In *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, Amy-Jill Levine explores what Jesus’s parables might sound like through an imagined set of first-century Jewish ears and how they might be translated so that they can be heard as still speaking today.

A brief introductory chapter delineates the purpose and presuppositions of the book, followed by nine chapters of discussion of a dozen or so parables: “Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Lost Son”; “The Good Samaritan”; “The Kingdom of Heaven Is Like Yeast”; “The Pearl of Great Price”; “The Mustard Seed”; “The Pharisee and the Tax Collector”; “The Laborers in the Vineyard”; “The Widow and the Judge”; and “The Rich Man and Lazarus.” Each chapter follows the same format: it commences with Levine’s own fairly literal translation aimed at making the parable seem unfamiliar to the reader, followed by an attempt to locate the parable in its historical and literary context, before the chapter concludes with a discussion of what the parable might have said to its first listeners and how it applies today.

A thoroughgoing objective for Levine is to steer clear of turning the parables into platitudes and easy moral lessons along the lines of “be generous, God loves you, the kingdom of God is important, pray a lot” (279), as this would entail turning the parabolic genre—designed to shock and challenge—into something it was not. Instead she works
diligently to bring out the message that she envisages people who did not (yet) believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior would have perceived. For the most part, this message concerned life here and now and spoke of realities either identical with, or at least close to, those explicitly mentioned in the respective parables. Levine notes: “Sometimes a shepherd is just a shepherd, and not a cipher for God; a king may be just a king, a landowner someone in need of workers; and a lost sheep is not immediately seen as a sinner, repentant or defiant” (16–17).

The book as a whole is rounded off with a brief recapitulation of what has been previously said, while Leveine at the same time underlines the main contentions of the book. As Levine comments in her final words, Jesus’s parables “are pearls of Jewish wisdom. If we hear them in their original context, and if we avoid the anti-Jewish interpretation that frequently deforms them, they gleam with a shine that cannot be hidden” (282).

There is much to commend about Short Stories by Jesus. From Levine’s keyboard flows a characteristically engaging and entertaining prose; who can help but smile at such phrases such as “Men in tights and Tzitzit,” teasing the common identification of the robbers on the road to Jericho as “Jewish Robin Hoods” (89)—which makes up for an easy and enjoyable read.

The benefits of the book do, however, not pertain merely to its form. Its main strength lies rather is Levine’s near unsurpassed ability to detect and deconstruct anti-Jewish sentiments hiding in and/or behind various interpretations. Throughout the book she exposes simplistic, ahistorical, anachronistic, and stereotypical readings in an admirable way.

Moreover, Levine presents many interesting and reasonable interpretations of the parables. As already noted, instead of allegorizing, moralizing, and christologizing (see 3), thereby mapping God, salvation, Jews/Christians, and the like onto the details of these stories, Levine suggests that they speak about the things they actually talk about. For example, the parable about the laborers in the vineyard says more about economics than about eschatology, as it describes a CEO who cares about providing work for the unemployed and workers who care more about getting more than their contract stipulated instead of rejoicing with their colleagues who found work and a living wage (197–219). Levine’s exegetical judgments are overall sound and well-argued, and, at any rate, she does not contend that hers is the only way to read these parables. Stories, Levine asserts, have by their nature a surplus of meaning, and she is not concerned with uncovering the correct interpretation as much as she is with correcting simplistic, stereotypical interpretations that originate from a lack of understanding of the original context.
The concluding discussions of how the parables might apply today also makes the book a helpful resource for those who want to bridge the divide between here and now/there and then without propagating anti-Jewish sentiments that have attached themselves to much of interpretative history.

There are, nevertheless, some problematic aspects with Levine’s treatment. Although the intention to hear the parables as a first-century Jewish audience would have is laudable, the methodological approach employed is dubious. Part of the strategy is to circumvent the interpretations—stretching from implicit elucidation by placement, through introductory comments, to explicit explanations—imposed on the parables by the gospel writers. The problem here is that Levine all too swiftly accepts that the parables go back to Jesus and can be lifted out of the literary contexts provided by the evangelists to be heard in their original form. Although Leveine correctly asserts that we do not know with certainty if Jesus told the parables recorded in the gospels (10)—although she appears to think he did (see 11)—and that all that we are in possession of are “the memories preserved and filtered through the concerns and confessions of those who proclaimed him Lord or Savior” (11), she nevertheless proceeds as if this was not the case. But what if—as, for example, J. P. Meier has recently argued—certain parables were composed not by Jesus but by the evangelists? Then their framing and/or explanation must be relevant to interpretation and not something to be done away with in order to hear what was said. Moreover, even if the evangelists merely passed on material that ultimately originated with Jesus, should they not be viewed as first-century Jews, or at least as being in close proximity to first-century Judaism(s), thereby providing first-hand evidence of how the original audience would have understood the parables?

One of Levine’s due criticisms of certain previous interpreters has to do with how the views expressed in one particular Jewish text or by one specific Jewish individual/group have been extrapolated to represent the views of all Jews during the first century. Even exaggerated parabolic caricatures, such as the rich man in the parable about Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31 [247–73]), have been misunderstood and allegorized to signify actual Jews/Judaism. While this is highly unfortunate, does it not follow from the implicit observation that there were many different forms of Judaism both in existence—and in disagreement with one another—during the first century that criticism between various Jewish groups and individuals is to be expected? If Jesus was indeed, as Levine suggests, a controversial rabbi walking around telling short provocative stories, then he likely took issue with at least certain aspects of (some of) the Judaisms of his time. This purported criticism of specific aspects of first-century Judaisms, however, does not imply wholesale rejection of Judaism in general nor entail anti-Semitism on behalf of Jesus. Whereas it is unlikely that this is what Levine wants to say, at times it nevertheless appears that she has decided a priori that a parable—at least in its alleged original form—cannot evince any
form of criticism against contemporary Judaism and thus needs to be reinterpreted in such a way that this is avoided: “If the interpretation of a story told by a Jew to other Jews is based on or yield a negative stereotype of Judaism then the interpretation has gotten more lost than the sheep, coin, or sons, and it cannot and should not be recovered” (279).

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, Amy-Jill Levine’s *Short Stories by Jesus* is an intriguing, informative, and instructive treatment of Jesus’s (and/or the evangelists’) parables, deserving reading by scholars, clergy, and laity interested in the interpretation of the parables.