

Review: “The Difficult Words of Jesus” by Amy-Jill Levine

Abington Press has generously provided me with a copy of The Difficult Words of Jesus: A Beginner’s Guide to His most Perplexing Teachings by Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School in exchange for my honest review. Thank you both to Abington Press and to Audra Jennings for the arrangement.

Book Review

In The Difficult Words of Jesus, Amy-Jill Levine addresses some of the interpretive challenges presented by what she aptly terms, the “most perplexing teachings” of Messiah Jesus recorded by the Gospels.

One thing that is immediately apparent as the book begins is Dr. Levine’s conversational writing style. She really does make the topic accessible. Having myself studied at Duke Divinity School, I am aware of Dr. Levine’s reputation as a Jewish feminist theologian, and she alludes to this fact throughout the book. It is my understanding that she earned her doctorate at Duke which has probably contributed to her name and work coming up every now and then in classes and conversation. Dr. Levine teaches in mainline Christian seminaries, currently Vanderbilt, but denies the divinity of Messiah Yeshua. She distances herself from the Jewishness of Messiah by referring to Him only by His westernized name as “Jesus;” never as the Hebrew “Yeshua.”

Levine describes Jewish traditions such as bar mitzvah and the High Holidays and compares them to traditional Christian practices. Sadly, she never addresses the continuity offered by Messianic Judaism.

Greek concept of Jesus vs Hebrew Rabbi & Jewish Messiah

According to the book, the majority of Levine's students participate in Western church traditions such as "Lent" so she is able to remain comfortable talking about the more Greek concept of Jesus without actually encountering Him as Hebrew Rabbi and Jewish Messiah. She does loosely discuss the commandments and other central Jewish teachings. This made reading the book more appealing to me from a Messianic perspective, but it seems that she attempts to teach an inclusive, fairly universalistic message, antithetical to the very *exclusive* nature of the Gospel's claim which is that Messiah Yeshua is the one and only begotten Son of God, Equal to God, and is One with God. Messianic and Orthodox Jews alike embrace the *Shema*. [Deuteronomy 6:4's exclusive claim: "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is One."](#)

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There is One God, and He has made Himself known as Father, as Son, and as the Holy Spirit. We can gain insight to better interpret the more difficult sayings of Messiah Yeshua by trusting in His Spirit, the *Ruach haKodesh*. This book does not operate under this core belief. Certainly, it is important to point this out if being used for a Bible Study.

Hermeneutical imagination

I enjoyed Dr. Levine's ability to draw out the characteristics of people described by the Gospel writers. For example, I liked the way she helps the reader imagine the attitude and behaviors of the rich young man in the Gospel of Mark. She demonstrates her sense of humor! She truthfully writes, "I'm not sure I'd want my children to date him" (*Levine, 14*). I also enjoyed the section that invites the reader to contemplate: *if you could stop Jesus in His tracks, what would*

you ask Him? Dr. Levine's question inspired me to write a blog post you can find [here](#). As a professor, she has accomplished her charge to inspire others.

[What would you ask from Yeshua?](#)

If you could ask Yeshua anything . . . what would you ask for? In a chapter analyzing [Mark 10:44, "Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all,"](#) Levine again shares her hermeneutical imagination in a way that is thought-provoking. Her social justice sensibilities help with this as she challenges the reader to " . . . think of Paul's Jewish family in Tarsus as at one time enslaved (it does give Paul a different nuance) . . . " (*Levine, 56*). I would definitely agree – that does give Paul a very different nuance and would make for intriguing further study.

Christianity & Slavery

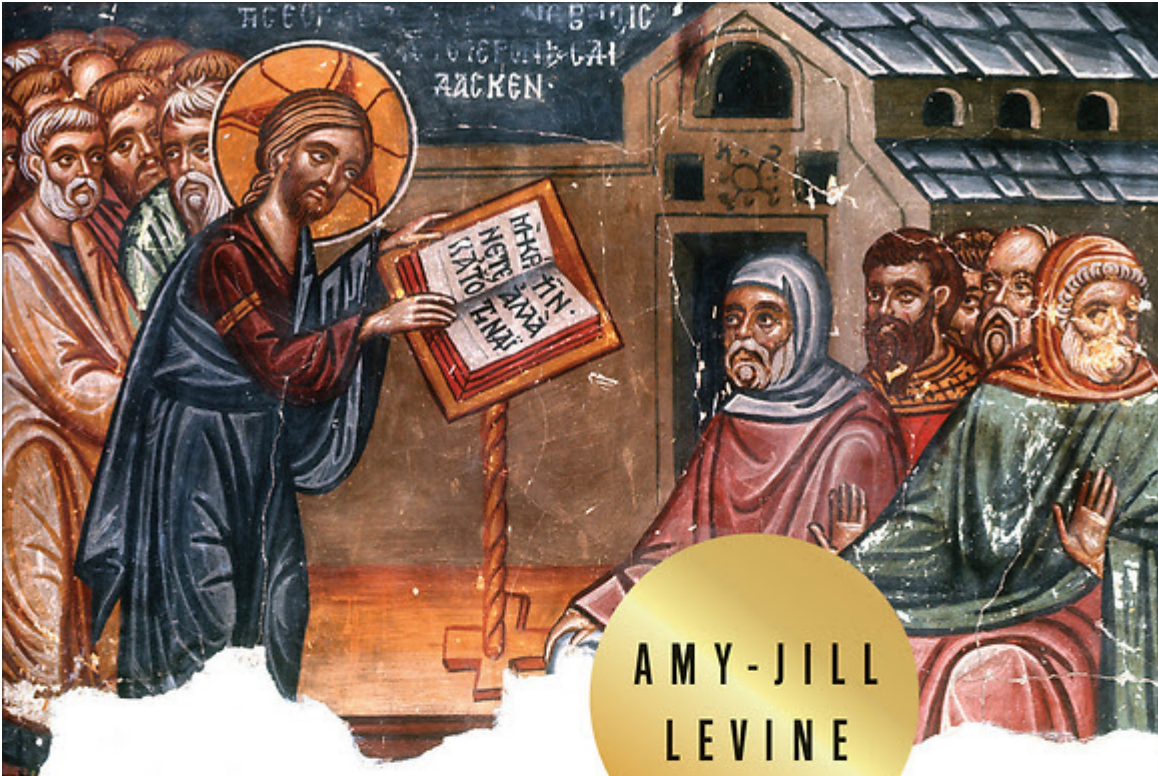
Levine questions why Jesus didn't teach freeing of slaves. She wonders why He didn't cite [Leviticus 25:10](#) or [Jeremiah 34:9-10](#). It is clearly a topic of interest for Levine as she describes the usages of the terms "slaves" and "servants" throughout the New Testament (*Brit Hadasha*). In addition, she points out that Westernized "Christianity" and slavery "traveled hand-in-hand through the Roman Empire" (*Levine, 58*). While I believe these are issues and topics that should rightfully be addressed through careful study and prayer, I again wondered how the less-Westernized remnants of the Jewish followers of Messiah Yeshua would have interpreted these same issues.

Levine does acknowledge that Jesus "identifies [H]imself as a slave, and so did his followers" (*Levine, 63*). She connects this in a way particularly meaningful to the believer: "Crucifixion was a punishment associated with slaves" (*Levine,*

63). I appreciated Levine's deeper look at the Hebrew "eved" as compared to Greek "oiketes" and "doulos." (pages 64 and 65). Also, the relationship of the "slave" or "servant" to the "Master" who is God/Elohim. She highlights that "for some, indeed probably for Paul of Tarsus, for the followers of Jesus to think of themselves as slaves to God is the **ultimate language of freedom**, since it indicates that no one and nothing else is in control" (Levine, 70, *emphasis added*).

Do the Gospels train listeners to hear anti-Jewish sentiment?

Lastly, Levine finishes her book with an emotive chapter addressing anti-Semitism paired with some of the harsher phrases that Messiah used that seem insulting. I don't know that it is fair to place both topics in one chapter because at various points in the chapter, Levine seems to insinuate that the Gospels *train* the listener to hear anti-Jewish sentiment by the way in which it is written. I recommend you decide whether or not you agree – read the book for yourself!



AMY-JILL
LEVINE

The

DIFFICULT WORDS *of* JESUS

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE to HIS MOST PERPLEXING TEACHINGS

There are times when Jesus taught things that seem problematic to contemporary readers. His comments lead to difficult questions about family values, economics, social

*justice, and religious respect. Jesus spoke 2,000 years ago, but the questions he raises are the ones with which we continue to struggle. In **The Difficult Words of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to His Most Perplexing Teachings** (Abingdon Press), Vanderbilt University professor **Amy-Jill Levine** gives cultural, historical, and biblical context to some of the most difficult teachings of Jesus to help readers better understand how those teachings spoke to his first-century audience, and how they continue to speak to us today.*

*Dr. Amy-Jill Levine's new book, **The Difficult Words of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to His Most Perplexing Teachings***

About the Author: *Dr. Amy-Jill Levine*



Amy-Jill Levine is University Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies and Mary Jane Werthan Professor of Jewish Studies Emerita at Vanderbilt Divinity School and College of Arts and Sciences.

*An internationally renowned scholar and teacher, she is the author of numerous books including *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week*, *Light of the World: A Beginner's Guide to Advent*, and *Sermon on the**

Mount: A Beginner's Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven. Her latest release is The Difficult Words of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to His Most Perplexing Teachings. She is also the coeditor of the Jewish Annotated New Testament.

Professor Levine has done more than 500 programs for churches, clergy groups, and seminaries on the Bible, Christian-Jewish relations, and Religion, Gender, and Sexuality across the globe.

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