

Knowing and preaching the Jewish Jesus

“If to get a good message you need to make Judaism look bad, then you don’t have a good message.”

[Elizabeth Palmer](#) interviews [Amy-Jill Levine](#)

This article appears in the [March 27, 2019](#) issue.



Amy-Jill Levine. Photo © Daniel DuBois / Vanderbilt University.

Amy-Jill Levine, who teaches New Testament and Jewish studies at Vanderbilt, is the author of The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus and coeditor of The Jewish Annotated New Testament. She has also written (with Sandy Eisenberg Sasso) several children’s books, including Who Counts? 100 Sheep, 10 Coins, and 2 Sons. She is a member of an Orthodox synagogue and speaks frequently in Christian congregations. Her most recent book is Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner’s Guide to Holy Week, designed for use in group discussions.

**How did you as a Jewish scholar come to focus on the New Testament?
What is it about Jesus that drew you in?**

I think Jesus is fascinating. Plus he’s Jewish, so he’s one of ours. The more I read not only the words attributed to him but also the stories told about him, the more

intriguing I find the material.

I also have very much worried about the anti-Jewish views that frequently surface in studies about Jesus. A number of Christian commentators feel the need to make Judaism look bad in order to make Jesus look good. Instead of portraying Jesus as a Jew talking to other Jews, he becomes in their views the first Christian, the one who invented divine grace, mercy, and love, and all that other good stuff. Such views neglect the presence of these same virtues within Jesus' own Jewish context. There should be no reason this Jewish Jesus is used to promote anti-Judaism.

For example, some Christian commentators portray Judaism as the epitome of misogyny and Jesus, by contrast, as the one who invented feminism. Or they regard Judaism as entirely legalistic and Jesus as the one who invented compassion; people who hold such views appear never to have read the Psalms or the rabbinic literature. Or they see first-century Judaism as xenophobic and Jesus as the one who invented outreach. Anybody who's ever read the scriptures of Israel, let alone rabbinic documents, would know these characterizations are wrong.

Is it important to distinguish between the anti-Judaism in the text itself (as in the Gospel of John, for example) and the way Christians read their own cultural perceptions into the text?

I'm not sure it's appropriate to say that the Gospel of John reflects anti-Judaism. John is more than happy to appropriate the Jewish tradition. He just doesn't like the way Jews that are not part of his group interpret it.

The problem for modern readers is that they don't know what first-century Judaism was like. People who are trained in ministry typically don't read Josephus or Philo, or do much with the Dead Sea Scrolls, and they have no knowledge of rabbinic Judaism except for an occasional footnote that shows up somewhere. And they begin with the idea that whatever Jesus says, it must be unique. In fact, much of it is not. So the problem is one of ignorance.

I should also say that Jews sometimes make uninformed and nasty comments about Jesus and Christianity. There's plenty of ignorance to go around.

What are some of the specific biblical texts that Christians misinterpret?

Perhaps the most common example is the parable of the good Samaritan. A standard Christian interpretation is that the reason the priest and the Levite walk by the guy in the ditch is because they're afraid that he's dead and if they touch him—or if he dies while they are attending to him—they will become ritually impure. This is a misperception of how purity laws function, and it's a complete misreading of the text, which says nothing about purity.

What's also missed is that in the contemporary Jewish context, as soon as the story mentions a *priest* and a *Levite*, everybody knows the third person will be an Israelite. It's like going from Larry to Moe to Curly. The shock is that the third one is a Samaritan, and Samaritans were the enemy. We should see ourselves not as the Samaritan but as the person in the ditch who is saying, "Who's going to help me?" and who then realizes that the enemy, the one we think is going to kill us, is the very one who will save us.

Another example is the parable of the prodigal son. The standard reading is that when the prodigal comes back, Jesus' Jewish contemporaries would have expected the dad—representing the so-called Old Testament God of wrath—to demand that the younger son beg forgiveness and work for 20 years before being allowed back in the family. And then the surprise is that the dad says, "No, bring out the best robes, and put out the barbecue." That surprise is false. We know from other sources of this period that if the younger son comes back home, of course the father is delighted.

What we miss in the parable is the pathos of the older brother. The older son says to the dad: "I have been with you; I've done everything you wanted, and you ignored me! You've put on this big barbecue. You had enough time to call the bands and the caterer, and you didn't have enough time to come out and find me?" It's a parable about a father who discounts one of his sons.

I've had students suggest that when Jesus says the greatest commandment is to love God and love neighbor, he invented this belief. They apparently don't know that the commandment to love God is in Deuteronomy 6 and the commandment to love the neighbor is in Leviticus 19.

Some students have said to me that when Jews say you have to love your neighbor as yourself, it means you only have to love fellow Jews. They forget that Leviticus 19 goes on to say that you have to love the stranger who dwells among you because you were strangers in the land of Egypt. Jews have the category of neighbor and the

category of stranger, but they are commanded to love the stranger too. The unfortunate thing is that the category of stranger eventually drops out of the Christian tradition. In the early Christian tradition, you are either a neighbor (which means a fellow believer) or you are a potential convert (which means a potential neighbor) or you are a heretic or an infidel.

If you could add one required class to seminary education, what would it be?

I would want three hours of instruction on how to avoid anti-Jewish teaching and preaching. I (unsuccessfully) floated that as an idea for the Association of Theological Schools—the major accrediting organization for U.S. divinity schools and seminaries—to put in their best practices model.

As the focus in homiletics goes more and more toward narrative theology, communications theory, practical theology, and global extension—all of which are very good things—it has less and less time for history. If we get the history wrong, we're going to get early Judaism wrong.

If you could rework the Revised Common Lectionary, what would you leave out that's currently in there? What would you add?

I'd add a whole lot more stories about women, just to start. I'm frequently asked to preach in churches, and I find that when I talk about the rape narratives—the Dinah story; Tamar, Absalom's sister in 2 Samuel; the Levite's concubine—people who have been abused suddenly feel that somebody cares about their experience and has given voice to their experience. I think those stories are there to tell us that horrible things happen even in the best of families, that there is no simple solution to abuse, and to help us recognize the issue and to show care for both victims and perpetrators. That's part of what religious communities ought to be doing.

I would also like to see bigger chunks of books read so that people would have a better sense of the continuity of the stories that underlie their tradition. In the Jewish tradition, we read certain books all the way through. For example, on Yom Kippur we read the entire book of Jonah. On the Ninth of Av we read the entire book of Lamentations. On Purim we read the entire book of Esther.

Given that Christians often read Jesus outside of his historical context or let bits of anti-Judaism slip into their interpretations, what do you

recommend to pastors who want to counter these tendencies?

When my children were little, I used to bring them to my classes and sit them in front of my divinity students, and I'd say, "When you preach or teach, I want you to picture this little kid in the front pew. Don't say anything that will hurt this child, and don't say anything that will cause a member of your congregation to hurt this child." That is theatrical and manipulative, but it is remarkably effective.

I've seen pastors correct their mistakes, and that's easy to do. You can get into the pulpit and say, "Last week, I said this, and I should have said that."

It comes down to this: if in order to get a good message you need to make Judaism look bad, then you don't have a good message.

Recently you've published some children's books, and now you've written a book (with accompanying videos) on the Passion of Jesus to be used by congregations as a Lenten Bible study. What has inspired this broadening of audiences for your work?

I don't see a huge distinction between what I do in the academy and what I do for more popular venues, because the two are mutually informative. I spend lots of time in churches, and people in congregations tell me what their concerns are. In order for me to train people going into the ministry effectively, I need to know what congregants need.

I want people in congregations to do biblical study too. A lot of them feel disempowered, as if biblical interpretation is a job only for the minister. I've had many students who've told me that in Sunday school or vacation Bible school or youth group they were not allowed to ask questions. I want people to know that the Bible helps us ask the right questions. It doesn't always give us answers, but it helps us ask the right questions.

Writing for children came about when I was lamenting to my friend Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, an award-winning children's book author, about the lack of really good Jesus books for children. So Sandy and I decided to write one. In the back of all of our children's books is a page for parents and teachers, with suggestions on how to read the book with children and questions you can ask children as you go through it, so the kids become active participants in the reading experience.

What are your hopes for the people who read *Entering the Passion of Jesus* ?

I want them to travel with Jesus to see the risk that he is taking and therefore to recognize the risks that they might want to take in their own lives. Jesus is going to die. His friends don't know it, but he certainly knows it. And in light of that, how do you act?

I also want them to recognize the different ways that stories are told. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all have different emphases, and if we mush them all together we are going to miss a whole lot. Each already has a different story to tell and a different image that we should take away.

There's no good reason why a Jewish Jesus should be used to promote anti-Judaism.

I want readers to ask themselves the difficult questions that the text poses. When we pay taxes, who is on our coinage? What's the propaganda here? Where's the money going? In the Gospel of Mark, when the woman anoints Jesus, Mark says the story of what she did will be told "in memory of her." Why don't we fully tell this story in memory of her? Why don't we have a first dinner during Holy Week where we celebrate that woman and all the other women? We have a last dinner, so why don't we have a first one? At the triumphal entry, when the hero comes into town, we think everything is going to be terrific. What happens the next day? Do we expect the hero to do everything? What's our role?

Each of these stories opens up to multiple other stories and multiple questions that are worth talking about. Maybe the answers that we come up with will differ from person to person and from setting to setting. That's a good thing too.

When it comes to the Passion Week texts, what are some of the most common mistakes Christians make?

The standard one, which one hears less today, at least in polite society, is that the Jews killed Jesus because he was interested in social justice, or because he told parables. Jesus didn't die because he told parables or because he proclaimed good news to the poor. Jesus died, historically speaking, because he was a popular leader, and Pilate, like any intelligent Roman governor, did not want popular leaders around—particularly at Passover, the feast of freedom—because he didn't want to have a riot on his hands.

A number of commentators suggest that the Jews were all looking for a certain kind of militant messiah rather than one who talked about peace. As soon as you say that, you know you're in trouble, because it's not like there was a singular Jewish view. There's no head Jew to tell us all what to believe and if there were, we probably wouldn't pay attention to him.

Would you say a little more about these multiple views of the messiah?

There's no checklist for the traits of the messiah. The figure of the messiah is not a major one in the shared scripture that Christians call the Old Testament. Isaiah talks about King Cyrus of Persia as being the Lord's anointed. Some people thought that John the Baptist was the messiah (and some people still do—they're called Mandeans). You can find two separate messiahs in the Dead Sea Scrolls, one a priest and the other a military figure. Some people were expecting the archangel Michael to function in a messianic role and bring about the world to come. Some people weren't expecting a messiah but were expecting the prophet Elijah to usher in the messianic age. Some were expecting a shepherd, some a warrior.

The major issue for Jews is less who is the messiah than what the messiah does. And what the messiah does is bring about the messianic age. The messianic age is the time when everybody comes back from the dead, all the Jews in exile come back to their homeland in Israel, there's a final judgment, and there's peace on earth.

The followers of Jesus thought the messianic age was beginning with his resurrection. As Paul puts it, he's the "first fruits of the resurrection" (1 Cor. 15:20), and first fruits means the final harvest is coming soon. As time went on and the messianic age as traditionally understood did not arrive, the timetable changed, and the followers of Jesus spoke of how his faithfulness even to death saved people from sin and death.

The vast majority of Jews did not think that somebody needed to die in order to save them from sin and death, because they believed in a gracious God who forgives sin. And they already believed in resurrection of the dead, as one can see in the wonderful scene in John 11 when Martha declares that she believes in "resurrection on the last day." The church changed the timetable and declared there is a messianic age part one, which begins with Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and a messianic age part two, which is inaugurated at the second coming.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Listening to Jesus as a Jew.”