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Amy-Jill Levine, center, and Marc Zvi Brettler present Pope Francis with "The Jewish Annotated

Amy-Jill Levine, center, and Marc Zvi Brettler present Pope Francis with "The Jewish Annotated New Testament" during his weekly general audience March 27, 2019.

Levine is the first Jewish president of the Catholic Biblical Association of America. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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When Amy-Jill Levine was a child in Massachusetts, a schoolmate in her predominantly Catholic hometown told her she was guilty of killing Christ because she was Jewish.

Her mother reassured her that wasn't the case — and instead of being embittered by the encounter, the young Levine began attending a Catholic catechism class to learn more about her Christian neighbors and their beliefs.

That blossomed into a decades-long academic career in an unusual role — a Jewish scholar of Christian Scriptures. Levine has worked to improve how Christians and her fellow Jews understand each other. She's spoken at many churches and taught students about the ancient Jewish context of Jesus' life and teachings. She's written numerous books, some in tandem with Christian scholars; she and a co-author even presented one book personally to Pope Francis.

But after the [Catholic Biblical Association of America announced](#) earlier this month that Levine was elected its first-ever Jewish president, an antisemitic backlash began.

Denunciations appeared in the posts and replies on social media accounts with tens of thousands of followers. Critics called her "anti-Christian," claimed she's trying to hijack Catholicism, denounced Jews for not accepting Jesus, and tacked on anti-Zionist comments.

While some questioned why the association would appoint anyone who wasn't a Catholic, much of the criticism was infused with anti-Jewish statements. They come at a time of rising antisemitism in the country.

Her supporters and longtime Christian collaborators are appalled by the backlash.

"Unfortunately, some neither understand the role of the president nor the nature of a professional society," said a joint [statement](#) by the association's executive board chair, Gregory Sterling, and executive director, Archie Wright. "She was not elected because she is Jewish, but because she is an exceptional scholar and has played a very important role in Catholic-Jewish dialogue."

The association is made up of Catholic and non-Catholic scholars with the stated purpose of improving the study of the Bible within the context of faith. Levine has been active in the association for decades, though she said when someone from its nominating committee asked her to consider being president, she wasn't sure at first if it was serious. It was — with supporters citing her long history of working with Christian scholars.

The criticisms underscore the need to address antisemitism, the association statement said: "We need to live and practice the values of our faith, values that are not evident in the criticisms." Numerous past presidents of the association signed a similar statement.

The chairman of the committee overseeing interreligious relations for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote to Levine to congratulate her.

"Your election is a fitting celebration of the genuinely interfaith character of biblical scholarship and of the many years of faithful Jewish-Catholic collaboration in the study of Scripture," [said Bishop Joseph Bambera](#) of Scranton, Pennsylvania, adding that it reflects the Vatican's call for Catholics to pursue "deeper understanding and

mutual respect with the Jewish people."

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Levine, an adherent of Orthodox Judaism, said that although she doesn't accept the Christian belief that Jesus is divine, she admires him as an early rabbinic teacher and believes Christians and Jews can learn much from each other.

"Hate and demonizing, name calling and slandering, are not good forms of evangelism," Levine [said](#) on her Facebook page. "And now, ironically again, I have to explain that these nasty posts are not indicative of the best of the Church."

She noted that she often defends the Catholic Church from bigoted statements against it.

"My historical work shows that we do not need to make Judaism look bad in order to make Jesus look good," she said.

She noted, for example, that there are common stereotypes that Jesus was introducing grace and acceptance against a rigid Jewish notion of law and purity. In fact, Levine told The Associated Press, the Bible shows that Jesus affirms Jewish law and "restores people to states of purity."

Levine said the Gospel stories would have resonated strongly with ancient Jewish readers. For example, the stories of Jesus' miracles echo those of ancient Israelite prophets. His escape from a murderous tyrant as an infant is similar to that of Moses. When Jesus said the greatest commandments are to love God and neighbor, he was quoting from the Torah rather than inventing something new, she said.

People embrace antisemitic views for various reasons, Levine said: "What they heard from their parents or friends, what they read on the internet, the conflating of certain Israeli policies with the views of all Jews, and what they hear in churches, whether problematic readings from the New Testament or sermons that introduce or reinforce, often because of ignorance and tone-deafness, antisemitic messages."

While Catholicism has had a historic legacy of antisemitism, the Vatican has repeatedly denounced it in the post-Holocaust decades. The reformist Second Vatican Council of the 1960s affirmed the shared "patrimony" of Christians and Jews.

It said the death of Jesus cannot be blamed on "all the Jews, without distinction."

St. John Paul II, the longtime pope, prioritized reconciliation with Jews, saying antisemitism "has no justification and is absolutely reprehensible."

Levine is a professor emerita in New Testament and Jewish studies at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. She now teaches part-time at the Hartford International University for Religion and Peace in Connecticut.

She said her role as Catholic Biblical Association president will include promoting excellence in biblical studies and supporting scholars and their research and publications.

She wants to continue speaking in parishes and to work with Catholic bishops "to help ensure that textbooks used in parochial schools, catechesis, and preaching do not promote antisemitic messages, to promote better Jewish-Catholic relations, and to promote the work of the CBA."

Professor Ben Witherington III, a New Testament expert at Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky, co-wrote a commentary on the Gospel of Luke with Levine, believed to be the only Gospel commentary jointly written by evangelical and Jewish authors.

"She is profoundly loved by all kinds of Protestant and Catholic folks," he said.

He said Levine regularly put her faith into action, including teaching Bible classes at a Nashville prison.

"She loves Christian people and she loves the Bible," Witherington said. "What she doesn't love is people using the Bible to beat other people over the head, including Jews. I agree with her on that."