

Amy-Jill Levine. *Witness at the Cross: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Friday*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2021. 153 Pages. \$17.

The old passion spiritual, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord,” invites us to stand as a witness at the foot of the cross. Levine goes further by inviting the reader to look at the cross through the particular eyes of those present with Christ during the event, suggesting that each person represents a different tone in a larger theological symphony. She makes this apparent by starting with the characters rather than the writers who tell their stories. In this way, Levine presents a comparative study that not only dives into the individuals and groups themselves, but approaches the theological messages of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John from a nontraditional angle.

Each chapter is divided by individual witnesses or groups of witnesses, including Simon of Cyrene, the unnamed bystanders and scoffers, the other victims hanging alongside Jesus, the beloved disciple, the women, and Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. The exegetical work around these characters extends beyond their engagement with the cross as Levine surveys how their immediate presence connects with a larger picture, possibly through previous gospel appearances, ties to prophecy, and sociohistorical realities. For example, when looking at the soldiers, Levine considers the implications of living in a Roman state. Similarly, when looking at the women, she connects the name “daughters of Jerusalem” to Hebrew texts and explores communal responsibility for lament and repentance. Each chapter varies in its type of exploration, based on the characters themselves, but consistently returns to how their unique stories contribute to the particular theological message of the gospel which includes them. Levine’s history of excellent and insightful scholarship continues with this book. From the first page on readers benefit from her ability to weave microscopic word study with meta themes, her unabashed embrace of difficult questions, and her rejection of traditional textual interpretations that result in anti-Judaism conclusions—especially important in connection to the Passion narratives. She does all of this with rightly sprinkled humor throughout the book.

The book’s subtitle, “A Beginner’s Guide to Holy Friday” may indicate the accessibility of this text, but as someone who has heard and studied these passages at length, it still offered something new, fresh, and introspective. This book is not the type of exegetical guide which parses Greek words or methodically follows a pattern of examination—that is clearly not Levine’s intent. She follows the characters and tells their story in a way that invites readers of all levels into an enjoyable exegetical process. This reflects the book’s connection to its partner materials in a leader’s guide and video teaching sessions ranging from 10-15 minutes (available as a DVD or through an online membership streaming service). Together, these resources comprise an excellent education package for ministry settings. Still, do not let the style or context mislead about this book’s potential for individual study or use in an introductory level classroom. Her expertise, experience and scholarship shine through these pages as Levine weaves ideas together around these characters, producing deep moments of perception through a single question, an idea, or modern-day illustration.

As I read these pages, I kept saying to myself, “That’ll preach!” Levine outlines the roles of these characters in such a way than anyone preparing a sermon would have a wealth of launching points for diving into their character, and as Holy Friday seems to arrive each year without fail, these different hooks into familiar texts and characters are invaluable.

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