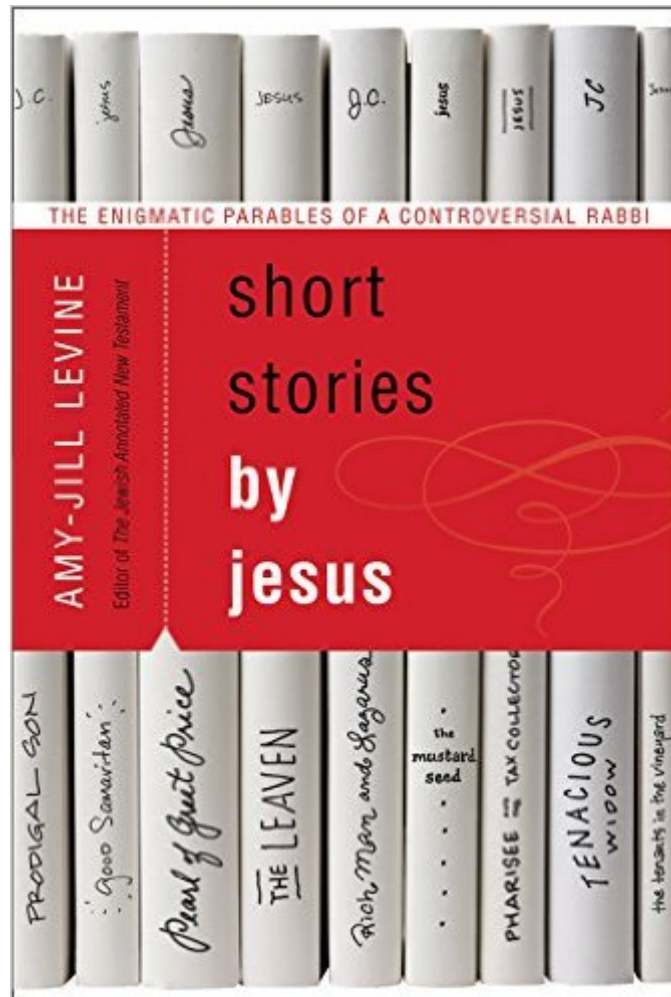


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# Short Stories By Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables Of A Controversial Rabbi



## Synopsis

The renowned biblical scholar, author of *The Misunderstood Jew*, and general editor for *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* interweaves history and spiritual analysis to explore Jesus's most popular teaching parables, exposing their misinterpretations and making them lively and relevant for modern readers. Jesus was a skilled storyteller and perceptive teacher who used parables from everyday life to effectively convey his message and meaning. Life in first-century Palestine was very different from our world today, and many traditional interpretations of Jesus's stories ignore this disparity and have often allowed anti-Semitism and misogyny to color their perspectives. In this wise, entertaining, and educational book, Amy-Jill Levine offers a fresh, timely reinterpretation of Jesus's narratives. In *Short Stories by Jesus*, she analyzes these problems with parables, taking readers back in time to understand how their original Jewish audience understood them. Levine reveals the parables' connections to first-century economic and agricultural life, social customs and morality, Jewish scriptures and Roman culture. With this revitalized understanding, she interprets these moving stories for the contemporary reader, showing how the parables are not just about Jesus, but are also about us—and when read rightly, still challenge and provoke us two thousand years later.

## Book Information

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: HarperOne; Reprint edition (September 15, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0061561037

ISBN-13: 978-0061561030

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.8 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 7.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars See all reviews (188 customer reviews)

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## Customer Reviews

The title is attractive. The credentials of the author are compelling. So I read the book, *Short Stories by Jesus*--the enigmatic parables of a controversial rabbi, as an early morning and late night

meditation during the seasons of light this year: Christmas and Hanukkah, 2014. I have been a practicing and observant Christian for 67 years. The stories of Jesus' parables are so intimately familiar to me because they were the tales that fueled my learning to read in the 1940's before I ever went to school. To say I have read and heard each of Amy-Jill Levine's selections of Jesus' short stories 67 times would be an understatement. I thought I had them down cold. As I ploddingly chewed on each morsel this winter I tasted the truths in each mouthful through a whole new culinary window. Some I resisted because of the unfamiliar flavorings. Some were reminiscent of my favorite meals from childhood. Some were bitter in my mouth with what seemed like foreign spices or odd proportions. I suspended judgment and bit-by-bit began digesting Dr. Levine's theological feast. Every bite, those redolent of great meals throughout my life and those bitter in my mouth because of the changed viewpoints they evoked, became sweet as honey and thoroughly, spiritually nourishing in my belly. I am slow in posting this review for 3 reasons: 1. I am still caught up in a glorious reevaluation and deepened appreciation of the foundations of Christianity and its life in my life. 2. Levine's wonderful bibliography and references have led to other books to read which supplement her themes, and for now I just can't stop! 3. The book, literarily very well written, is not a quick-and-easy read. It is challenging before it becomes deeply satisfying. This is not a book just for Christians and/or Jews. This is a book for anyone who wrestles with the common human search for the meaning of life and the role that religion or lack of religion plays in that wrestling match. It has been a long time since a book took me on a journey through time and space and belief like this one has taken me: so absorbing, so challenging, so provocative. If a reader's mind has not become hardened by time and habit, but has remained curious, confident, and open to new insights to inform old and familiar thoughts, there are not enough stars to rate a book presented with the style and skill of this contemporary author and this contemporary subject.

Amy-Jill Levine puts nine stories of Jesus back into their original context. She challenges many modern interpretations of those stories and includes more than 400 notes, many with multiple references (never, incidentally, of Wikipedia) to explain her views. She deplores anti-Jewish interpretations, she does not disparage Jesus, nor Christianity. Anyone with more than a cursory interest in what the Bible says should carefully read this book.

This author provides many insights if you're open to different interpretations based on contextual knowledge of the period. My favorite is the parable of "The Pearl." I had my own favorite interpretation, but I enjoyed seeing how many different folks have seen this entirely differently. This

is the point of good parables, more than one meaning can be pulled forth. If you approach the Bible as having fixed singular meanings, this book is not for you. I admit I was challenged by a very scholarly approach, dissecting the parable carefully. I often just wanted to get to the summary--tell me what it really means! But this misses the power of a good story. Sometimes to appreciate the full meaning, you need to turn it over, look at it from different angles, feel it slowly and try on these different meanings. This may not be the approach many take to the Bible, as we often want to believe there's one firm meaning there that all can see. What this author does successfully is show us that Jesus was like many thoughtful leaders--they didn't provide answers as much as they provoked us to search ourselves for how their story fits our circumstances. May you all find your "pearl."

Amy-Jill Levine is an extremely educated and well-respected scholar. From her profile on the Vanderbilt University Divinity School and Graduate Department of Religion: Amy-Jill Levine is University Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies, E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of New Testament Studies, and Professor of Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School and College of Arts and Sciences ... Professor Levine has been awarded grants from the Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the American Council of Learned Societies. ... With Marc Brettler of Brandeis University, she has edited the Jewish Annotated New Testament (Oxford), and she has written, with her Vanderbilt Colleague Douglas Knight, *The Meaning of the Bible: What The Jewish Scriptures and the Christian Old Testament Can Teach us*. (HarperOne) While marshaling a wealth of biblical knowledge, she is able to present her understandings in a way that non-theologians can understand, without being condescended to. With this particular book, she reveals the essential Jewish background necessary to understanding the parables that Jesus, a Jew, told to his disciples and the people around him. It cannot be overstressed how important an understanding of the ancient religious, cultural, and historical culture are to appreciating Jesus' parables in their full and masterful depth. Amy-Jill Levine correctly points out that Jesus used parables to challenge his listeners and move them (hopefully!) into a new way of thinking. The "twists" in the parables - the shocking turn of events - are the keys to the message of Jesus; I suspect that so many people who "didn't understand" the parables of Jesus actually didn't want to understand them, didn't want to be challenged into radical change. In just such a way, after presenting the background which gives 21st century Westerners a much fuller appreciation of the parables than the typical Christian has, Amy-Jill Levine then invites us to consider what the challenges of the message are. Not "were" back then, but *\*are\** today. What part of the message of

Jesus do we conveniently "not understand?"

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