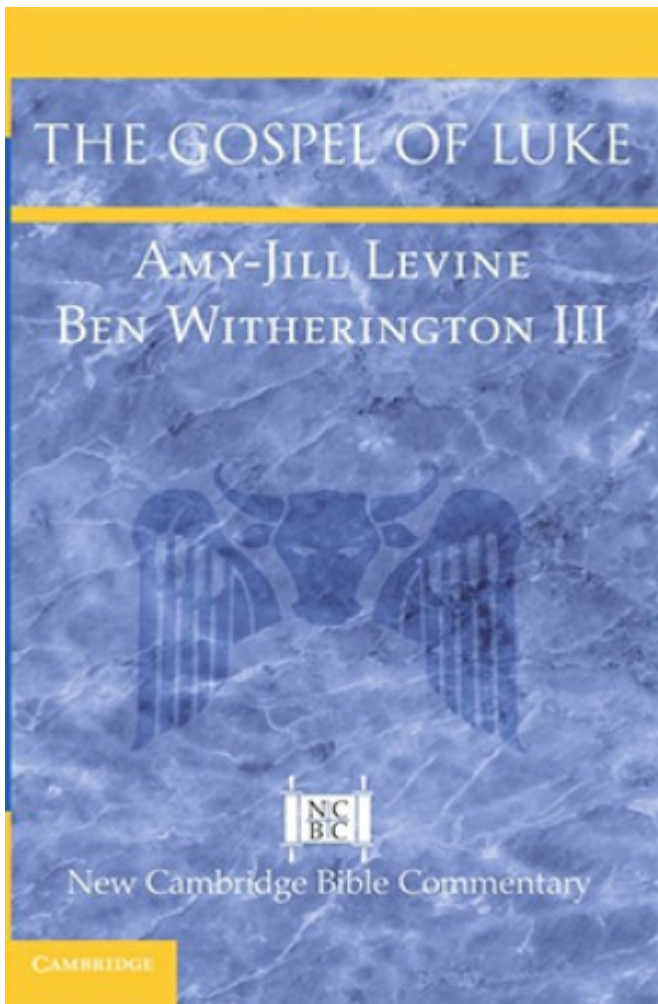


A Jewish and Christian commentary on Luke's gospel

## **Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington's dialogue is most illuminating when the co-authors disagree.**

by [Greg Carey](#) in the [October 24, 2018](#) issue

### **In Review**



### **The Gospel of Luke**

## New Cambridge Bible Commentary

By Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III  
Cambridge University Press

Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III have written a unique commentary on Luke—the one I'll turn to first for the foreseeable future. The first major commentary cowritten by a Jew and a Christian, it is thorough and engaging. The authors clearly explain their positions while engaging alternative perspectives, never losing sight of the theological implications of their work.

The book's collaborative nature adds enormous value to Levine and Witherington's interpretive work. During the flow of the commentary, they engage one another in conversation. The result is a nuanced interpretation of every passage in Luke. They also model dialogue: where they disagree, they say so, and they spell out their reasons. Their aim, according to the book's dedication, is to share their love of the Bible and to foster "better Jewish-Christian relationships." The authors alternate primary writing responsibilities according to Luke's chapter divisions, so Levine's wit comes through in odd chapters and Witherington's genial explication in even ones. Each chapter's commentary concludes with a brief reflection that aims at "bridging the horizons."

The authors are both highly accomplished. Levine's blend of Jewish and feminist interpretation has led to multiple best sellers. Countering those who magnify Jesus by vilifying Jews and Judaism, she humanizes ancient Jews and particularly ancient Jewish women. Witherington is respected by his peers and is especially influential among evangelical Christians. His multidisciplinary social-rhetorical criticism brings out a text's literary and cultural texture.

Yet the two authors hold more in common than one might assume. They clearly acknowledge the role of identity and experience in interpretation, rejecting the possibility of any final or complete interpretation. At the same time, they insist that interpretation matters and that we should reason through our differences. They share the familiar (and perhaps dated) "what it meant then" and "what it means now" framework. Historical considerations tempered with methodological sensitivity characterize their outlook. Perhaps most importantly, both authors value good Christian theology. One would expect this from Witherington, who teaches in an evangelical seminary. But Levine, who describes herself as agnostic, knows the

benefits of healthy Christian theology for all people—and the dangers when Christian theology goes awry.

A peculiar humility distinguishes the commentary. The brief introduction lays out not only the authors' fundamental assumptions but also their points of disagreement. Where they differ, they write "Ben thinks" or "Amy-Jill suggests." In particular, Witherington tends to be more optimistic than Levine concerning Luke's presentation of women, its characterization of Jews who do not follow Jesus, and its historical reliability. Alternatively, we might say that Levine assigns greater literary agency to Luke than does Witherington. How these three major differences play out can be seen in three case studies.

The story of the sinful woman anointing Jesus in Luke 7:36–50 provokes several debates among scholars. Our authors agree that the story reflects Luke's interests: dining, stories of women as "faithful but silent servants and patrons," Pharisees, repentance, and forgiveness. (One might also note Luke's interest in sinners.) Only Luke includes this story. At the same time, Luke omits the account of the woman who anoints Jesus for his burial (see Mark 14:3–8). Assuming that Luke is working from a copy of Mark, does Luke cut Mark's story only to rewrite it and replace it at a different location in the narrative?

Witherington argues that Luke is presenting a separate tradition concerning a woman who anoints Jesus, and he suggests that two women could have anointed Jesus for different reasons. Levine regards Luke's version as an example of creative license serving thematic purposes. Beyond questions of sources and historicity, she sees Luke reducing the woman's status from Mark 14, where the woman anticipates Jesus' death, to that of a passive sinner. Witherington, however, associates the woman with other sympathetic characters in Luke.

The extended banquet scene in Luke 14 reflects the authors' disagreement about the Gospel's characterization of Judaism, and in particular Luke's treatment of Pharisees. Levine and Witherington concur that "Luke does not depict the Pharisees in an exclusively negative light," but they later emphasize that Witherington absolves Luke from "stereotyping all Pharisees." The two commentators diverge most sharply concerning the role of the Jewish populace in Jesus' trial and crucifixion. Witherington sees no condemnation of Jews in these traditions, while Levine believes that "certain seeds planted" in Luke and Acts produced deadly "weeds" of Christian violence against Jews in later centuries.

When it comes to historical reliability, Jesus' saying that his words will come to pass during the generation of his hearers (21:32) presents challenges. As Levine sees it, Jesus was simply mistaken: the kingdom hasn't yet manifested itself. Witherington regards Jesus' statement as perennially applicable and therefore not erroneous. While the authors also disagree concerning the historicity of Jesus' actual resurrection—Levine credits Jesus' followers with visions of a risen Jesus—their commentary emphasizes how Luke interprets those traditions for its audience. The two disagree most intensely regarding the historical nature of the passion accounts. In Levine's view, the passion accounts resound more with theological profundity than historical reportage. Her conviction that the accounts reflect embellishment opens the question of motivation: What thematic purposes do these embellishments serve? Judas, she argues, may emerge from the common figure of the "friend who betrays"; the Sanhedrin trial, both historically unnecessary and absent from John, expands the circle of culpability for Jesus' death, as does the crowd's demand that Barabbas, not Jesus, be released.

The commentary genre persists despite repeated attacks. Levine and Witherington here join a distinguished line of innovators. Fortress Press's Hermeneia series introduced rhetorical criticism through Hans Dieter Betz's *Galatians* (1979) and reception criticism in Ulrich Luz's three-volume commentary on Matthew (first English volume appearing in 1989). Recently Scot McKnight's *The Letter to Philemon* (Eerdmans) is brief, but it largely consists of essays on slavery in the ancient and modern worlds. On the other end of the spectrum stands Craig S. Keener's four-volume, 3,000-page reference commentary on Acts, distinguished by dozens of essays on topics of interest (Baker, beginning in 2012). Levine and Witherington's commentary ranks among these landmark innovations in the genre.

At just \$39.99, the paperback edition of this commentary is especially attractive—but at more than 700 pages, one wonders how well it will stand up to the rigors of repeated use. The hardcover option comes in at \$120. The benefits of the conversation between Levine and Witherington justify either expense.