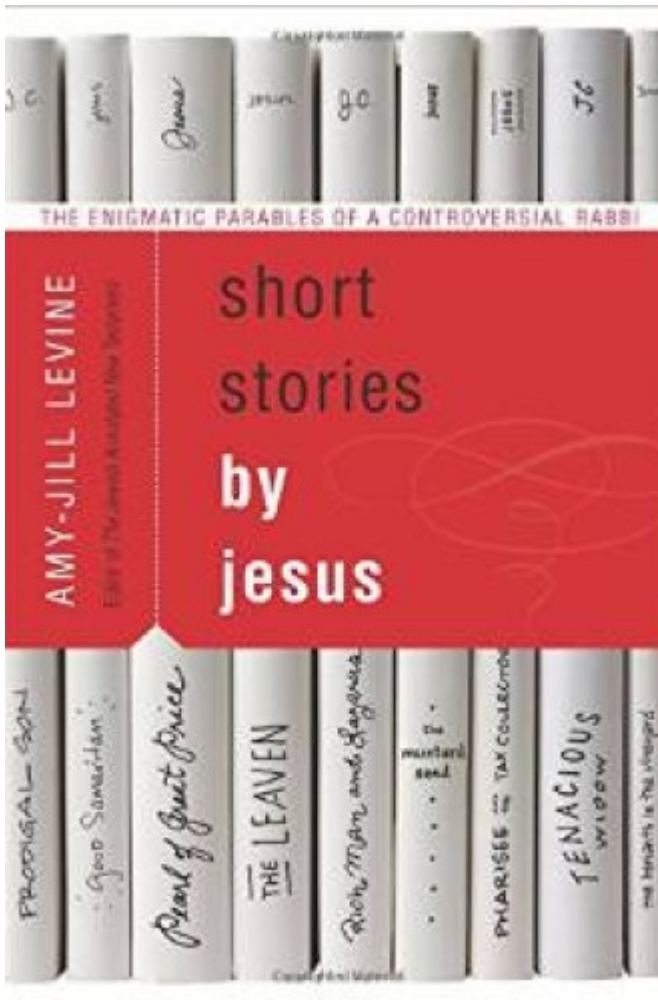


Short Stories by Jesus, by Amy-Jill Levine

reviewed by [James C. Howell](#) in the [March 18, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Short Stories by Jesus

by Amy-Jill Levine
HarperOne

While I was reading Amy-Jill Levine's *Short Stories by Jesus*, I kept wishing she had published it ten or 20 years earlier because she could have spared me quite a few naive mistakes I've made in preaching and teaching the parables. We who talk

about Jesus for a living have an understandable but lamentable habit of thumbing through a book or commentary, discovering some angle on the text we think will be productive, and then considering it settled forever. Levine has shown me ways I have relied on interpretations that were superficial or just plain wrong and that often the writers I read are themselves thoughtlessly repeating someone else's thin or faulty reading.

As a Jewish scholar and a clever raconteur, Levine is endowed with peculiar gifts to help us achieve her purpose: recovering "the art of hearing a parable," where context helps us "to determine what is normal and what is absurd." She deftly marshals history, the social sciences, rabbinic thought, Philo, and people from other cultures, including Merino sheep farmers in Australia (who point out that sheep resist valiantly if you attempt to carry them on your shoulders) and Yemenite women (who are certain their husbands would welcome home a wayward son).

Levine's best, most intriguing work is on the trio of parables on the lost in Luke 15. She helps us see what should be obvious: not only is the prodigal's father wealthy, the owner of one hundred sheep is relatively affluent, as is the woman with the coin. Precious few of Jesus' listeners owned as many as a hundred sheep, and the woman owns her home, has access to her own funds, and can throw a big party for her friends. Levine's deep insight? If you only have five sheep, you'll notice one missing, but if you have a hundred? "Perhaps it is those who 'have' who are more likely to fail to notice what is missing."

With the prodigal she overturns much that we repeatedly read and hear: that grown men didn't run in antiquity, for example, or that a son who squanders his inheritance is treating his father as dead. These pet notions don't stand up to scrutiny. Levine skewers dozens of scholars, from Jeremias to Scott to Buttrick to Hultgren, for passing along faulty readings—although in an analysis of her footnotes I detect that she takes on primarily books about the parables, and especially books on preaching the parables, rather than challenging commentaries. I am not surprised that books telling us how to make a parable work for a modern audience aren't up to snuff historically speaking.

What made me shudder as I worked through *Short Stories by Jesus*, though, was discovering that many of us have unwittingly been passing along anti-Jewish stereotypes. Haven't we heard that Jewish fathers were stern and would cut off a recalcitrant son? Or that the Pharisee's boastful prayer was typical of a works-

righteousness Judaism? Or that the Good Samaritan portrays Jews as so fastidious about the law that they refused to help? The idea that Jews could not touch dead or half-dead people is ridiculous, for otherwise no dead people would get buried. According to Jewish law, Levine demonstrates, you could and should check on people who were injured, help them if possible, and bury them if they had died. Maybe priests needed to keep distance for purity reasons, but the priest in the story of the Good Samaritan is “going down from” Jerusalem, away from the temple. Good works such as those of the Pharisee were commanded not just by Jesus, but by the Torah. And we see many tenderhearted fathers in the Gospels!

Levine recovers a robust sense of what Judaism was and wasn't in Jesus' day, and she does so without chiding. As she gently but firmly challenges poor readings, her assumption is that Christian writers are not vicious but rather underinformed. She names our misreading on our own terms as well and dubs us not anti-Semitic but Marcionite.

Levine's writing is totally absorbing, although she gets a little chatty at times, with jocular asides about Rocky and Bullwinkle and about the curiosity of a sheep on television being named Lamb Chop. Wryly she points out that “the excitement over the finding of a lost sheep only goes so far,” musing that the party over the found sheep may have involved mutton. We've come a long way from the rigid scholarly tone of yesteryear's scholars.

It's hard not to feel like we're in an audience hearing Levine talk. Her acknowledgments enumerate 79 universities, churches, and other groups for whom she has spoken on the parables—in less than a decade! I heard one of these presentations. I remember sitting in the back of a big crowd of stuffy Presbyterians who remained enthralled for a solid hour, chuckling and nodding as she undermined their sweet preconceptions about Jesus' teachings.

I can find some faults in Levine's work. She picks on quite a few straw men as she subverts common thought on the parables and does not always take on the real stalwarts of the art. Some of her readings are a little strange. Where Luke 18 reports that the tax collector was justified “rather than” the Pharisee, she renders *para ekeinon* as “because of”: the Pharisee has a great store of merit with God, and the tax collector taps into his extra stash. The laborers in the vineyard constitute a lesson in economics. And regarding the rich man and Lazarus, she declares that the rich in the Roman world were expected to aid the poor—but Roman patronage was

more about public works, not charity for the needy.

For Levine, the parables “challenge our stereotypes about people and society.” They “provoke, convict and amuse.” I agree. Yet I am still persuaded that Jesus didn’t tell the parables just for some unsettling, iconoclastic purpose. Jesus used stories to reveal the deep realities of God, the dawning reign of God, and what relationships will look like in the new age. She says that parables don’t have a set meaning but solicit whatever meaning we find in them, and this strikes me as only partially true. Jesus probably had some intention in his mind, and we Christians inevitably read as those who know and believe more about Jesus than any single isolated story he told might unveil. This surfeit of what we know may sometimes jade our reading, but at other times it might enrich our understanding of a given word from Jesus.

Whatever the case, I will never preach or teach on a parable again without turning to Levine for shrewd and accurate insight, and to shield myself from even subtle derogations of Judaism.