

Book Review: The Bible with and without Jesus
by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler
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What about When Traditions Look at the Same Sacred Text Differently?

In an attempt to sharpen my own biblical hermeneutics as well as interreligious engagement, I embarked upon a journey of engaging with texts from various hermeneutical perspectives. One such text was *The Bible With and Without Jesus* by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler.

I have often found myself more nervous when talking to Jewish people than Muslims, because I am not as certain where our traditions overlap or conflict and am often concerned that I might read Christianity and Christian traditions into Judaism. This book did not answer all my questions or concerns, few books do, but it gave me a starting place for considering some of the differences in Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation.

The authors start their conversation by introducing the different Bibles of different communities whether Jewish or Christian and the different interpretive questions that they raise (3). The authors are clear that they are not advocating for one correct way of reading but merely hope that their book will help all readers see why the Bible is such a contested work (3). In many ways, their goal is like my general hermeneutical approach or posture. We both desire to put different readings of Scripture into conversation with each other to push readers of the text deeper in their understandings and interpretive journeys to consider new ideas, questions, other methodologies, and perhaps question and refine their own approach to hermeneutics.

For this task, the authors focus on texts from ancient Israel that are central in the New Testament (5). The authors assert that to speak of the Tanakh, or Jewish Bible, at the time of Jesus would be anachronistic, as all Jews had yet to subscribe to a three-part Bible at that time; therefore, the authors use the admittedly amorphous term, “scriptures of Israel” (11). This assertion should alter our approach to engaging other religions. As we may presume their familiarity with certain doctrines, texts, or ideas, that are unfair from historical evidence.

Our Jewish authors view the biblical story as a marvelous tapestry created by many weavers of tales over the centuries, each with a different understanding of history, of the relationship of God to the covenant community, and of how people in that community should believe and act (14-5). Brettler and Levine note how readers always bring their own experiences to the act of interpretation and always find new meaning in ancient texts (20). Lest one assume that Levine and Brettler let every interpretation fly, I’ve come to appreciate how Brettler and Levine challenge and wrestle with the problems and strengths around different historical interpretations of texts throughout the book. They also argue that different modes of biblical interpretation are not mutually exclusive but mutually enhancing and that the Bible itself is less important in Judaism than the Bible interpreted (30).

Further, they suggest that Jewish and Christian readings of Scripture can complement each other, especially when one community adopts a reading that the other might find impossible

(38-9). Brettler and Levine note how proof texting makes sense to those who hold a particular belief, since proof texting is always retrospective. As a result, we should respect how communities with different starting points find different messages in the same texts (53). The authors note the prevalence of polemics in Jewish and Christian interpretation, which give stereotypes, exaggerations, and often insult, but also show what needs to be overcome to move past distrust and hatred (59).

They also encourage Christians and Jews to read together from their strong and sufficiently different traditions with a generosity of spirit that communicates these different interpretive understandings and emphases to highlight different aspects and messages in the text that share their different cultural memories (66). They encourage Jewish and Christian discussion to be open enough to state, "I may not agree with you, but I understand how you came to your conclusion" (98).

This is an excellent starting point, because it urges further reflection, sharing, deeper relationship, and understanding, while avoiding attempts to coerce one to change their understanding of sacred beliefs. The multiple voices that Brettler and Levine see in the text prompt them to ask questions that may lead them to new choices or different religious beliefs (134). In some ways, this approach to Scripture is dangerous, but it also demonstrates a deep faithfulness to the text and the ongoing engagement of it in one's life (134). For example, the authors spend a lot of time showing how Jews and Christians both have plausible but contrasting readings of Genesis 14 and Psalm 110 and use this instance to insist that the scriptures of Israel require interpretation instead of attempting to replace one tradition with the other (177).

Brettler and Levine also encourage us to put Jesus into his Jewish tradition, when we approach matters of the law, because we will see that justice and mercy remain in both traditions and that the biblical materials are not always as clear as we may think in terms of literalism and hyperbole (217). They also note the powerful imagery around blood in both biblical testaments and conflicting views in Jewish and Christian understandings of atonement (253).

Brettler and Levine also share how different interpretations of Isaiah 7:14 by different religious groups over time should warn us against any narrow or restricted meaning and how all religions have and can change over time (283). They suggest that we read passages like the suffering servant together to endorse new readings that concern anyone who unjustly suffers to produce a kind of 'expiation' for a 'public' and 'historical' return to righteousness and justice (312). In this way, Jews can come to understand how Christians associate this with Christ's death, while Christians can also consider applying it to various figures throughout the history of Judaism and even into the present day.

Brettler and Levine also argue that, despite diverse Christian and Jewish interpretations of the book of Jonah, the book should unite those who hold it sacred and serve as a literary sign of interfaith cooperation instead of intolerance, fundamentalism, and fanaticism (343). They also discuss the relevance of Psalm 22 for Good Friday in Christian Churches and Purim in synagogues, and how that psalm of lament appropriately expresses the raw honest feeling of abandonment by God (379).

Regarding the Son of Man, they argue that Daniel's vision is eschatological so whether we read Daniel's imagery as referring to an angel, the people of Israel, the ancient worthy Enoch, or Jesus of Nazareth, the prophecy has yet to be fulfilled (412).

Brettler and Levine argue that we are finally at the point where Jews and Christians can read their shared texts differently as well as each other's unique texts and interpret the Bible based on the possibility of mutual respect if not in complete agreement, while correcting older readings based in polemics (422). Overall, they conclude that we are stronger when we wrestle, and when we read together, and that when we agree to disagree with one reading or another, we can continue to ask for new interpretations (426). Perhaps, one key conclusion from their study of Jewish and Christian interpretive history is that the better we can see through the eyes of our neighbors, the better able we are to be good neighbors (x).

I found this book incredibly helpful for learning more about Jewish hermeneutics of the Bible and generally helpful for engaging with those of other religious traditions and their sacred texts. By no means, do I expect to agree with all their interpretations and conclusions, but I can at the very least learn from them and respect them and their traditions as well as faithfully question my own understandings of texts. This helps me learn not only how to better think and speak about the text but also how to live out the truth of these texts in my interactions with my neighbors whether geographically proximate or around the globe.