

The Gospel of Luke

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Amy Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III: The Gospel of Luke. New York & Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 296 pp. \$24.95 (paper).



No other work of the New Testament, perhaps with the exception of Paul's letters, has been the subject of more study and more disagreement as to its treatment of Jews and Judaism than the two volume Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles. Does the author hold out the possibility for ongoing engagement and inclusion of Jews, or does the author view them as cut off from their covenant and salvation? Does the Gospel present Jews in general and Jewish leaders in particular as disobedient and venal, or does the author value Jewish institutions and genuinely hope for the repentance of all persons, including Jews (a common theme for Luke)? For such difficult questions, it is hard to imagine two scholars better suited to address them than Amy Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III. The pair address these issues and many others in their commentary on the Gospel of Luke. The book combines historical critical analysis and contemporary theological and social reflections. It is valuable to scholars and also accessible to non scholars.

The authors, both New Testament scholars, come to this work from significantly different backgrounds. Levine is a Jewish feminist agnostic woman and Witherington is a Methodist evangelical man. While such divergent characteristics could in less capable hands yield an ugly disputation, here their professional and personal backgrounds and commitments enhance the depth of their analysis. The authors are not interested in creating a debate, but a conversation, where they can talk to one another and reason together. On many points, the authors share a common understanding. In those cases, the book reads as if it were written by a single author, without including contrasting views. They agree, for example, that Jesus himself did not speak in a way that could be considered anti-Jewish. On other points, however, the authors express amicable yet significant disagreement, including "whether the charge (of anti-Judaism) can be laid at Luke's feet. Ben [Witherington] says the charge is inappropriate. Amy Jill Levine finds that Luke can be read, and certainly has been read, as having anti-Jewish views" (p. 329). These disagreements are presented side by side and in each author's name, without an attempt to resolve their differences

or identify the “correct” interpretation. In so doing the authors open up rather than foreclose the possibility for a constructive discussion.

Each book chapter covers a chapter of the Gospel. After presenting the NRSV translation (with occasional suggestions for alternative translations), the authors offer an exegetical commentary on subsections of each chapter. The writing is clear and free from extensive scholarly apparatus, and the book includes just enough by the way of footnotes (and a twenty page bibliography) to provide the interested reader with guidance for further study. At times the book has an almost midrashic quality (e.g., “a third reading,” “or it could mean,” “alternatively,” “or perhaps”), offering a series of possible readings without judging which is the correct one. Alongside the narrative commentary, the volume includes supplemental sections marked “A Closer Look,” which contain extended discussions of historical and redactional topics, and “Bridging the Horizons,” where the authors probe how the ancient text can speak to present day issues. While the volume covers the entire Gospel, it devotes considerable space to the treatment of Jews and Judaism and how Christian writers, ancient and modern, have interpreted these texts.

Despite these disagreements, the authors are united in their commitment to correct many traditional Christian (mis)understandings about Jews and Judaism. Throughout the commentary, they take time to explain (to a presumably primarily Christian readership) Jewish practices and traditions (e.g., Sabbath, ritual purity, gender and legal testimony, the Temple), and in so doing refute various anti-Jewish interpretations. For instance, in the story of the woman with osteoporosis (Lk 13:10-17), the authors reject the traditional Christian view that Jewish society would have marginalized such a woman and that Jesus remedied this inequity. The authors note that such a triumphalist interpretation is itself disabling (p. 369). The story is about the defeat of Satan and not a critique of Judaism or of the synagogue (p. 372). Parables receive particularly close attention. The authors note how these multivalent words ascribed to Jesus “have been used by scholars...to set up Judaism as a negative foil over and against which Jesus and Christianity can appear worthwhile. Such readings are not only dependent on and promulgators of anti-Jewish teaching, they are not necessary in order to find profound meaning in the parables” (p. 374). Time and again the authors critique modern interpreters who speak of Jews as slaves to a wrathful God and encumbered by works-righteousness (p. 426), who denigrate Jewish culture (p. 421), who misrepresent or misunderstand the practices of ritual purity (pp. 390, 421, 491), or who ascribe negative characteristics such as blindness to Jews (p. 418). Their criticisms extend even to such respected theologians as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth for pernicious associations they made between Judas and Jews (pp. 582-85).

While the authors provide a sustained critique of anti-Jewish readings, there are some rare misses. In discussing the different ways that Jews and Christians read Scripture, the authors approvingly cite a 2002 statement by the Pontifical Biblical Commission which notes that “the Christian, in the light of Christ and in the Spirit, discovers in the text an additional meaning that was hidden there” (p. 663). This reference to a “hidden meaning” invisible to Jews evokes the image introduced by Paul in 2 Corinthians of Jews wearing a veil over their eyes when they read Scripture. The Commission, however well-intended, evokes the theme of Jewish blindness that became a staple of ancient and medieval Christian polemic and does not offer the benign interpretation it is given here.

Levine and Witherington deserve our thanks for producing a commentary that is insightful and sensitive to these issues. One can only hope that readers will heed the authors’ advice not to ignore or neutralize the problematic nature of the text, but “to determine how to address a text that is open to supersessionist interpretations” (p. 404) and to recognize that “the negative stereotypes of Jewish theology and practice need to be challenged” (p. 411). They even dip their toe into the turbulent waters of the Israeli / Palestinian conflict. When commenting on Jesus’ condemnation of Jerusalem, the authors quite calmly and sensibly call upon their Christian readers to become better informed about the modern situation and to hear these words and seek a path of “mutual

recognition of both Jewish and Palestinian claims to the land, and for peace” (pp. 383-84).

While the analysis of both authors deserves careful consideration, I (a Jewish reader) ultimately find Levine’s description of Luke’s emphasis on discontinuity and willingness to engage in anti-Jewish views more convincing. As noted in the commentary, Luke’s soteriology dispenses with observance of Jewish practices and traditions and values loyalty to Jesus above all (p. 448). It is fair to say that Luke views the correct posture of worship to be prostrating oneself at Jesus’ feet rather than sacrificing at the Temple (p. 473). Even if we acknowledge that the Gospel speaks in a voice of prophetic critique and that Jesus offers words of forgiveness, it is hard to see any validation for or ongoing engagement with disbelieving Jews. God’s community and future hope for salvation rests with members of “the Way” (i.e., nascent Christianity). This does not mean that Jews cannot participate, but not as Jews.

The volume does not settle the question of whether the Gospel is or is not anti-Jewish. That is not its intention, and such a task may not even be possible. Perhaps a more fruitful approach to the Gospel would be to question the appropriate or legitimate limits of interpretation. The authors touch upon this issue by noting “the claim that Luke is anti-Jewish gets no traction from many readers who are invested in the sanctity of the sacred text” (p. 329). The statement comes off as an axiom, without explaining why it is true or whether it should be true. Is it not possible to imagine that a religiously committed Christian reader could acknowledge certain passages as problematic or even wrong and still hold it to be sacred and authoritative? Many contemporary Jews find all manner of objectionable statements in the Torah (e.g., the approval of slavery; claims that sexual relations between two men is an abomination) but continue to value the text for personal and spiritual guidance. It would have been interesting to have the authors explore this issue more fully.

Reading the back and forth between Levine and Witherington reminded me of a story told about Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Przysucha who carried two slips of paper, one in each pocket. On one he wrote, “for my sake the world was created”; on the other he wrote, “I am but dust and ashes.” He would take out each slip of paper as necessary, as a reminder to himself of his (and humanity’s) complex nature. Perhaps we might think of the commentary as a way for Christian readers to remind themselves of the spiritual nourishment available from the Gospel but also of the text’s darker side. Like Rabbi Simcha’s slips of paper, the commentary offers both spiritual affirmation and criticism. These features are not in competition with or do negate each another, but help the reader to explore the complexity of the text and the responsibility that one has as a reader

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