Amy-Jill Levine

Occasionally a book will come along that is simply dazzling in its freshness and directness while forming and reforming understanding and opinion by the quality of its treatment of some well known topic. Amy-Jill Levine has produced such a volume. Numerous treatments of Jesus’ parables fill the bookshelves of students and teachers of the New Testament. This book will not produce a fundamental revolution in understanding this material, but it will provide for many a different perspective from which to ponder the meaning/significance of Jesus’ short stories.

A word about the author is due for those who may not know her. Levine is an orthodox Jew, well trained in the literature of the New Testament and Jewish sources relevant to that time. She teaches New Testament courses (and others as well) at Vanderbilt Divinity School and College of Arts and Science in Nashville, Tennessee. She has lectured widely and is known for her capacity to interweave humor with solid scholarship in her presentations. Few get bored when she addresses an audience.

In this book Levine sets out to do several primary things. First, she wants to explore the Jewish context from which Jesus spoke. To be sure, we have all Jesus’ short stories [parables] as they were early translated into Greek (from Aramaic the presumed language used by Jesus); thus, the process of interpretation has already begun. But Levine wants as best she can to strip the parables of as much interpretation as she can in order to suggest how the stories may originally have been heard by the Jews to whom they were initially addressed. She is careful to remind the readers that by their very character stories seldom (if ever) have a single meaning. Thus, she is not interested in uncovering the “correct” interpretation of these stories so much as in correcting inaccurate interpretations stemming from misinformation and/or misunderstanding of the original contexts.

While Jesus may well have offered interpretations or explanations of his stories to his disciples, he did so in private leaving the crowds and us to find our own meanings. As she muses at the very beginning of her study: “It is a very good thing that the interpretations, if indeed Jesus did provide them, have not come down to us. The Gospel writers, in their wisdom, left most of the parables as open narratives to invite us into engagement with them.” (p. 1) And, “This surplus of meaning is how poetry and storytelling work, and it is all to the good” (p. 2).
Second, Levine intends to remind her readers that parables by their very nature are always “mysterious.” The “mystery” lies in the fact that parables challenge us as hearers to look ‘into the hidden aspects of our own values, our own lives. They bring to the surface unasked questions, and they reveal the answers we have always known, but refuse to acknowledge. Our reaction to them should be one of resistance rather than acceptance.” (p. 3)

An additional aspect of the “mystery” or “strangeness” of the parables is the context out of which they come. Western Christian readers simply do not know enough about the culture and traditions of Jesus of Nazareth to sort out easily what was actually odd or unusual in one of Jesus’ stories as opposed to something that seems strange to us because we do not understand the original context. This is not an easy task for the parables come to us with layers of interpretation from the earliest of those who preserved them. The challenge is to seek to understand how the parables made “sense” in the first-century “without any knowledge of how Jesus’s followers came to understand him after the Romans crucified him. They [the parables] need to make sense not only to those who chose to follow him, but to those who found him just a wise teacher, a neighbor in Nazareth, or a fellow Jew.” (p. 19) Levine calls her readers to resist easy explanations as they grapple with these stories of Jesus.

Finally, one of Levine’s most important intentions is to bring awareness to and warning concerning the frequent mischaracterization of the stories of Jesus by Christian interpreters that purposely or inadvertently support anti-Judaism. Too often in an attempt to make the parables address contemporary issues the instruction “goes awry.” “Jesus’s Jewish context is mischaracterized, and parables intended to provoke instead become parables that teach prejudice.” (p. 20) Levine writes to provide a “corrective, or in some cases a prophylactic… not only for preventing the disease of anti-Judaism from infecting the body of his [Jesus] parables, but also for avoiding the other less toxic but equally distressing moves that turn parables into platitudes.” (p. 20) “The message of Jesus and the meaning of the parables need to be heard in their original context, and that context cannot serve as an artificial foil to make Jesus look original or countercultural in cases where he is not.” (p. 25) And, certainly, the parables should not be used to spread slander or hatred (p. 25).

Levine’s uses the same approach in each of the nine chapters which deal with some of the best known of Jesus’s short stories (Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Lost Son; The Good Samaritan; The Kingdom of Heaven is like Yeast; The Pearl of Great Price; The Mustard Seed; The Pharisee and the Tax Collector; The Laborers in the Vineyard; The Widow and the Judge; The Rich Man and Lazarus). She offers a “fairly literal translation” with the aim at making