

# The challenge of Jesus' parables

## A scholarly handbook for ministers and preachers

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### Abstract

*The parables of Jesus recorded in the Gospels are profoundly challenging, not only as far as their original audience is concerned, but equally so as far as present day readers, hoping to fully grasp their meaning, are concerned. Renewed efforts to interpret these parables were made by a number of first-rate scholars, who published their research results in a book entitled "The challenge of Jesus parables", which forms part of the McMaster New Testament Studies Series. This review essay focuses on some of the book's main characteristics, in particular the resurgence of allegory, the Gospel contextualization of the parables and their application to contemporary issues of life.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

*The challenge of Jesus' parables* is the title given to a collection of essays, edited by Richard N Longenecker. The book is the fourth volume in the McMaster New Testament Studies Series. As noted by the editor (page ix) "the series is designed to address particular themes in the New Testament that are (or should be) of crucial concern to Christians today." This fourth volume focuses on the parables of Jesus as presented in the Synoptic Gospels. The collection of essays was first presented at a symposium held at the McMaster Divinity College, from 22-23 June 1998. The book itself was published by William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan in 2000.

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The thirteen essays that constitute the contents of this book are grouped in four major parts: I History, genre, and parallels (essays 1-3), II Parables of the kingdom (essays 4-6), III Parables of warning and preparedness (essays 7-8), and IV Parables of Christian life (essays 9-13). The editor (page xii) is well aware that the groupings themselves are "somewhat artificial" and the wording of the captions "somewhat "anachronistic", but are aimed to serve "pedagogical purposes" for its present day readers.

Both editorial statements above highlight one of the main characteristics of both the McMaster New Testament Series in general, and this book in particular. Although the essays are styled to reflect the best of contemporary scholarship, its target audience is not scholarly experts alone, but also theological students, ministers, and intelligent lay people. As such, the essays are both scholarly *and pastoral*. They reflect the scholarly work of proven experts in their fields of study, who use the tools of contemporary New Testament scholarship, but speak directly to the needs of people *in the church today*. For ministers (or aspiring ministers) of the church this book can, therefore, serve as a homiletical handbook on preaching Jesus' parables in a challenging and highly relevant way within the context of present day issues, hence my own sub-title of this review article: *A scholarly handbook for ministers and preachers*. The efforts of the authors to make their scholarly investigations accessible to ministers and lay people in today's church constitute both a strength and a weakness of the book. From a purely scholarly perspective the book lacks (1) some of the vast amounts of background information available today on the social, cultural, political and religious worlds of the first century Mediterranean as a backdrop to reading the parables in their original and/or Gospel context, and (2) the discussion of contrasting scholarly points of view in the interpretation process. This restriction, however, is a conscious one. Discussion-type footnotes are purposely excluded and the selected bibliography is intentionally restricted to no more than sixteen entries for further study, with only such works being cited that were foundational for the essays themselves. The strength of the book, on the other hand, lies in the summary-like capture of what constitutes the key issues addressed in each parable. Without exception the authors can be lauded for the selective capabilities of what today is an avalanche of material available on each parable. By purposefully restricting themselves, they have provided insight into the challenges posed by Jesus' parables to a wider audience. Engagement with the stories told should benefit scholars, ministers and lay people alike.

Suffice to say, this review essay will not provide an overview of all 13 essays that constitute the contents of the book. Instead it will highlight and at times discuss critically some of its main characteristics. In order to highlight these characteristics some articles will receive preferential treatment. Our focus will fall on three key issues, which in part are interrelated and overlap:

- The return of allegory.
- Dominical status and Gospel contextualisation.
- Parables and contemporary issues of life.

## 2. THE RETURN OF ALLEGORY

The first essay by Klyne R Snodgrass, *From allegorizing to allegorizing*, provides the reader with a quite brilliant summary of the history of the interpretation of the parables of Jesus (pp 3-29). All major approaches, including the period of the Church Fathers, Adolf Jülicher, C H Dodd and Joachim Jeremias, the existentialist approach of the *New Hermeneutics*, the artistic and literary approaches highlighting the “metaphorical nature” of Jesus’ parables, and those emphasising Palestinian culture and society are discussed. Snodgrass’ essay provides every student or scholar of Jesus’ parables with a helpful overview on past approaches and insight into some of the present debates.

The title of Snodgrass’ essay *From allegorizing to allegorizing* is striking and challenging in itself. It indicates that the allegorical approach of interpreting Jesus’ parables, put to death by Adolf Jülicher’s two-volume analysis of Jesus’ parables, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesus*, first published at the end of the nineteenth century, and seemingly buried forever by the proponents of Jesus’ parables as metaphors, has resurfaced again. This is confirmed by Snodgrass’ concluding remark that in the history of parable interpretation we “have come full circle” (p 26).

On the one hand Snodgrass’ essay highlights that a totally non-allegorical approach to Jesus’ parables is not tenable (see also Forbes 2000:16-50). It is well known that the Gospels themselves give testimony to the allegorical interpretation of parables (see e g Mk 4:14-20 par), but in the interpretation history the weaknesses of applying this method throughout soon became apparent: Firstly, two expositors rarely agreed on what the individual elements in the parable stood for, and secondly, some of the meanings attributed to the details in the parables were clearly anachronisms, that is, they reflected on a situation or a doctrine from a later period. Such “allegorising” of Jesus’ parables is also rejected by Snodgrass as such “an interpretive procedure assumes that one knows the truth before reading the

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text, and then finds that truth paralleled by the text read – even if the text is about another subject” (p 5). The main premise for Adolf Jülicher's ([1960] 1976:61-62) rejection of the allegorical approach to Jesus' parables was that allegory “disguises meaning”, which could hardly have been the intention of Jesus in telling his stories. It was this understanding of allegory as *uneigentliche Rede* which also led to Jülicher's rejection of the parables of Jesus as metaphors. For Jülicher allegory was an expanded metaphor, parable in turn an expanded simile, that is a *Vergleichung*, albeit with only a single point of comparison (the *tertium comparationis*). The rejection of allegory, therefore, precipitated also the rejection of Jesus' parables as metaphors. They belonged to the “same camp”.

The initial literary approaches, however, led to the radically revised understanding of Jesus' parables as metaphors. The New Hermeneutics and those emphasising the poetic and artistic nature of Jesus' parables provided the impetus. They drew attention to speech as “language events”, which has the ability not merely to describe something, but to bring into being what was not there before. Robert Funk (1966:124-222; see also Patterson 1998:120-162), for example, understood the parables of Jesus as such language events, “creative” of the world into which Jesus was inviting his listeners. Contrary to Jülicher, Funk (cf Snodgrass p 13) understood a parable not as an expanded simile, but an expanded metaphor, placing allegory and metaphor into two “opposing camps”. If similes and allegories illustrate meaning, metaphors and parables create such meaning by the juxtaposition of “dissimilar” entities. Interpreters of Jesus' parables were faced with an either-or-choice: Either Jesus' parables were allegories (descriptive of meaning) or they were metaphors (creative of meaning). The former could be translated into text, the latter, however, being untranslatable as it needed the metaphor itself to “impact” meaning onto the listener.

Snodgrass resists the choice between allegory and metaphor. With reference to the work of Madeleine Boucher, *The mysterious parable* (1977), and John Sider, *Interpreting the parables* (1995), Snodgrass advocates that allegory should not be seen as a literary genre at all, but a “way of thinking”, that is, a “device” or a “mode” of meaning, which applies equally to metaphor (pp 8 & 16). With the emphasis on the fact that both reference meaning by means of analogy (speaking about one thing in terms of another), they are not two opposites but synonyms, not exclusive but complementary notions.

Snodgrass' views gain support from Robert H Stein's in his essay *The genre of the parables* (pp 30-49). For Stein much of the confusion in past discussions of the parables of Jesus rests on the failure to distinguish between the “referential” and the “commissive” dimensions of communication,

which he defines as follows: “Whereas the former is primarily informative in nature, the latter is primarily affective. And whereas the former seeks mainly to convey information, the latter seeks to convey emotion and bring about decision” (p 36). The metaphorical aspects of Jesus’ parables convey emotion in so far as they impact on the listener. This “commissive” dimension, however, does not exclude that the parables may also allegorically reference people or events outside the parable. Based on his investigation on the Hebrew *mashal* (*parabol* in Greek) Stein appeals to observing the “extremely broad semantic range” for the term “parable” in the Bible (p 47). Common to all parables, however, is a “comparison” (or a juxtaposition) of two “unlike things”. The immense contribution of the literary approach has been the awareness it has raised of the “affective dimension” of the parabolic genre.

Although we have so far highlighted Snodgrass’ contention that the parables of Jesus do not totally abolish allegorical referencing, his remark “We have come full circle” is intended to draw attention to the ever continuing danger of “allegorising” Jesus’ parables, attributed not only to the Church Fathers who embraced allegory as the primary method of interpreting Jesus’ parables, but also to those who have actively and consciously resisted it. Both Snodgrass (pp 7-8) and Stein (p 46) highlight the distinction made by Hans-Josef Klauck between “allegory” and “allegorising”. Allegory is defined as a rhetorical device applicable to many literary genres, which gives a symbolic dimension to text. Allegorising, however, refers to the process of ascribing hidden, often anachronistic meanings (from one’s own world and culture), to a text never intended by the author. Examples abound (see pp 4-5). Snodgrass recalls the opinion expressed by several scholars, that Jülicher’s reaction against allegory only reflects a nineteenth century distaste for the allegories that were written during the sixteenth through to the eighteenth centuries (p 8). The real problem is not allegory, but allegorising (see also Blomberg 1990:44). This problem continues to exist. In fact, Snodgrass contests that whereas the reaction of Jülicher against the “theological” allegorising of the church was indeed correct, a similar reaction is needed against the “sociological and ideological” allegorising today (p 27). Despite the pitfalls of the past, the practice of allegorising the parables of Jesus continues unabatedly.

With the above critical remark, Snodgrass’ targets especially those scholars who have used the generally accepted polyvalency of the genre parable, to interpret the parables of Jesus in *non-Gospel* contexts. Although it is accepted that the Gospel writers themselves placed Jesus’ parables in different contexts, it is argued that the interpreter today may not “exploit” the polyvalence of parable by simply choosing another non-Gospel context (cf

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Snodgrass p 21). This applies not only to those interpreters who interpret the parables of Jesus in terms of modern economic, political, and psychological concerns, but also historical Jesus scholars. For Snodgrass all such attempts invariably lead to the parables being embedded in another "belief system", which in turn was exactly what Augustine did (p 22). Importantly for Snodgrass all those adapting and retelling the parables in new contexts, have ceased to be "hearers" of parables and have become "tellers" of parables instead (p 21).

Critically assessed, among other, are the works of Bernard B Scott, *Hear then the parables* (1989), Charles Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions* (1994) and William Herzog, *Parables as subversive speech* (1994). Snodgrass accuses these scholars of "banality", that is, reducing "the parables of Jesus to worn-out conventions or simplistic statements, with their messages being drearily predictable" (p 22). Although predictable in the case of each scholar, the meaning or intent of Jesus' parables as discerned by these and other scholars hardly ever coincide. The Parable of the Widow and the Judge (Lk 18:1-8) serves as an example (pp 25-26). For Dan Via the parable presents a problem in male psychology: The male ego refuses to respond to the anima, the archetype of a woman in a man's unconscious. For Herman Hendrickx the parable encourages Christians to seek justice in the light of widespread bribery and venality of judges. For Bernard Scott the continued wearing down of the judge by the widow is a metaphor for the kingdom – the kingdom keeps coming, battering down opposition. For William Herzog the parables encourage the oppressed to collude in the oppression of an unjust legal system.

The reason for the divergent interpretations, Snodgrass asserts, is that the moment a parable is removed from "the context in the Gospel, the life of Jesus, and the theology of Israel the more there exists a lack of control and the more subjectivity reigns" (p 22). The "theology of the evangelist" is simply replaced by the "ideology and sociology of the interpreter" (p 26). As such, the illegitimate practice of allegorising the parables of Jesus is back. We have gone *From allegorizing to allegorizing*.

Although Snodgrass does not deny that the Gospel parables have been "shaped" by the Gospel writers, he rejects the notion that one can find the message of Jesus, or get closer to the message of Jesus, by abandoning the Gospel context (p 26). If the Gospel contexts are deemed to be unreliable, Snodgrass sees little hope in finding the intent of Jesus (see also Forbes 2000:48-51). His implicit assumption is that although each evangelist may have shaped the parables to fit his broader message of Jesus, there is nevertheless a high degree of continuity both between the Gospel contexts

and the (historical) life of Jesus as well as Jesus' own intent in telling the parables – particularly when correspondences exist between the parables and the non-parabolic teachings of Jesus. That the different Gospel contexts may result in different (or even contrasting) meanings or functions of a parable is of little consequence. Snodgrass accepts that Jesus told at least some of his parables on several occasions and argues consequently that “to the degree that this is true, we should give up attempts to reconstruct a parable’s original form” (p 27). The general maxim is: The closest we hope to get to the message of Jesus *are* the Gospel contexts.

As an interpreter of Jesus' parables, Snodgrass therefore commits himself (as do the other contributors to this volume) to an interpretation of the parables of Jesus *in their Gospel context*. This includes that the broad semantic range that the genre “parable” in the Bible possess is adhered to: metaphors are to be interpreted as metaphors, similes as similes, riddles as riddles, and allegories as allegories. This way effort is made to consciously circumvent the illegitimate practice of allegorising the parables of Jesus.

To interpret the parables attributed to Jesus within their Gospel context is, of course, a scholarly choice. Ministers and preachers of Jesus' parables do well in following suit. Effort should be made to interpret a parable within the particular Gospel context in which it features, without implicitly assuming that the parable has the exact same meaning, or exercises the same function, in another Gospel context. Such attention will help to guard against the practice of providing a parable with a meaning foreign to Jesus and/or the Gospel writers.

From a scholarly perspective, however, it remains questionable whether interpreting the parables of Jesus exclusively within their often diverging Gospel contexts is to be understood as the more responsible interpretative procedure. The acknowledgement that the Gospel writers did not pass on memorised text, but often “shaped” (or retold) the parables of Jesus to fit their situation, that is, became parable “tellers” themselves, calls on critical scholarship to ask the question of authenticity. The scholarly quest to determine the original setting and/or the original words/structure of a Jesus parable is valid. Of critical importance, however, is that the assumptions governing a particular quest, including the methods and models used within the investigative programme, are continually re-assessed. It is not the non-Gospel context per se that opens the door on the continued danger of allegorising the parables of Jesus, but rather the failure to assess the assumptions of one's own investigative procedure.

## **2. DOMINICAL STATUS AND GOSPEL CONTEXTUALISATION**

Dominical status is a phrase that features repeatedly. It is used to refer to the authenticity of Jesus' parables, that is, that the parables are "of the Lord" Jesus Christ. Although not a single author of this volume denies the redactional features so apparent in those parables that feature in two or more Gospels, the basic assumption is that the parables all originated from the mouth of Jesus. Fervently rejected is that allegorical features per se disqualify the authenticity of a Jesus parable. Graig A Evans echoes the sentiments of all authors that objections made against the authenticity of certain parables of Jesus "because they appear to be allegories based on the fate of Jesus" or "on the experience of the early church" are not valid (p 70).

The dominical status of the parables is upheld even for those parables where the redactional features lead to strikingly different functions of the parable and where the allegorical interpretations provided clearly reflect a later situation. The Parable of the Sower (Mk 4:1-20; Mt 13:3-23; Lk 4-15) serves as an example. It features in all Synoptic Gospels. And although the redactional features both in the parable itself and in the interpretation given clearly reflect adaptations made by the author to address their particular situation, the parable(s) is (are) deemed to be authentic. Interpreting the Parable of the Sower in Luke's Gospel, Donald A Hagner contests: "The interpretation as it is, even with its slightly unusual vocabulary makes quite good sense in the mouth of Jesus" (p 105). This statement finds substantiation in the words: "It is simply unjustifiable prejudice to conclude that Jesus never allegorized a parable" (p 105).

The above assertions raise two questions: The first relates to the use of the word "authenticity". For historical Jesus scholars the word "authenticity" is essentially used to refer to the original words (*ipsissima verba*) and/or the original structures (*ipsissima structura*) as well as the original setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of the parables as told by Jesus (see Scott 1990: 63-76). "Authenticity" as used by the authors of this particular volume, however, refers to the original "source" of a parable as having its roots in Jesus. Dominical status, therefore, can mean that either the parable reflects the "words" of Jesus, or that there is "continuity" between the message of the parable and non-parabolic teachings of Jesus elsewhere, or that the parable was created "in imitation" of a Jesus parable.

The second question once again raises the issue of parable and allegory. The positions taken by the authors of this volume are clearly reactions to an understanding of Jesus' parables whereby any allegorical features immediately disqualify its authenticity, not least of all by some



proponents of Jesus' parables as metaphors. A balanced position, however, is called for. An understanding of Jesus' parables as metaphors does not per se lead to the entire abolition of reference (see Ricoeur 1975:83-84; 1981:239-40). Instead using metaphor as a "model" to interpret Jesus' parables has raised the awareness of the multi-dimensional or ambiguous referencing of parable. The prodigal in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32), for example, does not only refer to the toll-collectors and sinners (cf Lk 15:1-2), but to Jesus as well (cf Lk 7:34), and beyond them to all those "outsiders" who per se are excluded from the people of God. Rejected is a reference that is fixed and one-dimensional. Furthermore, whereas an allegorical interpretation of Jesus' parables focuses on *what* the individual features refer to, the metaphorical approach highlights the *how* of parabolic referencing. As such it has created awareness of *how* especially through the juxtaposition of dissimilar entities conventional views are challenged and alternative views are called into being. Scholars do well not to polarise allegory and metaphor as two mutually exclusive genres, but both as ever-present principles of human thought, whereby one thing is seen or understood in terms of another.

The debate around the dominical status of the parables in this particular volume distracts from what is indeed a most valuable scholarly contribution: an interpretation of the parables attributed to Jesus "in their Gospel context". This need not be seen as an exercise in opposition to the quest associated with historical Jesus research, but an exercise of a different kind, equally stimulating and challenging.

As already noted above, ministers and preachers, who do not wish to engage in the exercise of interpreting the parables of Jesus in their historical contexts, need to take cognisance of their "Gospel" contextualisation. The parables of Jesus as they feature in the Gospels are not loose, independent units, but form part of the greater message of each Gospel writer. The particular intent of the Gospel writer needs to be discerned, before the parable can be translated into the present day situations.

The value of interpreting the parables of Jesus "in their Gospel context" is exemplified in particular by the interpretation of the *Parables of the kingdom* (Chapter 4: *Mark's parables of the kingdom*, pp 79-101; chapter 5: *Matthew's parables of the kingdom*, pp 102-124; chapter 6: *Luke's parables of the kingdom*, pp 125-147). Each parable is interpreted within the wider context of the Gospel in which it features with a careful analysis of the redactional features, so as to determine the intent of the Gospel writer (and Jesus) and the purpose pursued by the (re)telling of the parable. The Parable of the Sower, for example, features as a kingdom parable in all three Synoptical Gospels (Mk 4:1-20; Mt 13:3-23; Lk 4-15), but the function of the parable in

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each Gospel differs. Morna D Hooker, explicating the parable in Mark's Gospel, notes that for the evangelist Mark there was a very close connection between the coming of the kingdom and "Jesus' identity as Son of God" (pp 82-101). In fact, in each case the kingdom is linked in some way with the "authority of Jesus". The enigma of Mark's Gospel is the failure on the part of those to whom the secrets of the kingdom is revealed to respond positively, while those to whom it is hidden grasp it. By the time Mark wrote his Gospel this enigma was even greater. For Mark the parable provides an explanation for Israel's rejection of Jesus. They reject him because they do not understand his teaching. The parable calls for a wholehearted response to Jesus, the "word" that he sows, being the word about himself. The kingdom of heaven dawns on those who accept *Jesus'* authority.

In the Parable of the Sower in Matthew's Gospel (13:3-23), explicated by Donald Hagner, the emphasis falls less on the person of Jesus and more on a positive response to the "message" of the kingdom (pp 103-108). Hagner notes that in "the interpretation of the parable, Matthew replaces Mark's introductory words, which imply criticism of the disciples ('Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?'), with the simple exhortation: 'You, therefore, listen to the parable of the sower' (Mt 13:18)" (p 105). The emphasis is on "hearing" the word of the kingdom. The seed metaphor (Matthew uses the plural: "seeds") refers to both, not only the message, but also to the person receiving or not receiving the message (cf verses 19, 20, 22, and 23). The key issue of the parable is, therefore, responsiveness or non-responsiveness to the "message" of the kingdom. If the message is received fully and without reservation, it results in constant and abundantly fruitful discipleship.

In Luke's Gospel the Parable of the Sower (8:4-15), explicated by Richard N Longenecker, functions still differently (pp 127-136). Whereas Mark and Matthew felt the force of the question: Why did Israel reject its Messiah and why are believers in Jesus in the minority? Luke had other concerns. He had little interest in assuring his readers of the coming of God's promised kingdom. His goal was to present to his Gentile audience (1) that Jesus' ministry was a prophetic ministry; (2) that in carrying out that prophetic ministry, Jesus proclaimed "the good news of the kingdom"; and (3) that such preaching calls for a wholehearted response (cf p 136). Luke, therefore, sets the Parable of the Sower in the context of Jesus travelling about in various cities and villages "proclaiming the good news of the kingdom". This is confirmed by Luke's redactional treatment. In the introductory words (Lk 8:8b) he inserts that "he [Jesus] called out", placing the focus on the proclamation that is to be heard. He characterises the "good soil" as being "people with a

noble and good heart”, implying that these are the type of people he wants to address and who will respond positively. Contrary to Mark and Matthew, Luke is not concerned with the identity of the sower or the intrinsic quality of the seed. His focus falls on the positive response on “Jesus’ proclamation of the word of God.”

The short summary of the “Gospel contextualisation” of the Parable of the Sower is but one example of the importance of explicating each parable of Jesus in its Gospel context, without implicitly assuming that a parable always has the same meaning and function.

### **3. PARABLES AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES OF LIFE**

A third characteristic of the volume is the application of the parables, interpreted in the Gospel context, to contemporary issues of life. This provides all ministers and preachers with a helpful homiletical tool. It gives impulses and ignites ideas on how to apply the parables to contemporary issues of life.

Before providing examples, some consideration needs to be given again to what was termed the ever-continuing danger of “allegorising” the parables of Jesus. The discussion above on the “Gospel contextualisation” of the parables of Jesus has shown that the Gospel writers themselves have in part adapted, changed and as such “retold” the parables of Jesus for their own particular situation, made possible by the polyvalent nature of the genre “parable”. The changes were brought about by the “narrative context” in which the parables were placed as well as conscious additions and/or omission. As illustrated above, the changes have resulted in a shift of focus, meaning and function. The question this raises is: To what degree did the Gospel writers themselves accede to the danger of allegorising the parables of Jesus, that is, provided them with a function foreign to their use in Jesus’ life?

Despite the fact that allegorising the parables of Jesus is deemed as being a “not legitimate means of interpretation” (Snodgrass p 5), some authors of this volume readily acknowledge that in the process of “contextualisation” the Gospel writers did in fact allegorise the parables of Jesus. Attention has already been drawn to Hagner’s assertion, spoken in defence of the dominical status of the Gospel parables, that it “is simply unjustifiable prejudice to conclude that Jesus never allegorized a parable” (p 105; see also Hooker p 88). The process of allegorising the parables of Jesus, however, does seem acceptable as long as there is continuity between the (new) meaning, and the (new) function of the parable and some other non-parabolic teaching of Jesus.

This does, however, raise the question, also discussed by Longenecker, whether the reader and interpreter today is free or perhaps

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even encouraged by the polyvalent nature of parable to play with its plots and metaphors so as to apply them in almost unlimited ways to contemporary issues (p 144-145). It is clear that such an approach may lead to gross practices of allegorisation – to the degree that there is *no continuity* with the message of Jesus, either in the parables or other non-parabolic teachings. Assuming that we cannot get closer to the message of Jesus as it is provided by the Gospel writers, Longenecker himself feels bound “to hold to the stories and contextualisations found in the Synoptic Gospels” (p 144). As such the boundaries for adapting, changing, and retelling the parables of Jesus are - strictly speaking – set by the canonisation of the Bible.

However in the light of the fact that Gospel writers did adapt, change, and retell the parables of Jesus, it does remain an open question, at least from a scholarly perspective, whether later generations of Jesus followers may not in an imitation of a Jesus parable tell an own story (an own parable) that “creates a world” which is in continuity with the kingdom world of Jesus’ parables and equally challenging. If continuity is sought, such a practice does not reduce, but rather increases the responsibility of interpreting the parables of Jesus in either their historical or Gospel context. In each case it remains critically important that effort is made to discern the intent of Jesus and/or the Gospel writers in telling a parable.

The authors of this volume demonstrate abundantly that the choice of applying only those parable features specifically found in the Gospel contextualisations to the needs and circumstances of the listeners today, does provide the interpreter and preacher with enough stimulus for theological contemplation and more than enough challenge for action. The application follows only after or in accordance with a careful analysis of each Jesus parable in its Gospel context.

The contemporary contextualisations provided by the authors of the volume are indeed challenging and stress the continued significance of Jesus parables. In providing examples we will restrict ourselves, this time to the work of a single author, Sylvia C Keesmaat’s interpretation of the collection of parables she discusses under the rubric *Strange neighbors and risky care* (chapter 12, p 263-285). The parables explicated are the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Mt 18:1-35), the Parable of the Banquet (Lk 14:7-14), and the Parable of the Compassionate Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). Keesmaat’s approach differs from the other contributors in so far as she *begins* her article with a reflection on some features of her/our contemporary context. The reflection then “sets the stage” for an engagement between her/our world and the parable’s word, which is explored in the Gospel context. In a final step she once again gives considerations to some broader connections.

It is all too clear that the three parables raise issues pressing in our world today: (1) matters of forgiveness and debt, (2) who we welcome with gracious abundance to our tables, and (3) an enemy we not only hate but find repulsive (see Keesmaat p 264-265). All three issues are constantly being played out in our contemporary contexts.

The issue of debt is addressed first. Keesmaat notes that developing countries, although receiving 1.5 trillion US dollars in new loans, paid almost double the amount, 2.9 trillion US dollars, in principal payments on their debts to developed countries between 1981 and 1997 (p 264). This means, for every dollar provided in aid, over three dollars come back in the form of debt servicing. The funds used to pay these debts are diverted from basic services, such as health, clean water, education, housing and others, leading to the ever widening gap between rich and poor. The problem is compounded by the fact that we live in a culture where forgiveness is not readily accepted or welcomed. But this unforgiving nature also leads to a variety of problems in other areas of life, not least of all in the church self, which is characterised by the ever-increasing numbers of schisms and establishment of new churches.

Secondly Keesmaat raises the issue of welcoming the outcast and sharing our abundance with them (p 264-265). Who are the ones we do not want to invite to our churches? Who are the ones we do not want to share our wealth with, because they cannot pay us back or contribute in some other way to our community?

Prevalent as ever is the third issue, that of our enemies. Keesmaat observes that in spite of so-called globalisation, tribalism and nationalism is as alive as ever – not to mention the atrocious acts of ethnic cleansing and racial genocide (p 265). We continue to find it hard to deal with pluralism without hating others who are different. We battle to love those whose identity is tied up with a way of life we find repugnant.

Reflections on present day issues show how little the world has changed and how pressing the challenges of Jesus are even today. It also stresses that merely making some suggestions or passing global resolutions do not necessarily lead to change. What needs to change is the way mankind views reality. This new reality, the new vision of life in the kingdom of God, Jesus not only described, but “created” with his parables and invited his listeners to enter.

Notably the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Mt 18:23-35), which addresses the issues of debt, is given in response to a question concerning forgiveness: “Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’” (Mt 18:21). Although release of (economic) debt and forgiveness are used

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synonymously in the parable, most parable interpretations (past and present) conveniently distinguish and separate the two as if the latter is a concern relating to God's people, the former not. That Jesus and the early Christian community indeed saw an inseparable link is confirmed by Matthew's (6:12) recording of the prayer: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors", as well as Luke's (19:1-10) account of Zacchaeus who on receiving Jesus into his home promised to give half of his possession to the poor and to return fourfold anything he had taken through cheating. Indeed challenging!

The Parable of the Banquet (Lk 14:7-14) creates a world that is distinctly "inclusive". The eschatological banquet will consist not only of the holy, but also the outcast of society. Both for the original listeners of the parable and contemporary listeners today, the implications are clear: Those who wish to partake in God's kingdom need to be willing to join the banquet with all kinds of people. Acts 15 recalls how this message challenged and reshaped the world of the early Christian community.

The context of the Parable of the Compassionate Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37) is that of a lawyer who tests Jesus: "Teacher ... what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Lk 10:25). Keesmaat stresses that the question does not address the issue of "how to get into heaven after death", but rather "how to share in the coming of God's new age" – now (p 276). The parable creates this "new" world as one where one allows one's enemy to become one's neighbour with the added challenge to the lawyer that he is to follow the example of his enemy in learning what it is to be a neighbour.

In concluding her reflections, Keesmaat summarises the "world" that Jesus created by his parables as "one of profound joy and liberation for slaves, debtors, the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and the hated – but also one that was a profound threat for the wealthy, the landowners, the prestigious, the healthy, and the acceptable" and notes that this world places "us (the followers of Jesus) firmly on the list of those who should be most challenged and threatened by Jesus' parables" (p 282-283). The first century context of small villages and today's context of a global world might be vastly different. But the issues addressed by Jesus' parables nevertheless remain remarkably valid and his message relentlessly challenging.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The aim of the McMaster New Testament Study Series was defined as reflecting the best of contemporary scholarship for an audience that is not confined to scholarly experts, but also speaks to the needs of people in the church today. This fourth volume on Jesus' parables has indeed achieved this aim. The short scholarly expositions and in particular the applications to

contemporary issues of life provide lay people and especially ministers and preachers with valuable information. In true parabolic fashion the reader is drawn into the stories and is called on to the face the challenges they present.

The focus on “what” the parables of Jesus refer to, with the repeated emphasis that the parables of Jesus also reflect on distinct people and events outside the parable allegorically, has, however, suppressed and at times obscured some of the other valuable contributions in parable research in recent times. The new literary approaches, with their emphasis on the metaphorical nature of parable, as well as the social-scientific approaches, with their focus on ancient customs and cultures, have helped us to understand not only the “what” of parabolic referencing, but the “how”. Both these approaches have shown how the parables of Jesus do not merely convey information, but indeed “create” a new world into which the reader is invited. Furthermore, my own research (Reinstorf 2002) has confirmed that the use of metaphor as a “model” to read the parables of Jesus should not be confined to historical Jesus research, but is equally valid when reading the parables in their Gospel context.

Furthermore, the authors’ consistent resistance to the efforts of other scholars to interpret the parable of Jesus in their historical context has resulted in a number of sweeping statements without the necessary engagement with those scholars to validate the criticism. Synodgrass’ remark that “it seems far more naive to think that interpreters can abandon the Gospel contexts and ever hope to find the message of Jesus” (p 26), is but one example.

The methodical approaches adopted by the authors of this book have not resulted in any new insights with regard to the understanding and interpretation of Jesus’ parables. As noted above, the primary contribution of this book lies in the effort of the authors to provide the reader with a concise, summary-like interpretation of the parables of Jesus in their Gospel context and in particular their effort to bridge the gap to contemporary issues of life.

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