are learning to discard long-standing biases both on academic and on moral grounds, as unfounded distortions unworthy of serious study, and also as morally objectionable presentations of other religious texts and traditions.

For this valuable endeavor, there is no one whose work is more deserving of attention than that of Amy-Jill Levine. Her newest book, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, continues her remarkable trajectory of path-breaking research combined with a deep commitment to improving Jewish-Christian relations. Or, to use my previous terms, she is driven by impressive scholarly and moral commitments. Importantly, in this volume as well as in many of her writings, she has shown that these are complementary goals. First, she writes that "ahistorical or anachronistic" interpretations distort the meaning of a text, undermining our efforts to properly understand, in this case, passages in the gospels (p. 18). Second, polemical interpretations have long buttressed negative, even hateful messages. Because the canonical status of biblical texts makes them highly influential millennia after their composition, even when they are badly misunderstood, Levine's work is very significant. She has elevated scholarly discourse as well as the discourse in our religious communities

through her accessible scholarship and devotion to frequent speaking and near-constant travel.

It is therefore a signal virtue of Levine's insightful new book that she has applied her energy and talents to studying such difficult texts as Jesus' parables. The gospel writers themselves admit this difficulty, as when the Marcan Jesus tells his disciples that they should be grateful to hear his message in non-parabolic form. He states that to outsiders, "everything comes in parables" and is murky (Mark 4:11), while they have Jesus as their guide.

Unlike these disadvantaged outsiders, today's readers benefit by having Levine to guide them. She seeks to cut through the clutter of questionable or imposed interpretations in order to understand what the parables meant in their original first-century context. What might Jesus have intended? What did his listeners hear and think? For starters, she reminds us that, while the gospel parables are inherently complex texts, they are also undeniably first-century Jewish texts, and can be situated in their distinct political, social, and religious milieus. This, she rightly argues, is the way to best hear them as they would have originally been heard. Remarkably, this approach has seldom been followed, as she illustrates with some stunningly strange and far-fetched interpretations from both traditional and even contemporary sources.

She likens her form of critical methodology humorously but insightfully to the children's toy, Mr. Potato Head. (Before considering this metaphor, I should note parenthetically that while few academic books make me laugh out loud, Levine's many works are notable even in this regard. For example, she wittily insists that the employer's offer of payment in Matthew 20 makes him sound more like God the Father than Mario Puzo's Godfather. Such examples abound.) To return to the toy, she says it is the potato itself that has a nutritious core. The eyes, ears, and other parts are flourishes and interchangeable, much as later interpretations are. They are not essential to the potato and in fact produce sometimes new and often bizarre creations.

Much of her book profiles and then draws out the implications of such interpretive additions. As noted above, one of the things she demonstrates, shockingly but perhaps predictably, is how badly the potato gets decorated, that is, how poorly texts get interpreted. Just like a child putting Mr. Potato Head's pieces in upside down and in the wrong places, commentators on the parables, Levine shows, have offered readings that misrepresent Jewish and biblical traditions. Unlike the child at play, who quickly moves on to other toys, many commentators consistently misread the parables in strikingly anti-Jewish ways and with baleful consequences for Christian perceptions of Judaism and, indeed, for their own understanding. This is a trend with a long history and, sadly, it is still operative. She shows how too many commentators rely on what we could call a "contrasting approach" that improperly extracts Jesus from his actual Jewish milieu. They unfavorably contrast Jesus' supposedly progressive views with supposedly xenophobic or misogynistic Jewish teachings. Rather than situate him in his Jewish milieu, seeing him as engaging with and even challenging parts of the tradition, some cast him as an outsider nullifying central features of the tradition.

The bizarre creations that result, usually due to the commentators' imposed agendas have, we might say, rearranged the parts in the wrong places. Many interpreters, motivated by ideological or political commitments (even admirable ones), nonetheless ignore historical scholarship that might better illuminate the context of the parable and forestall using Judaism as a negative foil. That this happens in patristic or medieval writings is not surprising; its appearance in contemporary, supposedly objective commentaries is depressing. Importantly, Levine shows that this is not an inherited polemic present only or largely in ancient or traditionally-minded modern commentaries. Paradoxically, some of those commentators who otherwise cast a critical eye on traditional Christian views of other issues nonetheless recapitulate traditional Christian anti-Jewish claims, only now in service of counter-imperialism or post-modernism, for example.

The term Levine uses to characterize the ways distortions make their way into interpretations is "domestication" (p. 15). This does not start only with post-biblical interpreters. It was done by the evangelists who redacted the extant gospels or by later Christians, though the former is more complicated for it introduces form-critical issues. These occurred when the likely original parable was presumably altered or surrounded by added statements so as to give it a different, usually tamer, less challenging, or appropriately 'spiritual' meaning. Levine's statement that the evangelists are the "first known interpreters of the parables" is extremely important, for very early they began this domestication process, complicating the work of later interpreters (p. 16). Of course, we do not simply have the parables Jesus presented, but only longer texts, with parables embedded into literary units. The statements or other texts that usually precede or follow them sometimes seem intended to enlist the parable to support some view of the evangelist. Luke, for example, downplays some of the more worldly or radical implications of the parables. He prefers to draw out pious lessons for the benefit of his readers. In chapter 18, which includes the Parable of the Widow and the Judge, he almost certainly added his own insistence on the need to "always pray" (v. 1). The parable itself, limited to verses 2-5, has no concern with such a lesson.

Levine's skeptical approach is generally sound and usually insightful. However, while it is tempting to exclude verses that seem to be additions and meant to draw out some lesson, a search for the core parable text may be too restrictive. While some statements can plausibly be said to be late and so post-date Jesus, others may be from Jesus himself and therefore are an integral part of his message. Thus, Levine identifies some apparent additions, which seem to be separate from the content of the parable itself strictly defined. However, the claim that they are also extraneous to the meaning of the parable or attributable to the evangelist and not to Jesus is more questionable. Rather, it also seems reasonable to suppose that Jesus may have linked mundane features of the parable to religious ideas about salvation or divine justice or even his own role, topics he was of course also interested in. I therefore wonder whether Levine's general judgment about parables may be too broad. This is seen, for example, in a discussion of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, where she says the parable text itself, without the

additions she identifies around it (e.g., Lk 18:14b), leaves us “without full resolution, which is what a good parable should do” (p. 193). I am not sure that a reliable standard for discerning if a parable was by Jesus is if it left his listeners with unresolved questions. I raise this note of caution against too strictly separating the Jesus-core from the evangelist-addition. If we want to know something about Jesus' original teaching (and not just limit this to the putative original parable), these statements may warrant more attention. Admittedly, they may redirect us from the immediate challenge of the parable itself or hint at a resolution, but they may also reflect an integral part of Jesus' own message. For the search Levine is doing, I wondered if these statements might be worth more attention.

I want to draw upon an admittedly inexact parallel. We certainly learn much from the statements that follow rabbinic parables and that are meant to help readers or listeners to draw out their deeper meaning, whether these are later additions or part of the original midrash (which often we do not know). In the classic format, the *mashal* (the parable itself) is followed by a *nimshal* (a statement that facilitates understanding of the text as the rabbis wanted it to be understood, as David Stern and others have shown). The *nimshal* is an integral part of the parable, for most often it connects the generic characters of the *mashal*—the king, the wife, the servant, etc.—with religiously significant characters—God, the prophet, the people of Israel, etc. Sometimes it works well; other times it is imprecise or clumsy. But it is a regular feature and intended to preclude too much open-endedness. It gives the *mashal* a resolution and an application. I raise this rabbinic parallel about the framing statements to the gospels' presentations (perhaps additions) to underscore the essential role of the *nimshal*. Many are not additions to parables, distorting their meanings, but necessary for interpretation and likely present from the start. An attempt to isolate the core parables of Jesus may be useful, but what seem like “accessories”—that is, evangelists' additions—may also reflect the lessons that Jesus himself sought to make (p. 15).

I want to remain with these topics of domestication and framing of the parable and note the ubiquity of this approach in Christianity, especially in interpretations undeniably at odds with what seems like the content of the original parable. Levine's study makes one realize that so few Christians, past or present, made the parable itself their focus. Again, using the potato metaphor, she sees the potato itself as providing the nutrition. By contrast, while some modern scholars and some modern Christians might be nourished too, many more Christians now and in the past seem to find the parable to be at best an *hor d'oeuvre*, perhaps tasty but not much of a meal. More often, they find it to offer little to no nourishment at all, for the content she skillfully uncovers often has been and still is ignored. Instead, she reveals a near-universal indifference to the parables themselves, along with the proclivity for often wild allegorization or distortion, even among modern scholars. This demonstrates just how little influence the parables had and have, with their challenging economic messages or playful portraits of provocative social interactions. Whether we read the writings of Jerome or Calvin or of various post-x (that is, post-modern, post-colonial, post-critical, etc.) academics, nearly all these parables were soon cast in exclusively theological terms

of relevance to a Gentile church in opposition to Judaism and far removed from Jesus' milieu. Parables about how one treats one's workers or social inferiors, for example, were and even are seen as generally far less interesting than the putative theological messages they contained, especially when the parable is allegorized. This approach, rather than a plain sense approach, predominates. A theological interpretation is not necessarily unrelated to the parable itself, and as I note, may genuinely reflect Jesus' own views, but, as Levine shows in her survey of interpretations, many are highly questionable. Whether one is or is not a Christian, it is striking to realize that the plain sense meanings of these parables actually need to be recovered today.

To connect this to the topic of Jewish-Christian dialogue, one of Levine's prominent interests, it would be helpful to consider further how this type of study could "be a place where today Jews and Christians might find some common bonds, or at least common challenges" (p. 18). The Jesus who emerges in the parables as she isolates them is a witty teacher, a social critic, and very much a first-century Jew. The Christ of faith, needless to say, is not her focus, nor does he much emerge in her study of these passages, despite of course their inclusion in the gospels. In her skillful efforts to recover a largely neglected view of Jesus, however, the strangeness of the portrait only underscores the historic proclivity of Christians to prefer a very different view of Jesus. While presumably not exactly making a conscious choice, Christians chose not to explore the aspects of Jesus' teachings highlighted by Levine, whether because the passages lacked resolution or were too distant from their own experiences, or because Christians simply had other interests. Even some who sought to recover neglected aspects today, as Levine shows, introduce distortions in using these to critique imperialism or Jewish views of women. For Jews, Levine's portrait of Jesus may be more familiar, not surprisingly. In his own way, he appears quite rabbinic, engaging with Jewish tradition and culture, a lively teacher and speaker, even if some things he says seem quite strange or unexpected.

Without saying such traits are inherently more rabbinic than Christian, I do wonder how Christians would receive Levine's provocative portrait of Jesus, who teaches without offering "closure" (p. 244) or who fails to clearly state what constitutes virtues such as "fairness" (p. 245), for example. That there are Jewish precedents and parallels in midrashic literature may do little to make this portrait of this first-century Jew eventually elevated to divine status in Christianity especially welcome to Christians. That is not Levine's main purpose, of course, though I expect this might make the reception of her remarkable book—for Christians and for those involved in Jewish-Christian relations—challenging in the fullest sense of the term. Levine deserves high praise for presenting such challenges before us.