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The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus

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REVIEW

Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*

(San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), paper, 256 pp.

Reviewed by Eugene J. Fisher, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C.

If you read only one book in Jewish-Christian relations this year, this is the one to read. Amy-Jill Levine at once provides an insightful overview of the best of contemporary New Testament scholarship and a powerful, often witty critique of many of its weaknesses when it comes to dealing with Jesus as a Jew. In a review of her book in the Christmas issue of *America*, Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, himself a redoubtable New Testament scholar whose work over the years has displayed most of the virtues Levine wishes to promote in Christian scholarship and almost none of the flaws she skewers, admits to finding the book “both challenging and humbling,” since a few of her barbs “hit home to me personally” (195/20 [Dec. 18-25]: 24). This is high and gracious praise, well deserved, from one top scholar to another.

Levine writes from the point of view of an Orthodox Jew who grew up admiring much about the Christians around her and about Jesus’ teaching, though not the claims to his divinity, or much about what Christians in general mistakenly believe to be Jewish beliefs and practices. She sets Jesus solidly within the context of his own people and times, dispelling many a pious myth in the process. Jesus lived and died a believing Jew, reflecting and at times challenging the Judaism he loved. The New Testament, Levine rightly notes, contains polemics against Judaism. These reflect more the times and needs of the New Testament authors than those of Jesus himself. For instance, Matthew’s negative portrait of the Pharisees served the purpose of downplaying the authority of the Jewish leadership in Matthew’s time who, like Levine, simply did not accept the author’s claims about Jesus. Jesus is to be understood not as “over against” his people or his faith, but rather as fully a part of them. In so doing, Levine argues, one can begin to re-capture the fullness of Jesus’ teachings and their continuing challenge to us.

As a Jewish woman, Levine effectively goes after the implicit antisemitism of many “early” Christian feminists who sought to play up Jesus advocacy of women at the expense of turning the Judaism of Jesus’ time into a misogynistic, oppressive religion when, in fact, Judaism of the period was much more supportive of what we would today call women’s rights than the societies around them. She likewise quite rightly goes after the tendency of much of liberation theology to identify Jews as oppressors and Judaism as a system that justified oppression, as opposed to Jesus who sided with the poor. She rightly traces this through statements of the World Council of Churches as well as individual (often Catholic) authors.

Levine singles out for praise the 2002 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC), *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*. The PBC document noted the great differences in canon and interpretation between Jewish and Christian understanding of our common sacred texts, and goes on to affirm that both traditions, properly understood, can be valid at the same time.

In her final chapter Levine summarizes the state of the art in Christian-Jewish relations with a wonderfully handy alphabet of suggestions. These are equally addressed to church and synagogue, since 21st century Judaism, whether Orthodox, Conservative or Reform, has quite a few misunderstandings of Christianity of its own. One of these misunderstandings, which Levine unfortunately perpetuates rather than challenges (p. 218), is that Christians don't pray to God directly but have to go through an "intermediary," i.e. Jesus. This is incorrect. I pray to God directly all the time. And, in point of fact, since Jesus for me is God, I don't believe he is some sort of being interposed between me and God.

Levine's book has some other flaws as well. She is much too dismissive of those scholars who for good reason suggest translating the Greek word *Ioudaioi*, in some cases and where appropriate, as "Judeans" rather than Jews. Similarly, she appears to dismiss the efforts of historical-critical scholarship as "merely speculative." True, there is speculation in all historical scholarship, but that does not mean that it is entirely devoid of solid foundation. Finally, while Levine is correct that there could have been no universal expulsion of Christians from synagogues precipitated by the *minim* clause in the Eighteen Benedictions which tradition ascribes to the Council of Jamnia, there is certainly something historical behind the experience of the Johannine community to explain why John speaks about Christians being expelled.

These, however, are minor flaws in an otherwise truly wonderful and highly readable work.