A Jewish take on Jesus

Jesus was smack in the middle of the Jewish tradition of his time. Remembering that can make you a better Christian, says this Jewish scholar of the New Testament.

Train, for a moment, the long lens of history on Amy-Jill Levine's life story. The bishops at the Second Vatican Council likely had no idea that their declaration *Nostra Aetate,* issued in 1965, would so affect the life of a Jewish grade-school kid riding the bus with her Portuguese Catholic friends in North Dartmouth, Massachusetts. This Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions would at least attempt to put a stop to comments like the one that was hurled at Levine one day: "You killed our Lord!"

Her Catholic accuser got this information from whom? Why, the parish priest, of course. Shortly thereafter *Nostra Aetate* would go forth, admonishing him and the whole Catholic Church that the events of Jesus' passion "cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today."

Undeterred, Levine grew up to teach New Testament at a divinity school in the middle of the Bible belt. She has held office in the Catholic Biblical Association. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament,* which she co-edited, zoomed to number 31 on Amazon's top 100 list when it was first published last year.

Levine also teaches New Testament courses on Monday nights at Riverbend maximum security prison. She meets with divinity school students and Riverbend inmates over biblical texts. Jesus would definitely approve.

But then he was Jewish, too.

The editors interview Amy-Jill Levine

What was it like growing up Jewish among so many Christians?

Our neighborhood was heavily Portuguese Roman Catholic, and almost all of my friends were Catholic. I wanted to go to church with them, and I was lucky enough to have parents who said, "If you want to go, that's fine. Not a problem."

My parents had explained to me that Christianity, which in our case meant Catholicism, was very much like Judaism. We worshiped the same God. We prayed the same psalms. We followed the Ten Commandments. We Jews had a few more commandments, but Christians had extra books in their Bible. We had some differences. And a Jewish man named Jesus was very important.

When all of my friends were preparing for first communion, I didn't understand the ritual involved, but I became obsessed with the dress. My mother bought a bride dress for my Barbie doll, and I used to practice giving communion to Barbie. My friends taught me how to do it with Necco wafers.

In that same year a little girl said to me on the school bus, "You killed our Lord." That was the only anti-Jewish thing I ever heard growing up, by the way. My family and I were welcomed in the

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The Meaning of the Bible: What the Jewish Scriptures and Christian Old Testament Can Teach Us, with Douglas A. Knight (HarperOne, 2012)

The Jewish Annotated New Testament, with Marc Brettler (Oxford, 2011)

neighborhood with no problem.

I remember saying to this little girl, "No, I did not." She said, "Yes, you did. Our priest said so." When I got off the school bus, it took my mother a while to figure out why I was crying hysterically. So I explained that I had killed God, and she explained to me that God was doing just fine, which was quite a relief.

What did your mother do?

She made a few calls to the local diocesan office, and the priest was actually reprimanded. This was during the Second Vatican Council, but *Nostra Aetate* had not yet been published. That document marked a sea change in terms of the Catholic attitude toward other faiths.

After that, I announced to my parents—I did not ask—that I was going to catechism. I was going to find out where this problem came from, and I was going to stop it. And again my parents, who were remarkably open-minded, said, "As long as you remember who you are, go. You might learn something."

I found out later that my cousin Eleanor played poker on Tuesday nights with one of the priests, and that's how my enrollment in catechism class got worked out. At least that's what I heard.

Anyway, whenever I could, I went to catechism with my friends. The stories are what grabbed me, because they were my stories, and not just the "Old Testament" stories, using that term in the Christian sense, but the New Testament stories as well.

Did everyone react as favorably as your parents to your interest in the New Testament?

One aunt asked me why I would read that horrible, anti-Semitic book.

Is that a typical reaction?

I don't think most Jews know the story of the New Testament, but I think if we did—if we Jews have some familiarity with our own traditions—we would see those traditions being echoed.

That shouldn't surprise us. Jesus' earliest followers were all Jews. They understood him through the template of their own religion, and they told stories about him by making connections to stories they were already telling, stories found in what Christians call the Old Testament.

Is that a hard sell, given the history of Christians persecuting Jews?

There's some grounding in that history, in the resentment of being forced to sing Christmas carols in the public school system or of listening to people in public pray in the name of Jesus, which means a Jew can't say "amen" to that prayer. American Jews live in a Christian culture where not only is Christianity presented to us as the norm, but our own traditions, if they are understood at all, are marginalized.

So I do understand the reluctance.

Missing in that history, however, are the countless rapprochements between church and synagogue over the past 2,000 years, the good relations between Jews and Christians throughout the centuries.

As human beings we tend to remember what hurts us, and it might be time to remember the connections and to build on those, without, of course, forgetting the hurt.

What can Jewish readers get out of the New Testament?

The New Testament preserves for the Jewish community part of our own history that we don't have. Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Jesus' mother, James, Paul—they're all Jews.

The only Pharisee from whom we have written records is Paul of Tarsus. The first person in history ever called rabbi in a literary text is Jesus of Nazareth. If I want to understand Galilean life in the first century, other than archaeology, I have no better source than the gospels.

So by reading the New Testament, we Jews recover our common roots. To be sure, the New Testament is tendentious literature. All literature has an agenda. But Jesus is an interesting bridge between what we have in the shared scriptures—the Old Testament of the church and the Tanakh of the synagogue—and what we find in later Jewish literature, particularly in terms of storytelling and in his way of understanding Jewish law, the heart of Judaism, which has been debated since Moses came down the mountain. The Jewish system still does that, and Jesus takes his place within that tradition.

Does Jesus stay completely within the Jewish context or does he depart from it at some point?

In first-century Judaism one can find the idea of God as manifested as the Word, the *Logos*. Judaism has the idea of the *Shekinah*, the feminine presence of God descending to earth and dwelling among human beings. The prologue of the Gospel of John makes perfectly good sense in that context.

First-century Judaism was sufficiently fluid to allow even the idea that an individual could embody divinity. We know that because the earliest followers of Jesus who recognized him as divinity incarnate—such as Paul or James, the brother of Jesus who's running the Jerusalem church—still called themselves Jews. Everybody recognized them as Jews.

Did they disagree with other Jews about Jesus? Sure. Does that put them outside the bounds of Judaism? No.

Doesn't the new church eventually define itself as something apart from the Jewish community?

Remember that the idea of internal dissent is part and parcel of what it means to be in the human community.

Also, starting very early on there were pockets of followers of Jesus who were never part of the Jewish community to begin with. The gentile churches were never Jewish; their members were never expected to be Jews. If God is the God of the world, then God can't simply be the God of the Jews. God has to be the God of the non-Jews as well. As the church became increasingly non-Jewish, part of that self-definition took on uglier colors.

You've written about the common errors Christian preachers make when they talk about the Judaism of Jesus' day. What are some of the more egregious ones?

That Jews believe in a God of wrath and Christianity invented the God of love. When I get that from my students I'm inclined to tell them, "Fine, the Lord is my shepherd, his mercy endures forever, but you're condemned to the outer darkness with wailing and gnashing of teeth."

God is a God of love throughout both testaments. If God didn't love in the Hebrew scriptures, then we wouldn't have the covenant. God would not have been Abraham's friend. God would not have allowed the covenant community to survive in Egypt or bring them back from exile.

God is not a "don't worry, be happy" sort of deity. We have certain responsibilities. When we do not show the love of neighbor that Leviticus commands us and that Jesus reiterates, God has good old righteous anger.

What about Jesus and women?

The error here is the idea that first-century Judaism was the equivalent of the Taliban and that Jesus invented feminism. I find that not only historically incorrect but also highly problematic, in part because it creates a sense of Jewish women as disempowered.

Luke tells us that Jewish women were patrons of the Jesus movement. Women appear in synagogues, they appear in the Temple in Jerusalem, from Mary to the widow Anna. They have freedom of travel, they own their own homes, they have use of their own funds. The New Testament tells us all of that.

The modern version of Jesus as a feminist arose in the late 1960s and early '70s as the women's movement began to affect theological education. If Jesus could be found to be a feminist, then any woman who's looking for equality in the church or the academy can say, "Well, if it's good enough for Jesus, then surely it's good enough for the church." The problem is, when one looks in the New Testament for Jesus being proactive on women, there's precious little there.

He summons no woman from the community even as he summons Peter, Andrew, James, and John from the boats. There's no woman at the Last Supper, there's no woman at Gethsemane. There's no woman among the Twelve.

Women may have been there and just got written out of the history. But you can't make an argument on absence of evidence, so what did feminists do? They drop the bar on first-century Judaism: By making first-century Judaism

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appear to epitomize misogyny, then any time Jesus says anything good about women, he must be progressive. Jesus had women followers and women patrons; women were teachers and prophets and deacons and apostles and leaders of congregations in the movement that developed in his name. None of this should be surprising, since women had comparable roles in Jewish circles as well.

Did Jews reject Jesus because he wasn't the Messiah they were expecting?

That claim that Jews rejected Jesus because he counseled peace and all Jews were looking for some warrior Messiah whose job it would be to get the Romans out of the country misses the variety of messianic ideas that were floating around in the first century.

The majority of Jews did not accept Jesus as a Messiah because most Jews thought that the Messiah and the messianic age came together. The messianic age meant peace on earth and the end of war, death, disease, and poverty, the ingathering of the exiles, a general resurrection of the dead. When that didn't happen, I suspect quite a number of Jews who were highly attracted to Jesus' message of the kingdom of heaven thought: That's a good message, but we have to keep waiting.

You also hear that Jesus was trying to de-emphasize Jewish purity laws.

The standard interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan is that the priest and the Levite walk by the fellow in the ditch because they're afraid that if he's dead and they touch him, or if he dies while they're ministering to him, they will become ritually impure because they will have touched a corpse. So they're actually following Torah by allowing this guy to die on the side of the road.

If expressed in that way, it should sound like nonsense, but somehow priests and homilists never quite get to that.

Taking care of a corpse is one of the highest commandments in Judaism, because it's one of the few commandments you perform on behalf of someone else with no possibility of reciprocation. A corpse can't help you.

The actual parable never says a thing about purity. It never gives these guys any motive whatsoever. The best interpretation I've heard about the parable was actually from Martin Luther King Jr. He said something like: I don't know why they walked by the man in the ditch, but here's what my imagination tells me. Perhaps these men were afraid. The priest and the Levite say to themselves, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me? There are bandits on the road." And the Samaritan says, "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" So the Samaritan asked the right question.

King goes on to say: If I don't stop to help the sanitation workers in Memphis, what will happen to them? And we know what happened to King.

Sermons can also go wrong by saying the Samaritan is today's beleaguered minority group, marginalized and ostracized and whatnot. But in the first century, the Samaritans were not marginalized and ostracized. The Samaritan was the face of the enemy. And then we have to realize that unless we allow that person to help us, we will die. And we have to choose life.

The lawyer's question "What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?" is what got this whole parable started in the first place. How do you choose life? Sometimes you have to allow the enemy to serve as neighbor. That's the shock of the parable.

How do you deal with a really problematic passage, like "Let his blood be upon us and our children" from Matthew's account of the passion?

An unfortunate interpretation of that verse is what led to the idea that Jews are perpetually guilty and perpetually damned for the death of Jesus. And that's what *Nostra Aetate* corrected.

I don't think Matthew was thinking about 200 years later, let alone 2,000 years later. I think for Matthew "all the people" meant the particular people who happened to be in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus, because it's their children who would have seen the destruction of the city by the Romans 30 years after his crucifixion. Matthew understands the destruction of Jerusalem to be prompted by the city's general failure to accept the Christian message.

What has been most rewarding for you about studying the New Testament?

On Monday evenings I'm usually teaching in a maximum security prison in Nashville.

To gain insight into the parables, or the gospels, or Acts from people who have served in prison for 30 or 40 years is extraordinary; I get a sense of how the biblical accounts are so fresh that they continue to talk to people today.

The good thing is that when multiple interpretations are shared, instead of saying, "Well, that's not my reading, so therefore it's wrong," people say, "Oh, I never saw that. That's right." So the texts are still speaking after 2,000 years.

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and takes a little bit of ethnic pride: "Hey, he's one of ours, and we did well."

I've been doing increasing numbers of programs with mixed congregations or mixed audiences: Jewish and Presbyterian, Jewish and Catholic, Jewish and Episcopalian. When I point out how understanding the Jewish background of the New Testament opens up new interpretations, I see the Christian audience go, "I never thought about that!"

I point out, for example, that if you begin a story, "There was a man who had two sons," every Jew knows the plot line. We are reminded of Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Manasseh and Ephraim, and suddenly the parable of the prodigal son takes on a completely different meaning. And then I recount some of the Christian material and explain it in Jewish terms and have the Jews go, "Ah! I never realized that!"

Do these encounters change the ways Jews and Christians think about one another?

What brings me great joy is to have people recognize they can disagree. They don't have to sacrifice their own religion in order to be in an interfaith conversation. They can stand firmly in terms of who they are and say, "This is what I believe," and then have somebody else say, "OK, I don't believe that, but I see where you get it, and I respect it." That's fabulous.

So Jews can understand, for example, how important the passion narrative is to Christians; it's not just "Oh, the Jews are going to get blamed for the death of Jesus." For Christians the story describes a divine love for humanity so extraordinary that God dies for humanity. So we begin to see stories through different lenses, and that's invariably helpful.

Can knowing more about Jesus' Judaism help Christians follow him more closely?

Far too often for Christians, Jesus is seen as the ticket to heaven. You believe in him and you get to heaven, and the most important thing he did is defeat sin and defeat death. So Christianity becomes a matter of belief.

The issue for Jesus is not, "Here's what you need to believe in order to get into heaven."

But recognizing Jesus within his Jewish context means recognizing his enormous concern for how people relate to each other on a day-to-day basis. The issue for him is not, "Here's what you need to believe in order to get into heaven." The issue is, "Here's what you need to do in order to have one foot in the kingdom of heaven. Here's what you need to do because here's what God wants you to do, and here's what your tradition calls you to do."

It is his Judaism that associates love of God with love of neighbor; his Judaism emphasizes what we call the golden rule, also found in a number of different religious traditions. That's why he talks to people about reconciliation and says that human interaction is more important than ritual. Saving a life always trumps any law of the Torah for Jews.

Jesus teaches people how to live, how to act. That's the Jewish Jesus, and that too often drops out. It's part of the problem, by the way, with the creeds. If you go straight from Jesus being born to being crucified, you're missing a whole lot.

Many Catholics think that being Catholic is primarily about what you believe.

Yes, but it's not. For people in the church over the centuries, it never has been. Take the earliest gospel, which is probably Mark. Right after Jesus' baptism, Jesus goes out to proclaim his message: "The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the Good News."

I am consistently asking my students, "What's the good news?" It's not that Jesus died and came back, because this is only the first chapter. He hasn't yet mentioned the passion. Nobody knows he's going to die. The good news has to be something else.

So the good news has to be what you get from the parables. The good news has to be the Sermon on the Mount. The good news has to be the healings, which show care for people in the community.

The good news is that everyone is part of the family. It doesn't matter what your income level is. That's even true of sinners and tax collectors, people who have removed themselves from the common welfare by working for the occupation government, disrupting the sense of community by stealing, or destroying marriage by committing adultery. Jesus says, "You know what? You've got a role in this community, too."

That's not belief; that's action. It is reconciliation, and it's family values in their best form possible.

If you were to meet Jesus, what questions would you have for him?

Beyond general questions like "What did you hope to accomplish?" I'd like to talk with him about what he thought about Rome. He says very little about Rome, and I'm curious as to whether that was even on his radar.

I'd like to know what he was thinking while he was dying. We get very different depictions as we go through the four crucifixion narratives, from the cry of abandonment—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—in Matthew and Mark, to "Father, forgive them" in Luke, to the quite stoic Jesus in John who seems to be orchestrating the entire thing, saying, "It is finished."

Did he feel that he was bereft? Did he feel that in his death he was saving his people as an ultimate martyr? Was he convinced of the power of the resurrection? What was he thinking? And what would he want us to do with what he was thinking? **USC**