

Two interviews on the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*

**One:**

<http://www.jewsforjesus.org/publications/havurah/v15-n02/six-questions-for-amy-jill-levine>, accessed 7 July 14.

**Amy-Jill Levine and Havurah interview, Fall 2012**

**Two:**

<http://www.messianicjudaism.me/musings/2011/11/15/the-jewish-annotated-new-testament/>, accessed 7 July 14.

**The Jewish Annotated New Testament Posted on November 15, 2011 by Derek Leman**

“JANT is the NRSV text of the New Testament with study notes in the bottom margin, sidebar essays, and longer essays in a section at the back of the book. It is dense with maps, charts, lists and other helps as well. Usually any given scholar writes comments on no more than one of the New Testament’s twenty-seven books and usually not more than one essay.”

**Amy-Jill Levine’s Essay, Bearing False Witness: Common Errors Made About Early Judaism**

I was pre-destined to love this essay. It was a surprise to find I disagreed with Levine a few times. It was also a surprise to find that she had something to teach me in this essay (and I thought I was so sensitive to Jewish concerns in reading the New Testament!).

She begins by describing the problem of Christian clergy unaware of the harm anti-Jewish readings of the New Testament can cause. She gives credit to the guidelines and policies of some denominations which address these issues but rightly notes that many clergy even in these denominations are unaware of them. Jewish-Christian relations classes attract too few clergy amid the thousand topics important to leading a flock. Clergy fail to realize that Jewish-Christian relations is central to the gospel and not a peripheral issue (that is a point I am making, but which Levine did not).

Levine then proceeds to list ten misconceptions. I find that I disagree or feel she has overstated the case on a few of them (she claims there is no contrast between a violent revolution and the delayed kingdom and suffering that Jesus taught and she also claims the Temple state was not oppressive and corrupt). But she is pure gold on many of her correctives and I will share this exhilarating example:

Jesus himself was halakhically obedient: he wears fringes (tzitzit—see Num 15.38-39; Deut 22:12) to remind him of the Torah (Mt 9.20; Lk 8.44; Mt 14:36; Mk 6:56); he honors the Sabbath and keeps it holy; he argues with fellow Jews about appropriate observance (one does not debate

something in which one has no investment). It is from Torah that he takes the “Great Commandment” (Mt 22.36-40): love of God (Deut 6.6) and love of neighbor (Lev 18.19).

She suggests at the end of her essay that JANT itself would be a good tool for Christian clergy to consult prior to teaching in order to avoid a blunder and in order to understand the numerous agreements and connections between Judaism and Christianity.

### **Rebecca Lesses’s Essay, Divine Beings**

This is practically the counter-example to Levine’s article, since Christianity (and Messianic Judaism) is charged many times by Jewish interpreters with either blasphemy or idolatry in declaring Jesus to be divine. Lesses doesn’t address this charge directly, but her essay is intended to make a simple point: the Christian belief that Jesus has a status equal to God is not unique or inherently counter to Jewish thought (but she is not addressing the issue of incarnation, which concerns divinity existing as a human being, which is reserved for a different essay on the Logos by Daniel Boyarin).

Lesses gives us the gamut of divine and semi-divine beings in the Hebrew Bible, Jewish apocalyptic and mystical literature, and rabbinic literature. From the many appearances of God to people, from the Kavod (glory) to Wisdom in Proverbs to the bene Elohim and the angel of the Lord and Metatron and Enoch and the Son of Man and so on, Jewish texts are full of beings related to divinity and sometimes indistinguishable from divinity. She explains Jesus’ claims to a high identity as fitting into the world of Jewish thought, though of course being unique and unsettling as a self-claim.

### **Daniel Boyarin’s Essay; Logos, A Jewish Word: John’s Prologue as Midrash**

This is a remarkable essay. By the end, Boyarin says that John 1.1-5 is “not a hymn, but a midrash, that is, it is not a poem but a homily on Genesis 1.1-5” and also “until vs. 14, the Johannine prologue is a piece of perfectly unexceptional non-Christian Jewish thought.”

Let me unpack some of that for readers less familiar with some of these ideas. Boyarin discusses and gives numerous examples in early Jewish writing, especially Philo and the Targums (Aramaic paraphrases of the Pentateuch and other scriptures), of talk about a Logos or Memra or Word of God or Wisdom of God, which is in some cases described almost as a separate being and in others seems to be unified with God. If you are not familiar with this phenomenon of Second Temple Judaism and very early Palestinian rabbinic Judaism, this assertion may sound startling, but it is well-known.

But from this beginning Boyarin develops his case further. John 1.1-5 exhibits a key characteristic of rabbinic midrash: it explains a Pentateuchal text by means of one of the prophets or writings. Thus, John 1.1-5 uses Proverbs 8.22-31 to explain how everything that was made was made by the Word (Memra, Logos) as related in Genesis 1.1-5. And so, God made all things with a Word (“let there be”), as Genesis tells us, and that Word (which is Wisdom) was with God (Prov 8.30; Wisdom of Solomon 9.9). And it was light and life and darkness was dispelled.

Perhaps the highlight of Boyarin's essay is his discussion (all too brief!) about the "Four Nights" homily found in the Palestinian Targum. It contains remarkable parallels to John 1, including a line that says, "and through his Memra there was light and illumination" and also including in the fourth night of the homily a description of the advent of Messiah!

His conclusion is that the only thing that might be foreign to early synagogue teaching in John's Christology in chapter 1 is the idea of the Word being made flesh (incarnation), although he muses (without explaining) that even that might not be unique. And the real uniqueness of the Christian claim, then, is that the Word incarnated particularly in Jesus.

### **Mark Nanos's Essay, Paul and Judaism**

This is easily my favorite of the essays I've read so far. Nanos's books on Galatians and Romans deserve a wider audience. (Note to those in our circles of Messianic Judaism and philo-Semitic Christianity: two popular level books on Paul exist already that incorporate Nanos's scholarship: my Paul Didn't Eat Pork and Daniel Lancaster's The Holy Epistle to the Galatians).

The simple premise of the essay is that Paul himself never departed from Judaism. The change in outlook that Paul experienced was not about leaving Judaism, but about the Messianic Era dawning so that gentiles were freely included in Abraham's people (which is not the same as gentiles becoming Jews):

Paul did not leave Judaism, neither the Jewish way of life nor Jewish communities. He rejected, however, his former opposition to the assertion of the nascent Christ-movement that non-Israelites became equal members of the family of Abraham without becoming members of the family of Israel. He now believed that what Judaism awaited, the day when the nations would turn from idols to worship Israel's God, had begun in the end-of-ages resurrection of Jesus. For Paul, the resurrection was a sign that the messianic age had been inaugurated.

In the course of his essay, Nanos explains Paul's stance toward non-Christ believing Israel, his belief in the continued privilege of Israel, his continued practice of halakhic Judaism, and the essential insight that has been missed by the Old Perspective on Paul, that the Pauline letters are highly situational and address the relation of non-Israelites to Torah. The freedom-from-Torah statements are the policy of the mission to gentiles (and these do not mean freedom from all of Torah, of course, but the identity markers in Torah such as Sabbath).

Nanos ably demolishes the notion, a misconception that is popular from 1 Corinthians 9, that Paul "compromised Torah-observance" to identify with non-Jews and mimicked the behavior of observant Jews to win them. Among other arguments, Nanos uses this point: "That would be deceptive, mimicking another's propositional values if not actually sharing them, tricking someone . . ."

I believe Nanos gets the food and table fellowship issue right (whereas Amy-Jill Levine, in my opinion, got it wrong in her essay). He explains Paul's conflict with Peter brilliantly.

This one essay would do much to shake the common image of Paul, an image held in Jewish and Christian circles. And whereas Nanos's longer books make for difficult reading, this essay is very readable and does not require a person to have an extensive education in history, theology, and sociology to understand its explanations. In a very few words, Nanos sums up the very Jewish Paul who reaches out from the Jewish community to invite non-Jews into the family of Abraham through the Seed of Abraham.

### **Evaluation: Matthew Commentary by Aaron M. Gale**

Gale's introduction to Matthew does well at hitting the major points: Matthew's use of Mark, Matthew's common material with Luke, the Papias tradition of a Hebrew gospel by Matthew, the lack of any attribution to Matthew in the gospel itself, the five discourses which appear to be patterned on the five books of Torah, the New Moses theme, and the affinity for Judaism in Matthew alongside evidence of conflict.

The major value of Gale's commentary is the huge bank of references to 2nd Temple Jewish literature and to rabbinic literature. The ideas and images used in Matthew are a part of the stream of Jewish thought and Gale helpfully gives readers numerous insights into the connections.

A second advantage to the reader in having Gale's commentary at hand is his frequent simple explanation of 2nd Temple Jewish customs and Galilean and Judean ways of life. So "synagogues" is defined as "Jewish assemblies, not necessarily buildings." Salt and light follow "ancient Mesopotamian notions, symbolizing purity and wisdom." We learn of lust that "Jewish sources show a deep disdain for this offense" (though many readers mistakenly believe lust was easily excusable to Jesus' contemporaries). Under the Lord's Prayer we learn about the Aramaic kaddish prayer which "became popular in Talmudic times." Hundreds of times Gale puts elements of Matthew in the context of Jewish and other sources.

My first disappointment with Gale's commentary was his sidebar on the Virgin Birth and the commentary on Matthew 1:22-23. He misses the opportunity to explain Matthew's midrashic use of Isaiah 7:14. In Isaiah a prophet announces the birth of a special child to a young woman whose entrance into the world signals safety for Judah in a time of war. Matthew draws the parallel with the announcement by an angel of the birth of a special child to a young woman who is also a virgin and the birth of the child spells safety and return from exile for Israel. On a positive note, he compares Matthew's birth narrative with the Talmud in Sotah 12a where Moses is said to have been delivered without any pain to his mother (and also that Moses was born already circumcised!).

There are other disappointments. In his comments on 5.17-20, Gale seems either unaware or disagrees with Nanos's article on Paul and Judaism. He assumes, as much scholarship has assumed, that Matthew's pro-Judaism stance is in tension with Paul. Gale misses, in my

estimation, many references that would have been helpful, such as Isaiah 6:13 with reference to the Sower's seed in Matthew 13.

Though not perfect, Gale's commentary is a quick and handy resource with a plethora of Jewish references to illuminate the gospel of Matthew. As yet, no study Bible available comes even close to making these insights available to modern readers.

### **Evaluation: Luke Commentary by Amy-Jill Levine**

Levine's introduction to Luke focuses on how the gospel depicts Judaism and Jewish people, a fitting emphasis given the purpose of JANT. Levine's interest in religious texts is largely about humanitarian issues: the treatment of women, the poor, the political outcast. Her focus in the introduction is sharply and appropriately on the tension between positive treatment of the Judaism of Jesus and the apostles and ultimate rejection of non-Christ believing Jews in Luke-Acts.

One of Levine's major points, and one which was a good corrective for me to read, is that the so-called "marginal" people of tradition were not so marginal. Women had extensive rights in first century Israel and the gospel of Luke reflects this properly. Tax collectors were not victims but victimizers. Gentiles were not marginal, but dominant and also well-accepted in Jewish society.

She also makes the point that Luke is positive on the Judaism of those who are faithful, as Luke sees it, to God's mission. So Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, and Joseph and Mary represent the positive side of Judaism. But the synagogue that rejects Jesus is a "place of violence" (referring to Luke 4:28-29). And Acts ultimately ends with the judgment that "the Jews will never understand" (referring to Acts 28:26). Toward the Judaism of the Christ-rejecters, Luke is not so positive.

Like Gale's commentary, Levine's is filled with references to fill out the Jewish context of Luke. Occasionally there are gems of insight, correcting mistaken notions, such as the comment on 2:8, "contrary to some Christian teaching, Jews at the time did not consider shepherds as outcast or unclean, as numerous positive images of shepherds in Israel's scriptures, the association of Moses and David with shepherding, and the connection of sheep with the sacrificial system indicate."

Her interpretation of the rejection in the synagogue at Nazareth is a new one to me (and rather compelling). What angered the people of Nazareth was not Yeshua's reference to gentiles receiving miracles from a prophet, but rather his refusal to work miracles there as he did at Capernaum and his saying that the faith of those in Nazareth was unworthy of messianic signs. Likewise her careful interpretation of the Good Samaritan is a helpful corrective (she demonstrates that ritual purity was not the reason the priest and Levite avoided the wounded Jew on the side of the road).

Overall Levine's comments focus on the perception Luke's gospel gives of Jews. She gives Luke a mixed review. He is positive on Judaism if it is mixed with faith in Jesus, so that her very last comment is, "Jesus' followers continued as faithful Jews." Yet he is negative on non-Christ-believing Jews, depicting them as violent and even following gentile stereotypes of upper income Jews as lovers of money (Lk 16.14). She is at pains to deny marginality or outcast status for tax collectors, widows, shepherds, women, and similar groups in Luke. She repeatedly emphasizes that Jewish messianism lacks many references to a suffering figure and at the same time she fails to inform readers that this lack may be due to Christian anti-Semitism hardening rabbinic interpreters to this theme. Her comments are loaded with helpful references to Jewish texts and ideas that make Luke's gospel comprehensible. Her commentary is a fine addition to the current literature on Luke and one could only hope she would write a full-length commentary to fill our her views.

### **SUMMARY**

JANT is a handy resource and its value is unique. Nowhere can you get such concentrated help in finding Jewish textual parallels, illuminating ancient customs relevant to the stories of Jesus, and helpful essays on the Jewish world behind the New Testament. JANT excels not only in illuminating Jewish backgrounds, but also Greco-Roman.

### **This is KEY:**

**“What you will not find in JANT is commentary on the position of faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord. You will not find appreciation and application of messianic discipleship. That is simply not the purpose of JANT and its authors do not adhere to the messiahship of Jesus.”**