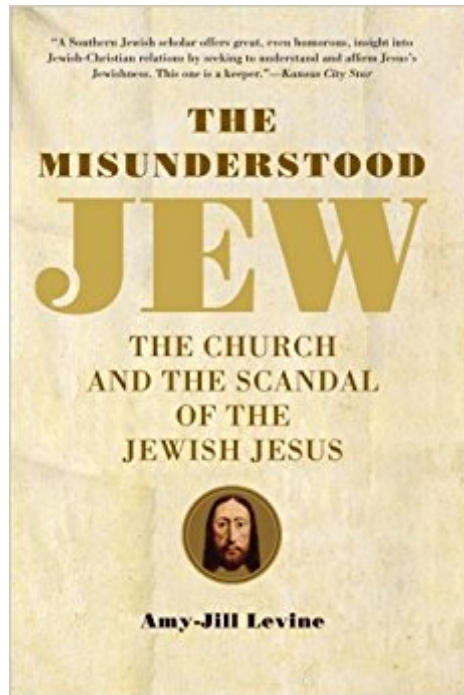


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The Misunderstood Jew: The Church And The Scandal Of The Jewish Jesus



Synopsis

In the *The Misunderstood Jew*, scholar Amy-Jill Levine helps Christians and Jews understand the "Jewishness" of Jesus so that their appreciation of him deepens and a greater interfaith dialogue can take place. Levine's humor and informed truth-telling provokes honest conversation and debate about how Christians and Jews should understand Jesus, the New Testament, and each other.

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Customer Reviews

That Amy-Jill Levine is a Jewish professor of New Testament studies was a surprise to me. Why would a Jew teach the stories told of the Christian Savior? But when I thought about it, why not? Didn't I take courses in Old Testament from a Christian professor? Which helps to make Levine's point. Our biases unconsciously affect our categories. And, as Levine argues in "*The Misunderstood Jew*," our categories often make Jews the bad guy in order to make Jesus look good. I have been a Christian religious education teacher for a number of years and I recently received a Masters degree in theology. But I found Levine's thesis at once fresh and engaging, if not completely convincing. Her basic idea is that Christians, usually in an effort to make Jesus more palatable to secular, pro-feminist and pro-multicultural worshippers, often do so by making his Jewish culture more rigidly pietistic, misogynistic and insular. Take the divorce issue. It is not uncommon for progressive Christian preachers to state that Jesus's prohibition against divorce was actually a pro-feminist attempt to counteract the misogyny of Jewish custom. These customs (we are told) allowed men to put women aside for trifling faults, such as bad cooking. But Levine shows that the portrayal of Jewish customs is based on a single utterance by rabbi engaged in testing the

hypothetical limits of just causes for divorce. Hardly was this statement the mainstream view of Jewish scholars or rabbis. But by claiming it was, Christians can water down Christ's absolute prohibition into a pro-female statement. Levine's familiarity with the New Testament is evident. In the case of divorce, she uses the gospel texts themselves to make a compelling case that the divorce question was not intended as a referendum on male domination, but a return to the Creator's intent as expressed in Genesis. Levine takes on other Christian biases about Judaism's supposed hatred of the poor, its hyper-ritualism, supposed ban on corpse-defilement and many other issues. She relentlessly cuts down the forest of false opinions and bad scholarship to bring Jesus more into focus as a Jew of his time. In some senses, I think Levine goes too far, even when she has a point. She disagrees with Christians who refer to the Old Testament as the "Hebrew Scriptures" on the grounds that the books were not all written in Hebrew, that Orthodox Christian Churches use the OT's Greek translation, and that Protestant and Catholic Churches include different books in the OT. Fair enough. But she goes into wince-inducing territory by claiming that using the term "Hebrew Scriptures" is subtly anti-Catholic. Also, one wonders what becomes of the Christian Jesus when he is blended so seamlessly into the background of his culture. Is it unfair to think that Jesus opposed some of the religious tendencies of his day? Must we assume (as Levine does) that no Jews were involved in his arrest and death? Perhaps one could see Jews as exhibiting the same tendencies - both good and bad -- of all religious people, including my own Roman Catholic coreligionists. Isn't it a human thing (not a Jewish thing) to confuse particular style of piety with love of God? In any event, Levine has done a signal service to Christians as well as Jews with this book. Anyone who gives voice to the unspoken biases that inform our religious education and worship does a good that deserves praise.

If this review reads as though it has been written by a smitten fan, it is; because this reviewer is delighted at last to find, read and enjoy with undisguised pleasure, a book written by a Jew, who places Jesus firmly within his Jewish environments. And to do it succinctly, with wit and a deep appreciation for both Judaism and Christianity. Amy-Jill Levine is a "woman of valour" in the world of Christian New Testament scholarship, and her book is a mitzvah for Jews and Christians. She is a modern Orthodox Jew, observant and informed as much about her own faith tradition as she is about the beginnings of the Christian movement. Levine brings to the table a wealth of knowledge about the late Second Temple period, the Jewish milieu surrounding the life of Yeshua/Jesus, and the complex beginnings of the Christian movement. Her razor sharp erudition is applied to the person of Jesus the observant and faithful Torah Jew using mishnaic and later rabbinic texts to give

the reader a very comprehensive picture of the world/s in which Jesus lived and moved. Reading the Gospels from a Jewish perspective and with a critical eye to "weeding" out inaccurate (usually Christian) interpolations gives this foundation period in Christian history a wonderfully refreshing and academically satisfying perspective. I found her exegesis of John 4 a typical example of Levine's scholarship; theology - both Jewish and Christian, biblical and post-biblical, early Christian and Rabbinic literary analysis and criticism, historical contexts and implications for dialogue and teaching. The second part of the book deals with common misunderstandings and misuses of the Gospels by both well-meaning and less well-meaning people, when it comes to Christians attempting to understand the one they call Saviour/Christ/Messiah. Only through honest study that challenges Christians to look critically at their sacred texts, can a more complete picture of Jesus emerge. And that is often done with some cost, as Levine details over a number of chapters. She does not shy away from wrestling with current issues of Antisemitism, the zealous, but naive, support of some Christians for Palestine at the cost of demonising Israel, and the perennial temptation of painting Jesus as the great liberator from Jewish oppression. With deft and skilled agility, Levine dismantles the myths and replaces them with fact and biblically based exegesis, commentary and plain, old fashioned common sense. At the end of this slender volume I felt I had been given a valuable tool for working with students, providing both Jews and Christians with a text that could be used in joint study of the most famous Jew to have ever lived. People of faith will not be threatened by Levine's work. On the contrary I found her book only served to enrich my understanding of Jesus placing him firmly within his own people and religious culture. It has certainly made me keen to read more. My only regret is that the book was not longer.

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