

DISRUPTIVE READINGS

Essays Honouring the Work and Wisdom of
Amy-Jill Levine

Edited by Marc Z. Brettler, Mary C. Boys and Joel N. Lohr



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Bible in the Modern World, 89

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Amy-Jill Levine

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches</i>
<i>BJRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>ClQ</i>	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
<i>EvT</i>	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JES</i>	<i>Journal of Ecumenical Studies</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period</i>
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
PBC	Pontifical Biblical Commission
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
<i>SBLSS</i>	<i>SBL Semeia Studies</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

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INTRODUCTION

Amy-Jill Levine's career in Bible and Religious Studies arguably started even before she was born. When her mother was pregnant with AJ, she attended an event alongside Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, founder of the Jewish renewal movement. "Reb Zalman" was, among other things, involved in trying to infuse mysticism back into Jewish life. He asked AJ's mother to lie down on a couch, put his watch over her pregnant belly, and announced that she should be honored because she was carrying "a great rebbe." AJ's mother thought he was crazy, but Reb Zalman surely wasn't wrong.

AJ was born on June 29, 1956. She spent her early years in Dartmouth, a largely Catholic town on the south coast of Massachusetts. Her neighborhood friends played with Communion Barbie, and some accused her of killing Christ, an accusation that confounded her. As a child, after watching the funeral of Pope John XXIII on television, she decided that she wanted to be pope—she liked the pomp and circumstance as well as the great accessories, and she loved spaghetti.

As an undergraduate at Smith College, AJ studied Religion and English. She completed her MA and PhD in Religion under the direction of D. Moody Smith at Duke University, where initially she was prevented from serving as a teaching assistant in New Testament courses because she was Jewish. In more recent years, she has received honorary doctorates from the University of Richmond, the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest, the University of South Carolina-Upstate, Drury University, Christian Theological Seminary, and Franklin College. Her academic accomplishments have been recognized through her election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Academia Europaea, as well as being awarded the first Seelisberg Prize for Jewish-Christian Relations.

AJ's early experiences had a formative influence on her. The relation between the Church and Judaism has long been a central focus of her research, alongside strong interest in gender and sexuality, and the study of the Gospels. The first topic is explored in more detail in this

volume's essay by Barbara Reid, "A Jewish Jesus in Christian Preaching"; the second is reflected in much of her writing, especially in the thirteen volumes of the *Feminist Commentary to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings* that she has edited. And she has also written extensively on the gospels.

The first of her main teaching positions was at Swarthmore College, where she served as Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot Associate Professor. From there she decamped to Vanderbilt University in 1994, where she served as E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of New Testament Studies, and later as Mary Jane Werthan Professor of Jewish Studies. In 2021, she retired from Vanderbilt to become the Rabbi Stanley M. Kessler Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at the Hartford International University for Religion and Peace. She also experienced formative teaching experiences in Glasgow, Rome, and the Philippines.

Unlike most biblical scholars, AJ often works collaboratively—with Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant scholars. She is deeply committed to public scholarship through lectures at colleges, universities, seminaries and theological schools as well as via frequent church sermons and workshops, recorded courses, podcasts, and other forms of public education. She has spoken at the most prestigious venues, including the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., Riverside Church in Manhattan, and the Vatican—in 2019 she was the first Jew to teach at The Pontifical Biblical Institute at Rome. Recently, she was elected vice president of the Catholic Biblical Association of America.

The select list of her publications on pp. xi-xviii offers some sense of her remarkable range. The importance of her writing is seen in her many works that have been translated into at least ten other languages, including Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Korean, Norwegian, Portuguese, and Spanish.

But AJ is much more than her bibliography; she writes on such a wide range of topics in so many venues. Her children's books, for example, written with Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, play an important role in educating young Christians to appreciate Jesus as a Jew. And she is indefatigable in trying to popularize, in the best sense of the word, her unapologetic ecumenical messages all over the world. As editors, we are used to getting her emails from airports, planes, or anywhere other than her home in Nashville, TN. And her great success as a teacher and as an "evangelizer" of the position that the NT must be understood in its Jewish context, results from her being so clear, straightforward, unapologetic, honest, and humorous. She is happy to share the limelight with others. Anyone who has heard her speak knows that from the moment she arrives

at a venue and kicks off her heels, all listeners are in for a treat. We have each learned never to speak after her; she is quite literally an impossible act to follow.

Editors' Personal Reflections

The three editors of this volume have worked with AJ in different capacities. As a way of fleshing out AJ the friend, the scholar, and the educator, we would like to offer some personal reflections.

Joel:

I will never forget meeting AJ for the first time. I was chairing a session at a Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting for a new section called “Jewish–Christian Dialogue and Sacred Texts.” As co-chair of the newly approved section, I was tasked with explaining our goals and hopes. I ended my speech by saying something like, “In short, we hope this section will embody the work of the esteemed scholars and teachers in Jewish–Christian Dialogue we look up to as a committee, especially those like Jon Levenson, Mary Boys, David Novak, Michael Wyschogrod, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky.”

AJ, who was in the audience, approached me immediately after the session. She introduced herself briefly, then asked, “Why wasn’t I on your list?”

It’s probably safe to say that there is no other person on the planet like AJ, and I mean that in a profound sense. She is clever, humorous, and witty. She is at the forefront of New Testament scholarship and Jewish–Christian dialogue and indeed should have been on our list (an inadvertent omission, for the record). She is prolific in ways very few scholars can claim to be. And she is not only respected within the guild, but somehow AJ has figured out how to be accessible and interesting to the public—perhaps her greatest feat, and an uncommon claim to fame for a biblical scholar! I like her, admire her, and wish there were more people like her. Yet, as my co-editors also note below, she can be a pain. And for that, too, I give her credit; but I should probably explain.

When I heard rumors that AJ might be retiring from Vanderbilt, I immediately called her. I expressed my deep appreciation for her, and her work, and how important she is in scholarship, in the world, in the church, and so on. Then, I think I said something like, “But you don’t need to hear me go on and on...” to which she replied, “Oh, keep going, it’s lovely.”

I eventually asked if she might be interested in coming to Hartford, where I was president, for a newly-named professorship. She replied,

“I’m retiring, but I’m not dead. Make me an offer.” I did, and we’ve been working together ever since. It has been a ride.

One thing I especially admire about AJ is her persistence—her incredible persistence—which makes her a good pain. AJ does not give up, especially when she believes in something. She is adamant about reducing antisemitism in the Christian pulpit, and she works tirelessly to that end. For example, for years AJ has pestered the Association of Theological Schools, America’s accrediting body for seminaries and theological graduate schools. She insists that courses to reduce antisemitism in the pulpit *need* to be required of all Christian ministers in training; or if not required, then at least encouraged. She has not given up, reaching out again, and again, and again. She critiques things (and people) until it hurts. But she is often right.

As president emeritus of her (now) university of employment, I can say that AJ has pushed me to be a better president, scholar, teacher, and thinker. For that I am grateful. Perhaps most importantly, though, AJ has become a friend. I feel lucky to know her.

Marc:

My work with AJ, which started completely by chance, has changed my life—both personally and academically. I was once a pretty typical scholar of only the Hebrew Bible, living in my Jewish and Hebrew Bible bubbles. Then, two decades ago, Donald Kraus, the Executive Bible Editor of Oxford University Press, asked me to develop and co-edit *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* along with AJ, whom I had not previously met. Since then, AJ and I have worked together to produce three different editions of that work, and we spent much of COVID writing a spin-off, *The Bible With and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently*.

Working with AJ has not always been easy—I had to catch her between airports, and she is a tough critic with the highest standards: the best teacher, not only in what she writes, but in how she edits (her undergraduate English major shows). Always pushing me to be clearer and more compelling, she is never afraid to say that I am wrong, forcing me (after taking a few gulps) to prove myself, often in email after email after email—but she is also willing (occasionally) to say that she is wrong.

AJ has not only pushed me to expand my concept of what the Bible is and how it can be interpreted, she has also involved me in some of her escapades, including the opportunity to present alongside her *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* to Pope Francis in St. Peter’s Square in Rome, in 2019. I grew up in a very Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn, NY, and

I never could have imagined writing about the New Testament or talking to the Pope. Hearing his enthusiasm for our project has animated me to become more engaged in understanding the NT and more involved in Jewish–Christian relations. Working with AJ, for me, has been truly life-changing.

Mary:

I had heard of AJ when she was teaching at Swarthmore College, but I first met her at a Methodist Church in New Jersey in the late 1990s. The minister invited each of us to speak on Jewish–Christian relations, and to interact in response to questions. It was clear from the outset that AJ was both a compelling speaker and delightful conversationalist. The audience was relatively small; there was nothing notable about the event except that it began a long colleagueship.

Not so many years later, we collaborated on teaching at a weekend event in *B'nai Jershurun*, a non-denominational, progressive synagogue on Manhattan's Upper West Side. The event was sponsored by a relatively new organization, Interfaith Community (founded by the late Sheila Gordon, PhD) and centered around the parables of Jesus. The parables invite imaginative exploration, and I remember the event as energizing and enjoyable—and fun. Some years later (2014), AJ would publish her well-received book, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*.

We did a few other joint events in those years, but I have come to know AJ primarily through participating in mutual projects, following the arc of her published works—not that I can claim to have read all of them—and observing her interactions with others. Some of my observations echo Marc's. AJ is fiercely opinionated, yet a respectful and engaging disputant who welcomes a good argument. If you ask her to read an article or book manuscript, she will generously agree. But beware—she will provide unstinting and unsparing criticism. AJ is a formidable critic committed to bringing forth one's best work.

Two recent experiences with AJ offer insight into what may be her lesser-known qualities. Anyone familiar with her CV, which includes an astounding number of publications and public presentations in a variety of modes, can guess that she has an intense work ethic. She's certainly not alone in the academic world in this regard, but it's one that is life-giving. For example, several months ago I participated in a symposium in Rome for which she was the keynote speaker. She fashioned her address around the work of everyone in the symposium, which meant that she had read every paper prepared by the participants and used them to create

a coherent narrative that raised significant issues to be addressed. Many keynote speakers would fashion something from their current work; AJ made *our* work hers as a way of launching the symposium. I've heard many keynote addresses in my day, but none as generous as hers.

Some months earlier, she and I were in Boston together as participants in a multi-year project on the Jewishness of Jesus. It's an international group of about twenty scholars, Jewish and Christian. Several of the members are priests, one an Episcopalian and two others Roman Catholic. As often happens, one of the Catholic priests announced he would be presiding at Eucharist (i.e., "saying Mass") each morning, and anyone of us was welcome. Such an announcement immediately draws me, the only Catholic woman in the group, into the tension of both valuing Eucharist and resenting the exclusivity of the all-male Catholic priesthood. (I once gave a paper at an international Jewish-Christian seminar on "Loving a Church that Squanders the Gifts of Its Women." The Vatican officials at the seminar were absent when the time came for discussion of my paper.) In the end, I went to each morning's Mass. So did AJ—sitting just behind our small group, simply present with us. It was, for me, a profound act of solidarity as well as a recognition that while we Christians and Jews do not worship in common, we can nevertheless be with the Other in our difference.

Finally, I always look forward to being with AJ, not just because of the depth and breadth of her knowledge, but also because of the gift of her humor. Her work enlightens and her presence brings a lightness.

The Essays

A "great rebbe" inspires lively commentary, as the essays in this volume exemplify. Over the years, each of the contributors has collaborated in various ways with AJ, and their wide-ranging essays illustrate the broad horizon of her scholarship as well as their affection for her.

Virtually all of the contributions grapple with biblical and theological issues correlated with Jewish-Christian relations, particularly with anti-Jewish interpretations that have contributed to theological antisemitism. Within this larger framework, several authors focus on aspects of the passion narratives: *Warren Carter*, *Adam Gregerman* and *Bart Ehrman*. Contributors *Rainer Kampling*, *Nicholas J. Schaser*, *Myrick C. Shinall, Jr.*, and *F. Scott Spencer* proffer new readings of New Testament pericopes that have been perennial sources of Christian misappropriation. Three essays give prominence to pastoral ramifications. *Barbara E. Reid* and *Elizabeth F. Caldwell* draw out ramifications of AJ's work for Christian

preachers and for writers of children's books on the Bible. *Jesper Svartvik* identifies five questions that should challenge Christian interpreters and identifies four interpretation fault lines to which Christians are particularly vulnerable. *Wolfgang Kraus* examines the early postwar beginnings of Jewish-Christian dialogue in Europe. *Mark Kinzer's* essay exploring the place of a "soft" supersessionism also raises significant pastoral questions.

Another cluster of essays involves methodological issues. For example, *Kathy Ehrensperger* argues for fresh translations of the New Testament responsive to the hermeneutical lenses of recent scholarship. *Adele Reinhartz* explores the significance of the claim that the New Testament must be read within the context of Early Judaism. *Philip A. Cunningham* shows how numerous Christian interpretations of the New Testament rest on the assumption of an "oppositional imagination" between Judaism and Christianity, thereby unfavorably contrasting Judaism with the teaching of Jesus. *Karma Ben Johanan* illumines an interpretational dynamic in which interpreters, mindful of their own standpoints, approach the Scriptures not merely through various historical-critical methods but also through the traditions of Jewish and Christian communities. *Paula Fredriksen*, writing on the relation between history and theology, argues that ethical theology requires interpreting ancient texts in ways that they become a force for good.

Three essays focus on women in biblical texts: *Deborah A. Appler* delves into the miracle story of the widowed mother of Zarephath in relation to questions of food justice. *Jennifer L. Koosed* explores the role of shame in the story of Judith through the lens of Hebrew *midrashim*. (The Book of Judith, while included in the Septuagint, is not in the canon of Tanakh.) *Carolyn Osiek* argues for the significance of looking beyond the named women of the New Testament to those women disciples grouped simply as the "many others."

Four essayists dialogue with various other dimensions of AJ's work. *Stephen D. Moore* alludes to her work on gender and sexuality in his reading of Rev 1:13 in which the risen Christ transcends gendered categories. *Jay Geller* interprets the poetry of Gertrud Kolmar, whose laments gave voice to Jews, women and animals. *Ben Witherington* disrupts conventional understandings of the identity of the Beloved Disciple in making the case that it is Lazarus rather than John. And scientist *Scott F. Gilbert*, a colleague of AJ's during her years at Swarthmore College, recounts the ways in which her curiosity and knowledge enabled him to deepen his own scientific research. For him AJ is a *shadkhan*—match-maker—of religion and science.

Gilbert also reveals that he is the lyricist for the songs AJ has been known to sing to accompany her lectures. Consider, for example:

Most of what Jesus said,
 Jesus said Jewish.
 Not everything's newish
 In what Jesus spoke to.
 Let's look at Jesus
 Within his own context
 To ignore it is sinful.
 Thank you, Vatican II.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our many contributors for working with us to honor AJ's illustrious first seventy years. We especially appreciate the help of Shira Steinberg of Jerusalem for managing this very complex project, keeping us on time, and helping to edit each essay so effectively. Achim Schmid of Duke University ably assisted with the "Select Publications." We thank Duke University, Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, and Union Theological Seminary for their financial support in producing this book.

The cover image features sculptures of *Synagoga and Ecclesia* by Paula Mary Turnbull. These were commissioned by editor Mary C. Boys to provide a rendition of contemporary relations between Jews and Christians. It images the theological developments that give hope that Jews and Christians might live in mutuality rather than in Christian triumphalism as depicted by the infamous medieval art in which Ecclesia is portrayed as triumphant over Synagoga. Turnbull, a Sister of the Holy Names, the community to which Mary Boys also belongs, died in 2018.

Finally, we would like to thank all those who work at Sheffield Phoenix Press, especially its managing director, Louise Clines, and its commissioning director, Jeremy Clines, who helped bring this project to fruition.

To Amy-Jill Levine

AJ, this book expresses our deep appreciation—along with that of all the participants in the volume and your many other friends—for your numerous contributions and for your friendship. We hope that the coming

years may even involve, in addition to continued academic and public work, some opportunity for relaxation—though we doubt you will follow our advice.

We thought long and hard about this volume's title, *Disruptive Readings: Essays Honouring the Work and Wisdom of Amy-Jill Levine*. We wish you many more years of positive disruption. You remind us of the late Congressman John Lewis, with his "good trouble." You are indefatigable. With your remarkable work-ethic and wisdom you are a good disruptor, and may your many disruptions, written (*Work*) and oral (*Wisdom*), continue to help mend this broken world.

A JEWISH JESUS IN CHRISTIAN PREACHING

Barbara E. Reid

Introducing Amy-Jill Levine

In August of 2024, I had the great privilege of introducing my friend Amy-Jill Levine (AJ) before she addressed the General Session of the annual meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association of America (CBA). Her presentation was titled “*Oy-Angelion: Why and How Christian Preaching and Teaching Still Promotes Jew-Hatred.*” Earlier, we tried to recall when we had first become friends, but neither of us was sure. My recollection was that the friendship started during a social hour at a CBA meeting; or it may have been at a Women’s Breakfast at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature.

For many years we have found ourselves moving in the same circles at scholarly meetings because of our shared interest in feminist approaches to the Gospels, especially Luke. We have worked together on numerous projects and have co-presented at academic conferences, as well as in parishes, synagogues, and universities. One of the most memorable times I had with AJ was in May 2009 when she was presenting at a symposium of feminist scholars in Seville, Spain. She asked me to come along with her to help navigate since I speak the language; also because I have a sense of direction whereas she claims to lack one.

There are few scholars whose expertise and range of interests are as comprehensive as AJ’s. She is expert in both Testaments of the Bible, rabbinic literature, history of interpretation, interfaith relations, and much more. One of her foremost efforts has been to help Christians gain a better understanding of Judaism and of Jesus as having been thoroughly Jewish. Not only has she done so through her publications,¹ but she has also

1. To name a few of my favorites: Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco,

worked tirelessly giving innumerable talks addressing scholars, preachers, teachers, and the Christian faithful.

In recent years, AJ has been an active part of the Task Force of the Catholic Biblical Association on Addressing Representations of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Exegesis, Homiletics, and Catechesis. This Task Force, formed in 2019, works to identify Lectionary readings susceptible to anti-Jewish interpretations. It produces guidelines and fact sheets that provide contextual materials intended to counter anti-Jewish readings and to provide alternative interpretations for enhancing preaching and teaching.

I have benefitted enormously from AJ's work and from personal interactions with her as she patiently tutored me and edited much of my writing. It is a great honor to have the opportunity to share, in this essay, examples of how AJ has helped me, and countless others, come to a better understanding of Jesus and Judaism, particularly with regard to his relationship to the Law.

Learning that Jesus was a Jew, not a Christian

I am a Catholic Christian who is old enough to remember when, prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), we prayed for “the perfidious Jews” on Good Friday. This prayer, recited in Latin, reflected what most Christians had long assumed—and was widely taught in the church—that the Jewish people lived in darkness and were culpable for the death of Jesus. As a youngster, I had no knowledge of Judaism; no friends, neighbors, nor acquaintances who were Jewish; and I never regarded Jesus as a Jew. Nor did I have any idea of the tragic and devastating consequences of the “Christ-killer” charge.

I was 12 years old when the Council issued its “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” known widely by its title in Latin, *Nostra Aetate* (“in our time”). It declared that “neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion.”² Citing Paul’s Letter to the Romans (9:4-5), the declaration reminds the church that, to Jews “belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship,

2006); *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: Harper One, 2015); Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), now in its third edition (2026).

2. *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4 in Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

and the promises.” Jews are “beloved” because the “gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:28).³ Only later, as an adult, would I begin to understand the implications for my personal and professional life of *Nostra Aetate* and all that followed. Of particular pertinence is the 1970 issuance of revised prayers for Good Friday. Previously, prayers on Good Friday were for the Jews not only in their perfidy—in the sense of “unbelief”—but also for their conversion. The new prayer strikes a far different tone: it speaks of the Jewish people as the “first to hear the word of God,” and petitions that “they may continue to grow in the love of God’s Name and in fidelity to the covenant.”

In the years since the Council, numerous statements and teaching have emanated from various church institutions. These statements, widely available online, refine, develop, and add nuance to *Nostra Aetate*. In addition, interreligious and ecumenical offices have been established, and a vast and burgeoning scholarly literature pertinent to Jewish–Catholic relations has developed. Catholic parishes in many areas have initiated dialogues with local synagogues, and Catholic scholars have collaborated in writing books with Jewish authors. Many Catholic colleges and universities have established chairs in Judaica or in Jewish–Christian relations. Some seminaries and theological schools have made concerted efforts to enhance their students’ understanding of Judaism and Jewish life.

My institution, Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, has instituted a Catholic–Jewish Studies Program with a Jewish professor on the faculty since the school’s founding in 1968. Today that professorship is endowed as “the Crown-Ryan Chair in Catholic–Jewish Studies.” All our students are required to take courses in interfaith relations. As much as I, as a faculty member and later as president of Catholic Theological Union, have learned from the presence of Jewish scholars on our campus, none has shaped my understanding more profoundly than has Amy-Jill Levine. From my perspective, no one has done more than she in exposing erroneous readings of New Testament texts that contribute to antisemitism, and in offering interpretations that reclaim the Jewishness of Jesus. I see her work as essential for Christians in developing appreciation of, and mutual respect with, Judaism.

Despite these efforts, and the important work of centers promoting healthy Jewish–Christian relations around the world,⁴ it is not easy for many Christians to overcome deeply ingrained anti-Jewish prejudices and stereotypes. I see this in our students, many of whom have absorbed some

3. All biblical quotations are from the NRSVue.

4. See, for example, the many such centers affiliated with the Council of Centers on Jewish–Christian Relations at <https://ccjr.us/members/member-organizations>.

of the cultural biases against Jews and misreadings of Scripture. Many, if not most, Christians continue to have misconceptions about Judaism. Christian preaching that features subtle and not-so-subtle anti-Jewish tropes still abounds. And Bible study groups often lack sound understanding of the Jewish milieu within which the New Testament must be understood.

Thus, in the remainder of this essay, I will identify some examples of common misconceptions about biblical texts. And I will point to AJ's contribution in offering fuller and more adequate interpretations of those problem passages.

Jesus as Overturning Oppressive Jewish Law

One of the most common ways in which Jew-hatred is manifested in Christian preaching is when the homilist portrays Jesus as over-against Judaism, overturning Jewish Law, which is supposedly restrictive and oppressive. Jesus is said to liberate his followers to form inclusive and egalitarian communities founded on love, not fear. Texts that most often prompt these kinds of interpretation are those in which Jesus seemingly breaks the Sabbath by performing healing work, or those in which purity laws come into play. Following are a few of the many examples in which AJ has exposed hateful interpretations based on misunderstanding and stereotyping of Judaism. She then shows a way to read the text situating Jesus as a law-observant Jew who was intent on helping his followers become better Jews.

Jesus and the Sabbath

Each of the Gospels recounts times in which Jesus heals people on the Sabbath: a man with an unclean spirit (Mk 1:21-28; Lk. 4:31-37); a man with a withered hand (Mt. 12:9-14; Mk 3:1-6; Lk. 6:6-11); a woman bent double (Lk. 13:10-17); a man who had edema (Lk. 14:1-6); a man lying on a mat at the pool at Bethzatha (Jn 5:1-18);⁵ and a man born blind (Jn 9:1-41). All but one instance (Mk 1:21-28; Lk. 4:31-37) introduces a controversy about whether Jesus had broken the Sabbath.⁶

5. In Jn 7:19-24 the controversy over the man healed at the pool of Bethzatha continues.

6. Another episode in which Jesus' actions on a Sabbath provoke controversy is when he and his disciples picked grain because they were hungry (Mt. 12:1-8; Mk 2:23-28; Lk. 6:1-5).

Christians often conclude that Jesus totally disregarded the Sabbath or deliberately overturned the laws concerning Sabbath observance. As AJ observes, they paint the Law as oppressive, and Judaism “as a straitjacket with thousands of picky injunctions, and Jews as fearful that if they were to violate one commandment, they would face the wrath of an angry God.”⁷ What such a misinterpretation of Jesus as antinomian misses, is that Jesus never advocates disregard of the Sabbath; in fact, the Gospels portray him again and again as an observant Jew who goes to synagogue on the Sabbath. Whether or not to observe the Sabbath is never a question for him. What *is* debated, both in the time of Jesus and beyond, is *how* to observe the Sabbath, and how to interpret laws prohibiting work on the Sabbath.

The question of which laws take precedence is clear in the healing of the man with a withered hand (Mk 3:1-6).⁸ When the scribes and the Pharisees are watching to see if Jesus would cure on the Sabbath, he poses the question to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” (3:4). They do not respond. Jesus tells the man to stretch out his hand and it was restored. As AJ points out, “No Jew, then or now, would have upheld any Sabbath ruling preventing work were a life in danger. But there are issues that were, and can be, discussed.”⁹

For instance, should one practice medicine and so “work” in order to preserve a life on the Sabbath? The answer seems clear in life-threatening situations. But what about healing a non-life-threatening, chronic condition on the Sabbath, such as the man with a withered hand? Or the woman who had a crippling spirit for 18 years (Lk. 13:10-17)? The synagogue leader in the latter story clearly takes a position different than that of Jesus: “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath day” (Lk. 13:14). Jesus regards this interpretation as disingenuous and counters with a *kal va'chomer* (קל וחומר; *from the lesser to the greater*) argument: “Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it to water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day” (Lk. 3:15-16)? The episode concludes with Jesus’ opponents being put to shame, while “the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by him” (Lk. 13:17). This conclusion highlights that the crowd sides with Jesus in this dispute about how to

7. Levine, *Misunderstood Jew*, p. 31.

8. Similarly, Mt. 12:9-14; Lk. 6:6-11.

9. Levine, *Misunderstood Jew*, p. 31.