A major achievement of the so-called “Third Quest” of the historical Jesus has been the exploration of Jesus’ Jewish identity, including his social and religious location(s) within the spectrum of first-century Jewish society and the parallels between his message and that of other Jewish leaders of his era. Recognition of Jesus’ Jewishness, however, has implications not only for historical Jesus researchers and theologians. Amy-Jill Levine’s book is a passionate, witty, and compelling attempt, not to prove Jesus’ Jewishness—this is beyond dispute—but to consider what Jesus’ Jewish identity might mean for ordinary Christians and Jews today. The book expresses her conviction that Jesus, if truly understood as a first-century Jew, can be a bridge between Jews and Christians and not the wedge that divides them.

The book’s introduction provides some autobiographical comments, enough to satisfy the curiosity of those curious about why a Jew would study Jesus and the New Testament. The first chapter, “Jesus and Judaism,” situates Jesus within the Judaism of his time and argues forcefully that Jesus should be seen as a teacher and prophet in a long line of Jewish teachers and prophets. The fact that he had a following testifies not to a uniqueness that elevated him above his context, but rather to the fact that he made sense within his own Jewish, Galilean context. “From Jewish Sect to Gentile Church” addresses the so-called parting of the ways and reminds the readers that what we now know as Christianity began as a sect within Judaism, and was propelled to separation by the large-scale adhesion of Gentiles to the new movement.

The next three chapters constitute the heart of the book. “The New Testament and Anti-Judaism” challenges us to recognize that the books of the New Testament, like all other texts, are subject to numerous interpretations, some of which, without a doubt, insist on the theological inferiority of Judaism to Christianity. This chapter sets the stage for the following two—“Stereotyping Judaism” and “With Friends Like These…”—which look closely at how Judaism has been constructed by some Christian theologians, scholars and pastors, in the pulpit and in the classroom. Of particular interest is the intersection of gender and historical Jesus studies, in which Judaism has often been used as the negative foil against which Jesus can be portrayed as a feminist and liberation theologian.

The final two chapters consider the role that the Jewish Jesus can play in bringing Jews and Christians into positive relationship. In “Distinct Canons, Distinct Practices,” Levine argues that the point of interfaith dialogue is not to reach common ground, but to understand, accept, and celebrate difference. The final chapter, “Quo Vadis?” sums up the lessons learned in the form of an alphabetary of points that can be used as the basis for interfaith conversation.

The Misunderstood Jew is highly readable and engaging. It is written with honesty, passion, and wit. Levine’s depth of knowledge and understanding are evident on every page and she succeeds in conveying knowledge without either pedantry or condescension. She knows her core audience—Christians with a genuine interest in Jesus—well,
and understands how to speak to them. Perhaps the greatest strength of the book is in the dual focus on the first century and our own, and the seamless weaving together of reflections on the life of Jesus, the insights of New Testament, and currents, from the positive to the negative, in contemporary Christian theology, interpretation and faith. While the book is not an academic textbook, it introduces some of the key components of New Testament scholarship, such as source and text criticism; it touches on key texts—the parables are treated in a particularly interesting way—and the main principles of critical interpretation. Most powerfully, Levine emphasizes the ways in which ideology and rhetoric shape understanding of the historical Jesus, and yet may at the same time inadvertently perpetuate anti-Semitic stereotypes or misrepresentations.

For this reviewer, who, like Levine, is a Jewish scholar of the New Testament engaged in Jewish-Christian conversation on a regular basis, the most thought-provoking element of this book concerns the question of whether the New Testament is or is not “anti-Jewish.” On historical-critical, literary-critical and theological grounds, Levine argues, this question is unhelpful. Instead, she insists, one should focus on the readings of the New Testament. Certainly some passages, such as 1 Thess. 2:14b-16, Matt. 27:25 and John 8:44, have frequently been read in a way that fosters distrust and even hatred of Jews, but it is neither accurate nor indeed meaningful to say that they “are” inherently anti-Jewish.

Strictly speaking, Levine is absolutely right. What does it mean to ask whether the New Testament “is” anti-Jewish? Is this a question about the original writer’s intended meaning? And if so, how would we determine that given that we do not know who the original writers were, let alone what they might have intended? To suggest that the texts themselves incite hatred of the Jews quashes dialogue between those who consider the New Testament sacred and those who have been hurt through the centuries by people who have adopted particular readings of the New Testament.

Time will tell whether Levine’s insistence on reframing the question will be satisfying to her readers; I suspect that, whether helpful or unhelpful, the question will continue to be asked by both Christians and Jews. Furthermore, the idea that anti-Judaism lies in readings of the text rather than in the text itself can be used as a way to avoid truly grappling with the language of the New Testament. Levine indirectly recognizes this possibility when she criticizes, correctly in my view, those translations of the Fourth Gospel that uses “the Judeans” rather than “the Jews” as a translation of the Greek term hoi Ioudaioi. Certainly the New Testament is susceptible to different readings, but it is also the case that certain passages seem to call forth anti-Jewish readings far too readily. While it is important that readers recognize that some readings of some New Testament texts are vehicles for anti-Judaism, it is also important that readers truly grapple with the texts themselves, including the different roles that “the Jews” as a group, individual Jewish characters, and the features of Judaism such as Torah and Temple are portrayed in the New Testament narratives and epistles, and used in their rhetoric. In this way, they may be better able to guard against the potential of anti-Judaism in their own readings.